

**Of Formless Formations**

Inner Landscapes of the Listening Body

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This is to certify that the Graduate Project Exhibition or Film Project prepared

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complies with the regulations of the University and meet the accepted standards with respect to originality and quality.

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“We shape each other to be human”

*Ursula K. Le Guin*<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ursula K. Le Guin. *The Birthday of the World: And Other Stories*. New York: HarperCollins, 2002. P.90.

I would like to honor the lands and waters along the Colorado River, known to the Navajo as Too, Tó Nts'ósíkooh meaning, "River of Never Ending Life", is a source that sustains life across diverse ecosystems and communities, and has worked as a source of inspiration to my thesis installation. The Colorado River flows through the ancestral territories of many Indigenous nations, including the Southern Paiute, Ute, Diné (Navajo), Hopi, Hualapai, Havasupai, Mojave, Cocopah, Quechan, Yavapai, O'odham, Akimel O'odham (Pima), and Kumeyaay. The river's journey continues south but falls short of the lands that have long been cared for by the Cucapá. This work reflects on its current state of neglect which has drifted it from the Vermillion Sea, colonially known as the Sea of Cortez or the Gulf of California, on the northern coast of Mexico<sup>2</sup>.

We recognize that the lands where the development, research, creation, and presentation of this work are the traditional and unceded lands of Mooniyang, Tiohtià:ke, of the Kanien'kehá (Mohawk) Nation, and the waters we benefit from are rooted in long histories of Indigenous stewardship, resilience, and knowledge. As we consequently acknowledge the ongoing impacts of colonization, resource extraction, and climate change we are grateful to the relentless grace of Indigenous sovereignty, land rights, and environmental justice and aspire in our own efforts of creative languages to do the same.

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<sup>2</sup> The Colorado River is also known as *'Ha Fay g'Aam* (Havasupai), *Palavayu* (Hopi), *Ha'yidada* (Hualapai), *Bits'íis Ninéézi* (Navajo/Diné), *Pia-Paxa'a* (Southern Paiute), *Ha Khwata* (Yavapai), *Tu'L che'e* (Apache), *K'yawan' A* (Zuni), and Xawill (Cucapá). Shaylih, Muehlmann. *Where the River Ends: Contested Indigeneity in the Mexican Colorado Delta*. "Listen for When You Get There": Topologies of Invisibility on the Colorado River'. Duke University Press. Durham and London. 2013. P. 14.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

*What does it imply when a river runs dry?*

Rivers are considered the “arteries” of Earth’s continents; passing water, sediment, and solutes from headwaters to the ocean. Not only do they provide life for those who inhabit their proximity, but they contribute to a complex feedback loop. A river runs its course and then becomes a sea; its journey starts with the melting of glaciers, which carries these molecules deep into soil, shaping the lands it meanders through, creating cloud formations that invite rain and carry this signaling on loop, transmuting into countless continuously morphing forms, molecular formations and emergent<sup>3</sup> patterning.

Growing up in Colorado, I witnessed the turbulent reality of drought and wildfires. When you live somewhere that is “land-locked”, water scarcity is just a factor of your daily life, supplies are sparse and our habits are thus shaped around this. We rely on one river– The Colorado River. Every year we would watch the snow melt trickle in, keeping a careful eye on how the land would absorb it, with some seasons leaving everyone speculating, dancing, and hoping for rain, or else our homes would burn, and our forests begin to bald and char. With the rapid increase of wildfires and topsoil death that plagues the region, it has become impossible not to notice the parallel between the recent economic “booms” in the region and the ecological scars it has left. And to this day, the cranes hover over, marching in as if there was a never-ending supply to this river of “Never Ending Life”.

The Colorado River is the main artery for the arid Southwest of the U.S. and Northern Mexico. The course of the river starts in the Rocky Mountains and ends in Mexico, passing through over 16 Indigenous Lands. Its history is long, tangled, and still an unsolvable mystery. With the region of the Southwest experiencing a drought so extreme that it is categorized as *aridification*,

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<sup>3</sup> Emergence, in philosophy, systems theory, science, and art, occurs when a complex entity has properties or behaviors that its parts do not have on their own, and emerge only when they interact in a wider whole. Emergence plays a central role in theories of integrative levels and of complex systems.

it is clear that its archaic set of flawed laws and lawsuits, called the “Law of the River”<sup>4</sup> are to blame for overuse that has extended now for over a century. The USGS has long considered it one of the most overdrawn rivers on the planet<sup>5</sup>, but in 2022, combined with global warming, its declining conditions finally forced a global reckoning.

After nearly 100 years, it has become clear the river’s custody agreements—drafted in 1922<sup>6</sup>, were shaped for a vastly different social and ecological landscape. Much like our socio-political concerns and collective heart-beat, this river is tangled in an ongoing battle, four years at a time, worsening each year, as each election passes by.

Attempts to update this broken system have only led to blurred legislation, tossed proposals, and ultimately—stasis. As climate change sharpens, development climbs. The river remains captive to outdated agreements. Now, almost a century after dams and canals first confined it, the river is dying. All systems connected to it—human and non-human—now bear witness to the unraveling of our social and ecological bonds. As water scarcity shifts from the periphery to the forefront, our inability to act as a collective, as humanity, reveals its own fractures and *disintegration loops*<sup>7</sup>.

For the last three years, I have been working with the endlessness of its implications; its forensics; and metaphors that arise from the complex history of the Colorado River. Through the lens of speculative realism, new materialism, and post-human feminist phenomenology, I position the projects I will present in this paper within the “hydro commons”, referring to the interconnected, shared networks of water that bind all living beings and the environment<sup>8</sup>. Through methodologies such as soundwalks, structured improvisation and collective choreographic creation, I explore how through water, we glimpse interdependence; droughts don’t just dry rivers, they reveal the cracks in our social foundations, the hidden costs of

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<sup>4</sup> Shaylih, Muehlmann. *Where the River Ends: Contested Indigeneity in the Mexican Colorado Delta*. “Listen for When You Get There”: Topologies of Invisibility on the Colorado River’. Duke University Press. Durham and London. 2013. P. 25.

<sup>5</sup> USGS (United States Geological Survey) Colorado River Basin drought and the 2023 Water-Year. February 5, 2024. <https://www.usgs.gov/tools/colorado-river-basin-drought-and-2023-water-year>.

<sup>6</sup> Eric B. Taylor. *Rivers Run Through Us: A Natural and Human History*. Vancouver: Harbour Publishing, 2021.

<sup>7</sup> *Disintegration Loops*, by William Basinski is a series of music created from deteriorating tape loops that break down as they play, symbolizing impermanence and loss.

<sup>8</sup> Astrida Neimanis. *Bodies of Water: Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017. P. 27.

progress, and the communities that are left thirsting on the margins, and straddling borders of neglect. Using water as a material, it is my intent to reveal the quiet threads that connect us all, urging us to imagine a future where we don't conquer rivers but learn to flow with them, honoring their path as much as our own.

Working with this river as a case study, the story of the Colorado opens up a discussion that borders care and neglect; life cycles and gradual death, speculating the future loss of a main artery water source, one that feeds life of the Southwestern US and Northern Mexico. This research has unfolded into a series of works that I have developed, including *Pulse Flow i-ii* (2022), *Minute 323* (2023) and *ATMOS* (2023). More recently, my creative-research has resulted in a contemporary dance piece, which explores the overlap between the hydrocommons, collective dynamics, and care, presented as a part of my MFA Thesis Exhibition: *Of Formless Formations* (2024). This exhibition features three separate works (*If all else; I fall, Impending Bloom, h2.er*) that work together collaboratively. With this project I intention to bring awareness and create a space for dialogue, where through movement scores and the sonification of water memory, the importance of listening to the subtleness of our crises resonates.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

My practice is guided by triangulations and collaborations: from concept to medium. At the core is my dance practice, a trajectory for exploring the interrelationship between social, technological, and ecological systems, engaging with new materialism and political ecology. Through the individual body and collaborative, immaterial mediums—electronics, video, and sound—I investigate how bodies can spark conversations about our interconnected circuitry. I am interested in our human entanglements with ecological crises, technological expression, and speculative visions of harmony and discord. Weaving together light, sound, and body, I shape immersive installation and performance spaces that invite reflection on these shared entanglements. In other words, I create installation works with the body in mind, and then I unfold it. I imagine scenographies for dance spaces, but invite the non-dancer body to experience the spaces I create.

Throughout the MFA, I have considered the body into the space, using motion sensors, such as in *Pulse Flow part i* (2022), where I play with the concept of proximity to activate a kinetic sculpture, animating fans to “breathe” and an LED using motion sensors to



Figure 1: Pulse Flow, part i. Arduino, LED, PIR Sensor, River stone, Mylar. Fans. April 2022.

“pulse”, causing the caustic reflections in the space to move like, what I call, “river ghost”. This interplay of im/materiality outlined a question about whether I wanted to illustrate hope, or despair; repair or stasis. Astrida Neimanis explains in *Bodies of Water: Post-human Feminist Phenomenology*, that “in a context where popular apathy and hopelessness are fuelled by an inability to connect more-than-human scales of planetary distresses, a posthuman phenomenology can put us in better contact with our bodies as implicated in those hard-to-fathom phenomena-climate change.”<sup>9</sup> Along these same lines of negotiating apathy or hope, I was curious to discover the implicit message that an individual body occupies in that state, and that of the collective.



Figure 2 & 3: Stills from *Pulse Flow*, part ii (2022) Dance performance. Concordia University.

It was with this piece that I expanded it to *Pulse Flow part ii (2022)*, where the kinetic sculpture then became a centerpiece for a solo dance performance where the individual's actions activate the site, and the installation hosts the discussion for how collective gatherings might shape a different space, and what that might imply.

Centering this idea of collective versus individual through interactions felt best narrated with the body and sound; through dance processes and sound compositions. These findings emerge from a slow practice of analysis and catalog that has taken place over the last 3 years; where through soundwalks I collect field recordings, and the parallels between water systems and human

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<sup>9</sup> Astrida Neimanis, Duxbury (2010) and (Walker 2014) *Bodies Of Water: Post-human Feminist Phenomenology*. “Embodying Water: Feminist Phenomenology for Posthuman Worlds”. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017. P. 42.

systems become poetic structures for movement workshops, and where sound compositions can act as a way to weave them all together. *Of Formless Formations*, has consisted of three methodological approaches through gathering field recordings, hosting collaborative movement workshops, as well as the interplay of light and sonic circuits, to choreograph water into patterned and shapeless forms.

## 2.1 ALT RESEARCH: SONIC ROAD TRIP

In the development of this research, I embarked on the beginning of a sonic road trip, tracing the contours of the Colorado River starting with the mouth, in Poudre Pass, Colorado. Insofar, I have traced the source of the river, collecting samples at various points. In a state of health, a river is a feedback loop. In this case, the disruption of a feedback loop in the Colorado River would more accurately express this slow folding erosion; of sediment; of trust. Inspired by William Basinski's *Disintegration Loops* (2021)<sup>10</sup>, I wanted to explore the ways we can speak of the destruction of this feedback loop and its dissipation over time.



Figure 4 & 5 | Left: Field Recordings along the Colorado River. Photo by the Artist. | Right: Route of the Sonic Road Trip (outlined in red) along the Colorado River. Google Maps.

Recording, archiving, and composing sounds from these sites have allowed me to create textures and soundscapes that I have translated into a space to braid together a sensual river memory; fragmented and abstracted. Through this process, I challenge the way we perceive the

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<sup>10</sup> William Basinski. *Disintegration Loops*. New York: 2062 Records, 2002.

endlessness of the river and explore sensorial storytelling as a way to mend the fractures of our current ecological and social systems. In *Soundscape Works, Listening and the Touch of Sound*, Andra McCartney speaks about the visceral intimacy of collecting sounds. Much like my sonic road trip, McCartney describes soundwalks as an “exploration of an attempt to understand the sociopolitical and sonic resonance of a particular location via the act of listening,”<sup>11</sup> once again prompting an inner dialogue that asks whether these sound arrangements insight apathy or hope.

## 2.2 WORKSHOPS: INNER LANDSCAPES AND CHOREOGRAPHING COMPUTATIONAL GEOGRAPHIES

“Water constitutes one of the so-called Anthropocene’s most urgent, visceral and ethically fraught sites of political praxis and theoretical inquiry. Our reshaping of this planet is occurring not least through the rechoreography and rematerialization of its waters: ancient aquifers are being rapidly depleted; rivers that once ran fast are now exhausted before they reach the sea...and the composition of life they sustain seems to be shifting at breakneck speed.”<sup>12</sup>

Tracing the topologies of a river’s slow death has incited many internal dialogues that teeter between hope and despair; discord and harmony and has raised questions about how our collective negligence has continued for so long. Working with “environmentally engaged art bears the potential to both rethink politics and politicize art’s relation to ecology, and its thoughtful consideration proves nature’s inextricable binds to economy, technology, culture and law at every turn”<sup>13</sup> and it equally offers the potential to explore ways to express, communicate, and visualize these concerns. So much of what we are witnessing in climate change stems from dead-end decision-making and polarity. As if the data and coverage we consume do not hit a high enough decibel to make a change. No scream is loud enough. No protest is large enough.

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<sup>11</sup> Andra McCartney. "Soundscape works, listening and the touch of sound." *Aural Cultures*. Edited by Jim Drobnick. Toronto, ON: YYZ: 2004: P. 81.

<sup>12</sup> Astrida, Neimanis. *Bodies of Water: Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017. P. 93.

<sup>13</sup> T.J Demos. *Decolonizing Nature*. Introduction. Sternberg Press. P.8.

No vote carries enough weight. As we divide and further complicate our legal systems in an attempt to face these crises such as the dangers of drought. These issues, like the river, only continue on their current course.

In the same way that it takes collective action for our voices to be heard as we advocate for climate justice, it takes collective cadence<sup>14</sup> to trust ourselves and each other again. I wanted to work with collective language, something that could capture our shared desires and fears we hold across society, navigating inner landscapes of our grievances and the dynamics it takes to come back together again, to mend ourselves, as if broken— like a river from a sea. For my thesis project I created a series of workshops, *INTRA (2024)*, that explores the interplay of improvisation, movement toolkit creation, and bodied focal points that aim to consider the subtleness of one another through touch, breath, and defining group dynamics. With 12 participants, the workshop implemented a pedagogical approach based on sensorial memory, where dancers were invited to think of their relationship to water, embody it, and echo it throughout the space to be “offered” for others to mirror or repeat. With this process of working as a collective through body movement, we worked together to create a collective cadence, referring to the complex dynamics that arise between masses and individual expressions, through matching rhythm, breath, speed, and quality and taking turns with taking the lead and following. The dynamic was in itself a constant negotiation, and unfolding co-creation.

With these workshops, I wanted to build frameworks that explored speculative realism approaches, as a way to imagine another way of knowing; through sensing, feeling, and trusting one another, creating an intimate network between the performers, including myself, where the rigidness of individualized bodies can dissolve the walls that bar one another from flow of connection. The frameworks historically align with Postmodern rebellion, emerging in parallel to the Fluxus movement of the 1970’s when art disciplines were colliding and collaborating on one another. Critical to my movement research, is the collaborations and theories that emerged from the Judson Church Theatre, which included Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns, John Cage and Philip Corner, filmmaker Gene Friedman, and dancers Yvonne Rainer, Trisha Brown, David

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<sup>14</sup> Barbara, Ehrenreich. *Dancing in the Streets: A History of Collective Joy*. New York: Metropolitan Books, 2006. P. 180.

Gordon, Lucinda Childs, Steve Paxton, Laura Dean, Simone Forti among others. The interdisciplinarity of this group's dynamics gave birth to Anne Bogart's *Viewpoints* described below:

“These postmodern pioneers forged the territory upon which we now stand. They rejected the insistence by the modern dance world upon social messages and virtuosic technique, and replaced it with internal decisions, structures, rules or problems. What made the final dance was the context of the dance. Whatever movement occurred while working on these problems became art. This philosophy lies at the heart of both Viewpoints and Composition.”<sup>15</sup>

Activities such as building trust between partner interactions, or softening their body when they collide with someone, rather than freezing up and recoiling as we do in public spaces, are all ways that dance games seek to subvert the actions of the everyday-body, in order to explore the rigid constructs of society through an embodied metaphor. When I lead these workshops, it is important to me to not “choreograph” specific movement phrases, but rather, choreograph a spatial structure, creating individual and collective rules for the participants to explore and where harmonies and fragmentation might emerge organically.

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<sup>15</sup> Anne Bogart and Tina Landau. *The Viewpoints Book*, “Chapter 1. Practical Guide to Viewpoints and Composition.” Theatre Communications Group. New York. 2005. P.5-6.

### *2.3 USING WATER AS A LENS: CAUSTICS & CYMATIC COLLABORATIONS*

Through this project's trajectory, water has become more than just a material, it works as a lens through which we can see both the strength and fragility of our world. As I see it, rivers reveal the tension between nature's rhythm and human ambition. Each dam and diversion tells a story of control, yet also of loss—a once-living flow now channeled into concrete veins, held back from reaching the sea.

For my thesis project, I began exploring ways to visualize sound vibrations to narrate the space of the installation, as a way to amplify and give form to the invisible forces that shape and connect us. Just as water's flow reveals the hidden ties between ecosystems and communities, sound vibrations bring forth the unseen rhythms that underlie every natural system. Imagine the way ripples move across water in response to a sound—each wave a visual echo of the energy behind it, each pulse a reminder of our interconnectedness, underscoring that nothing exists in isolation; every sound, like every drop of water, resonates through the whole.

In my search to recreate the feeling of a river or water body, I explore caustics, the term for light refractions and combine it with the vibration of low-frequency sounds from a speaker to illuminate the space. The combined collaboration of cymatics (wave phenomena) and caustics works together in this research, as a way to visualize the harmonics, the resonance, and the lifecycle of a sound wave. Using a transducer, light, and metal plates has allowed for the creation of water lenses that I use to visualize the sound compositions I create. It becomes the organically sourced generative visual that takes the fragmented pieces of a water body, and bridges them back together into cloud-like formations and ripples.



Figure 6. Cymatic caustic formations using a transducer, steel, and LED. Photo taken in my studio.

### 3. PERFORMANCE INSTALLATION

*Of Formless Formations*<sup>16</sup> is a collaborative acousmatic and dance performance (30 mins) that unfolds into a spatialized sound installation for visitors to explore. This work traces the relationship between art and apathy, materiality and decay, and the aural possibilities of care in the Chthulucene (Haraway)<sup>17</sup>. Departing from one of the planet's most endangered rivers (Colorado) and its industrialization, the installation space echoes harmonic structures in sound and body, using field recordings of water and sonic textures to create an immersive space for the performers and viewers to mediate. The project features 3 separate works, *If all else; I fall*, *h2.er*, and *Impending Bloom* that converse with one another to narrate the space.

In the performance component of this project, *If all else; I fall*, a series of choreographic scores practiced by the dancers will activate the space. Using scores and structured improvisation, inspired by algorithmic thought<sup>18</sup> and a goal of harmony and fluidity, each movement score will

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<sup>16</sup> The name of this project is a direct reference to the book *Formless Formation: Vignettes for the End of this World* by Sandra Ruiz and Hyatia Vourloumis (2021), as it aligns with the themes I am exploring, such as the cross over of performance and critical aesthetics and political thought.

<sup>17</sup> Assuming our current epoch of the Anthropocene, the Chthulucene, as theorist Donna Haraway prefers to refer to it as, requires “sym-poiesis, or making-with, rather than auto-poiesis, or self-making. Learning to stay with the trouble of living and dying together on a damaged earth will prove more conducive to the kind of thinking that would provide the means to building more livable futures.” Donna Jeanne Haraway. *Staying with the Trouble : Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. “Ch.2 Tenticular Thinking: Anthropocene, Capituloscene, Chthulucene” Durham: Duke University Press, 2016. P.10.

<sup>18</sup> If-else statements are a key concept in computer programming, allowing programs to make decisions based on conditions. Their history is closely tied to the development of programming languages and logic theory. Its algebraic history has created binaries in logical decision making.

offer an interaction that attempts to transition the individual (performer) to a collective cadence through collisions of care.

To keep the conditions of the space ever-changing and responding to variations, we expanded on the following scores:

```
If (all)  
    } else {  
        I  
        listen ;
```

```
If (all)  
    } else {  
        I  
        fall ;
```

```
If (all)  
    } else {  
        I  
        wade these troubled waters ;
```

```
If (all)
```

*} else {*

*we*

*gather ;*

*If (all)*

*} else {*

*we*

*fall together ;*

This performance installation is a mediation to the moment we are witnessing. Implicitly political, it traces the escape of binary scripts into a more circulatory feedback. Some other questions we asked in this creation are:

*“\_what changes will it take  
to breathe life back into something so vital?  
\_how far within must we reach  
to collectively agree on something so essential as water?  
\_how far have we drifted?  
\_what shapes can we make that take us from this apathy  
and into empathy?”*

In the dance piece, the performers have been asked to channel their inner waters; using contained individual and porous collective body formations to shape their own forms. The concept of water

as a form, expands to the moving body through a post-human feminist phenomenological understanding of the hydro-commons, embodying water circuitry, containment, and the resonance of its ebbing. Its name, *If all else; I fall* is a linguistic play on words about algorithmic interactions and last resorts, and serves as a conceptual metaphor for the cohesion and separation gradually merging these individual bodies into one collective wave.

Further activating and narrating the space is a sound composition, *Impending Bloom*, which consists of two megaphone speakers that whisper the sounds of the river and the sea, in a call to action, a beacon for us to listen for the subtlety of their existence. Central to the sound composition is *h2.er*, meaning “harmony”, a kinetic metal sculpture that acts as a subwoofer-water-vessel and illuminates the sonified data across the space. The sounds are an experiment with emotional resonance, where harmonies use individual notes to hint at the relationship between the individual and collective, panning in different directions as sound waves pass like a water stream. The braiding of these works: the performance, the sonic composition, and the kinetic sculpture are intertwined, bringing metaphorical bodies together to bridge the present moment with the speculative future; the river with the sea; a slow transition from the individual to a slow meander towards a collective body’s formless formation and looping reformation.

#### 4. ANNEXE

*If all else; I fall*

Dance Performance, approximately 30 mins, 12 performers.

Performers:

*Aybüke Özel<sup>TK</sup>; Antea Chintoh<sup>CA</sup>; Camille Courchesne-Couturier<sup>CA</sup>; Giverney Welsch<sup>CA</sup>;  
Hannah Schallart<sup>CA</sup>; Malika Medawar-Bouchard<sup>CA</sup>; Michelle Shuman<sup>CA</sup>; Rae-Michelle  
Comodero<sup>CA</sup>; Sabina Gámez-Ibarra<sup>CO</sup>, Sarah Rose-Barone<sup>US</sup>, Sarah Germain<sup>CA</sup>, Thäina Rosinvil  
CA*

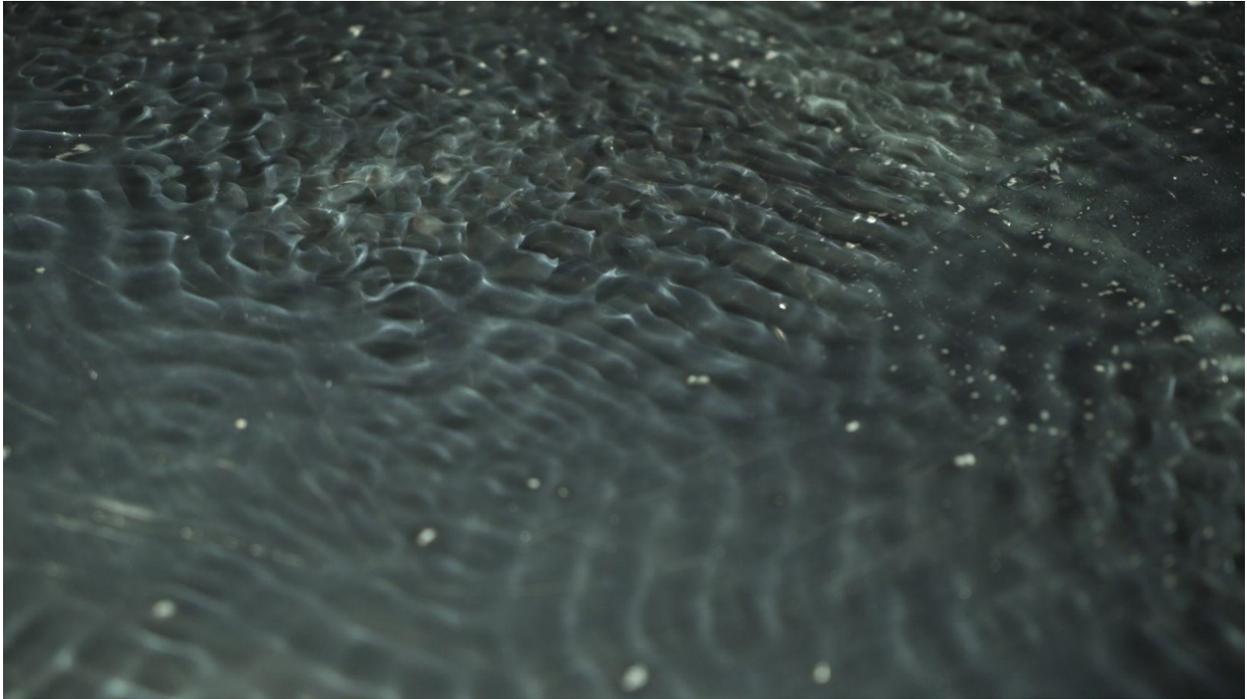


*Photographed: Rae-Michelle Comodero, Thaina Rosinvil, and Aybüke Özel. Photograph taken during the workshop series on October 8, 2024. Concordia University's Department of Dance.*

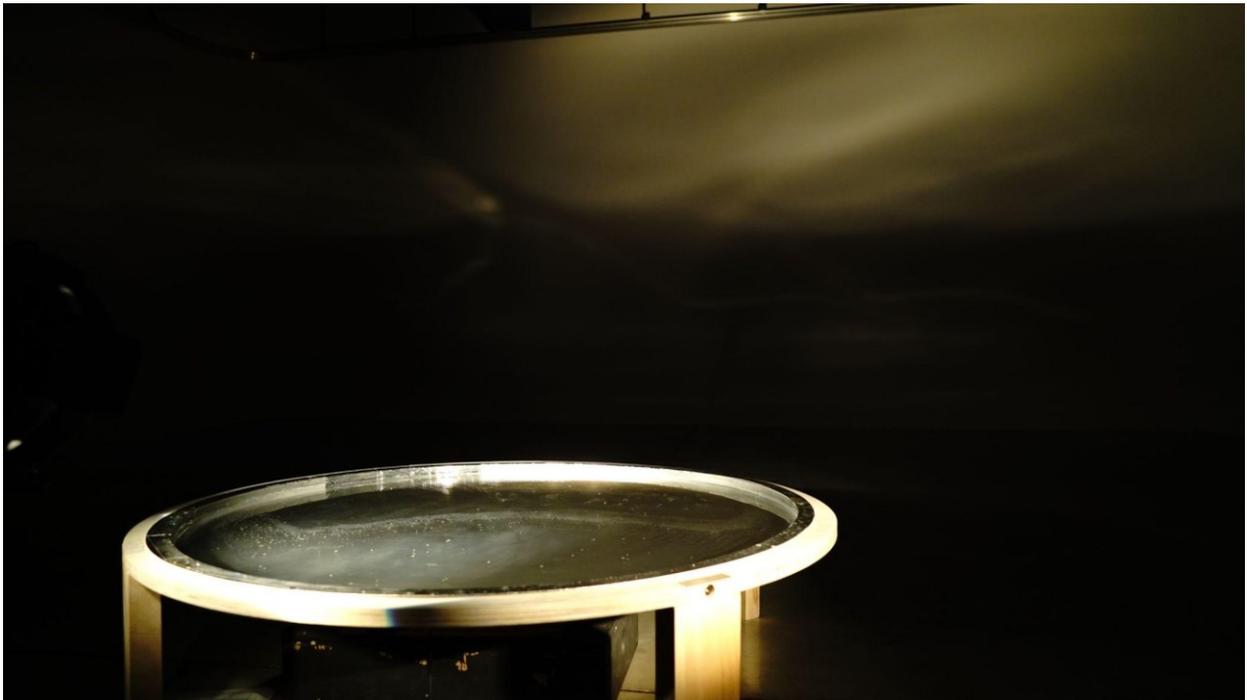
Follow the signal from the *skin-ter-face*.  
Trace the current, from your cerebral waters,  
between inhalation and exhalation, down your spine and send it back.

*h2.er (Harmony)*

Kinetic sculpture. steel dish, wood, speaker, modified amplifier, MP3 player, 3 litres of water. 3' (d) x 8".



*A close up of water patterns created by a muted transducer.*



*A muted transducer sends high and low frequencies. Photo taken at OBORO New Media Lab, Montreal, QC.*

### *Impending Blooms*

Synthesizer, Megaphones, MP3, looping swells of ocean sounds.



*Megaphone sounding ocean swells. Photo taken at Ateliers de Belleville, Montreal, QC.*

*Final Performance & Exhibition:*



*h2.er (harmony). 36" x 36" x 8". Steel, wood, water. subwoofer amp. DIY electronics. November 15, 2024. Concordia University, Black Box.*



*If All Else; I Fall. Dance Performance. 30 minutes. 12 dancers. November 15, 2024. Concordia University, Black Box.*

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