The E(thi)co-Political Aesthetics of Designer Water: The Need for a Strategic Visual Pedagogy

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This essay attempts to affectively politicize the visual art educator to the global condition of water in the larger context of designer capitalism. The ethical concerns of “designer water” are raised within the broader agenda of ecosophy as inspired by Giles Deleuze and by the last great essay by Félix Guattari. The essay takes an aesthetic line of flight that rests its trajectory on “anti-globalization” forces of protest and on an astonishing multiplicity of artists who are sensitizing us toward “becoming water.” The essay ends with the work of Al Gore, whose pedagogy provides a lesson for art educators in a world of visual designer spin. Hopefully, the argument is compelling enough to initiate an ecological sensibility into the visual curriculum.

There is a remarkable advertisement that lasts a mere 15 seconds. It is divided up into two equal segments. The first segment is always subject to change while the second always remains the same. In the first segment there is always someone or some team physically engaged in an activity. Generally speaking these are sporting activities, with walkers and hikers featured as well. The complementary segment then immediately follows—an aerial scan of various bottled products are drawn together—both figuratively and literally—by a single iconic droplet of water. The v(o)ice-over, spoken against a backdrop of classical piano music that sounds like falling rain droplets dancing merrily up and down, stops with one last note lingering on the sponsor’s name: “For every drop of yourself you give … get every drop back. We offer over 80 ways in which to hydrate, energize, nourish, relax or enjoy every drop of life. The Coca-Cola Company … make very drop count.” Remarkable, the way this particular visual iconic sound bite is able to synesthetically fold into itself both the body’s physical need to survive—60-70% of the body is water—and its range of affective states of enjoyment. Its sophistication is matched by the sophistication of the program Coca-Cola supports: PBS’ featured intellectual, Charlie Rose. On Coca Cola’s Internet site, the visitor is further informed that these 80 brands, 6 brands of which are designer water (water that has been packaged and usually sold in a plastic bottle), are distributed only in the United States, while altogether there are nearly 400 products in over 200 countries that meet “every taste, lifestyle or occasion.” All these drinkable products are supported through the science and innovation of Coca-Cola’s Beverage Institute for Health & Wellness.
The hegemony of this one image, the way a single drop of water branded by Coca Cola holds within it all the possible liquids of satisfaction, in short, the way it usurps the metaphysical essence of what is mysteriously called “life,” should send seismic shock waves to visual cultural art educators who wish to make a difference in the way our planet could be (re)imagined, not into a new transcendental totality offered by deep ecology, but by deconstructing the imagery that currently enwraps it so as to open up heterogeneous “lines of flight” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987).

This essay is framed by the ethico-political articulation of Guattari’s ecosophy (2000/1989). It continues the “poetics of a green ecosophy” I developed some 20 years ago (1988, 1989). Guattari’s three ecologies—environmental, social and mental—form an “assemblage,” that is, a heterogeneous complex of interlocking, conjugated and transdisciplinary flows, which is currently dominated by what he called Integrated World Capitalism (IWC), or Empire by Hardt & Negri (2000). Throughout my own work, I call this designer capitalism. The environment cannot be thought outside these three overlapping mental, social, and natural registers. The assemblage of such an eco-logic presents visual cultural art education with an opportunity to grasp and participate in what Guattari developed throughout his oeuvre as “transversality,” the possibility of a dissensual1 artistic-driven culture that is contrary to the market-driven consensual techno-scientific postmodern designer commodities. Such a deterritorialized aesthetic direction formed by ecological acts of micropolitical and microsocial dissent would cut across entire fields, bringing disciplines together in a new way, recreating them as something else, so as not to give designer capitalism our unconscious consent.

“We have to learn to make our thought traverse the interrelations and mutual influences between eco-systems, the material world, social and individual relations” (Guattari, 2000/1989, p. 35). Water is the test case in this essay for such an approach; water as the empty signifier that holds the global eco-system in place—transparent, a source of renewal and rebirth, a blessing, a gift, and a human right—seemingly ubiquitous and abundant to those who have no need to be concerned about it, but progressively more and more under the control of globalized capital.

1 Guattari (2000) writes, “Rather than looking for a stupefying and infantilizing consensus, it will be a question in the future of cultivating a dissensus and the singular production of existence” (p. 50, original emphasis). Dissensus refers to the call for the revival of individual competence as a social force and for the development of new egalitarian, decentralized, participatory democracies, orientated towards an environmentally sustainable way of living” (Carter, 1999, p. 300).
talist conclusion; the commodification of designer earth, be it potters’ clay or potting soil. All take a back seat to the commodification of water now that global warming, along with industrial air pollution, has begun to cause droughts, dry up rivers, melt glacial ice and pollute water basins and lakes with trace pesticides, herbicides, and heavy metals. In many ways, the commodification of all these basic “free” elements is interconnected. It is big agribusinesses (corporate farming) that guzzle up most of the water through irrigation schemes that dam(n) up and drain river systems; the San Joaquin Valley in California would return to desert conditions if it wasn’t for such schemes. Its vineyards and orchards would disappear. Add to this the burning of forests that releases more carbon dioxide into the atmosphere. The four life-sustaining elements are imploding, raising the earth’s temperature.

Designer capitalism now employs a steady stream of art and design graduates destined to enter publicity and advertising departments where “greenwashing” (giving a positive public image to putatively environmentally unsound practices) is not an uncommon practice. The opening advertisement in this article is paradigmatic of such practice. Water and air—the former now under the siege of free-market capitalism, and the latter being polluted by the same greedy system—form a self-serving binary. If the atmosphere, that “thin coat of varnish” as Al Gore puts it in An Inconvenient Truth (2006), continues to thicken as the carbon dioxides and monoxides, hydrocarbons and nitrogen oxides increase from our industrial and transportation emissions, then the glacial waters will continue to melt, not only raising the oceans and flooding populated shorelines, but increasing drought as the hydrologic rain cycle continues to degrade. Frank Herbert’s dystopian vision in Dune (1977) might surely become a reality. Some say that “dune-like” conditions can already be found. There are water-rich and water-poor areas; one-third of the entire world population is suffering from water shortages. If the trends remain the same, by 2025 two-thirds of the world’s population will suffer some form of water scarcity; the demand for water is doubling every 20 years, which is twice the rate of population growth of the planet. By 2025, the demand for water will outstrip supply by 56% (Clarke, 2006).

In 1999, Ismail Serageldin, the Vice-President of the World Bank, said: “Many of the wars of this century were about oil, but the wars of the next century will be about water (Serageldin, 1999). The Dune scenario is already here with protests and skirmishes to make water an environmental human right. A public trust has begun globally between private corporations, “the” people, and provincial, state, local and national governments. Such leaders as Maude Barlow, the founder of the Blue Planet Project, an organization committed to supporting global grassroots struggles for the right to water, and Tony Clarke of
the Polaris Institute work hard to organize conferences and meetings and bring to public awareness through articles and public speaking what is happening globally. Such committed leaders are invaluable, but it was a “lowly” Bolivian machinist-turned-union activist who, in protest of water privatization in his country, organized “La Coordinadora de Defensa del Agua y de la Vida” and started the first water war in the year 2000 against the World Bank and Betchel, a giant San Francisco engineering company (VanOverbeke, 2004).

Latin America has been the site of the most intense struggles against the privatization of water since the so-called “Washington Consensus” model of development that advocated the wholesale adoption of deregulation, privatization and unregulated free trade (Barlow & Clarke, 2002a, b). In the 1980s, the World Bank targeted the developing counties of Latin America to adopt these neoliberalist policies in exchange for debt relief. Foremost, in Argentina under the public privatization policies of President Carlos Menem, and then in Bolivia, Brazil, and Uruguay, the privatization of water has caused nothing but grief.

In India there has been a remarkable 5-year protest and struggle by the community of Plachimada in Kerala against Coca-Cola, who set up a bottling plant in the year 2000 (India Resource Center, 2006; PUCL Bulletin, 2002). Within a year, the groundwater started to decline and the wells became polluted. Despite the protests and the support of the local government, which denied the renewal of the plant’s license, Coca-Cola was able to have this decision overruled in 2005 by two judges of the same court who then enabled Coca-Cola to have use of the water over the local government’s right to regulate it. The local government took its appeal to the Supreme Court. Finally, on August 9, 2006, the Supreme Court of India ruled in their favor. The state government of Kerala was able to ban the production of Coca-Cola and Pepsi in the state as it was also found that the bottled soft drinks contained pesticide residues 24 times higher than the European Union standards and those proposed by India’s own Bureau of Indian Standard (BIS) (Mostly Water, 2006). Many states across India followed suit.

South Africa, since apartheid ended in 1994, has also become a hotbed of civil unrest, especially in Soweto in 2000, as the poor were unable to pay for the water at prepaid water dispensers. Every Afrikaner household in Johannesburg is allowed 6000 liters of “free” water per month. After that they must pay for it. Even if people can’t pay for it, the constitution guarantees them a minimum of water to sustain life. The Suez water company met this obligation by installing water pipes known as “tricklers,” a suitable name for taps that drip water a drop at a time 24/7 to fulfill this mandated law of survival, frustrating the collecting of water (CBC, 2004; Docherty, 2006). Incidents against the major corporate players such as these are on the increase as an International
Water Movement (IWM) tries to establish a universal set of ethical principles making water subject to “common” ownership and not the marketplace. IWM is committed to the equal distribution and conservation of water since it is no longer a renewable resource. They want to maintain water quality and democratize it in the hands of communities and not governments nor corporations.

What’s At Stake? The Social Relations Plateau

The facts are startlingly well-known: More than 70% of the surface of the earth is water, yet only 3% is fresh water and only 1% is drinkable. In the continent of North America, over one million people do not have access to safe, clean drinking water (Troubled Waters, 2006). In water-rich postindustrial countries with capitalist economies based on technology and information, these “facts” set up a very different economic dynamic than the one grappled with in Latin America, India, and South Africa. During the Ronald Reagan decade of neoliberalism (1981-1989) the door for the manufacturing of designer water was left wide open as companies began capitalizing on the health concerns of an aging baby-boomer generation and the public’s growing fear about the safety of their tap water. Bottled water consumption rose from 1.8% in 1981 to 6.9% by 1997 (Opel, 1999). Reagan was following Margaret Thatcher’s neoliberalist lead in privatizing water (Docherty, 2006). Public health scares involving drinking water (in some high-profile cases involving many deaths like the outbreak of Cryptosporidium in Milwaukee in 1993 causing 69 deaths, and in the small Ontario town of Walkerton where the municipal wells in 2000 became contaminated with E.coli, causing 18 deaths), along with continued news reports that question and spread doubt as to the quality of public water, enabled the private sector to control the perception that “safe,” “pure,” “clean,” water was in their hands. (These death tolls in North America pale in comparison to the cholera outbreaks from contaminated water in developing countries.) By trumpeting the virtues of the marketplace while demonizing municipal, provincial, and state government authorities as being inefficient and ineffectual bureaucracies in reference to water quality and purity, designer water companies managed to make public investment in clean public water a private resource for bottlers. They began to “own” the question as to what was desirable drinking water. In 2003, The National Resources Defense Council, the U.S. watchdog, reported that the Bush Administration’s Clean Water Act rollbacks would only exacerbate the deteriorating water works, pollution, and outdated treatment technologies of 19 of America’s largest cities. The multi-billion-dollar-a-year designer water industry was given full-steam-ahead to continue to own the issue of water. The combination of health-consciousness by a middle class, the question of the “purity” of water being “free” of pollutants,
and the anxiety that public water is increasingly not “safe” to drink, have made designer water one of the most profitable products.

The rate of consumption of designer water in the United States has been unparalleled according to the Beverage Marketing Corporation. It is the fastest growing major U.S. beverage category. There are approximately 900 brands of designer water in the U.S. alone. The profit margins are equally staggering given the low costs of the product. The estimated range is from $.0125 to $.06 U.S. cents per gallon depending on the variables of distance between source, bottling plant and distribution (Opel, 1999). In 2005, the volume surpassed 7.5 billion gallons, which is 26.1 gallons per person. A U.S. resident now drinks more bottled water annually than any other beverage (Beverage Marketing Corporation, 2005). Globally in 2005, the United States and Mexico led in designer water consumption, while China was third. But Italy and United Arab Emirates led in per capita consumption, with Mexico being third (International Bottled Water Association, 2005). There is no need to continue with such statistics of profit taking. Such statistics imprint well on corporate CEO’s and stockholders but numbers so presented do little to change people’s behavior.

**Snake Oil Fantasy: Mental Ecological Plateau**

The term “designer” rather than “bottled” water speaks directly to the “pure” model of neoliberalist capitalism, consonant with the claim to “pure” water that is being offered to the consumer. Unlike the taste of wine, which boasts connoisseurs and sommeliers, the taste differentiation between designer water and tap water under blind test conditions is impossible to tell, unless of course it is by crude distinctions such as carbonated vs. non-carbonated, fruit flavored vs. non-fruit flavored water. Yet, such books as Michael Mascha’s *Fine Waters: A Connoisseur’s Guide to the World’s Most Distinctive Bottled Waters* (2006) perpetuate this myth. Mascha, a food anthropologist, provides an image of each brand, gives his own description as to how it tastes, from what region and country it comes from, what foods go best with it, and then, of course, provides the usual breakdown of minerals, elements, salt content, and so on, of each product. Aside from the fetish of identifying (and collecting) x-number of brands, like wine or beer catalogues, the descriptions confuse rather than help consumer choice primarily because of over-choice. Understatedly, the tastes cannot be easily differentiated.

The peddling of “snake oil” has a long established tradition, and in the markets of many poorer countries, snake oil peddling continues to be a thriving business, the magical liquid substances offering anything from assuring a better sex drive to curing the local epidemic. However, it’s the *patter* (the signs and their significations) surrounding the product and not necessarily the product that sells. Likewise, designer water marketers
must rely on image, cost, and product placement to create desire for their particular brand. For believers in miracles, the Massabielle Spring water from Lourdes, France, is supposed to improve vitality, relieve painful joints, and even heal various bone disorders; the number of crutches left hanging on the ceiling of the grotto where the original miracle took place is supposed to be evidence enough. A small bottle of Lourdes “blessed” spring water sells for around $20. Baptisms, libations, Roman baths, and the spas that emerged for the rich around ancient springs and wells provide the rich historical background upon which designer water companies can continue to weave similar myths surrounding the health benefits of designer water. As Baudrillard (1975) successfully demonstrated, consumer capitalism requires that a brand label acquire a certain amount of cultural capital in the form of sign exchange value in relation to its competition with other similar goods, if it is to emerge as a successful product. Certain designer goods are perceived to be “better,” not necessarily because of their use and exchange value, but because they are able to ideally fill in the consumer lack that has been either generated by the manufacturing company for the product, or by what the public perceives to be a lack whose demand the product fulfills because of the increased anxiety or paranoia in the social order—that may, or may not have been artificially created. Consumer desire to fill a perceived lack is what makes the market commodities susceptible to “irrational” fluctuations.

In this complex affair, it seems that designer water is comparable to the ice-making machine in Peter Weir’s filmic allegory of entrepreneurial capitalism, Mosquito Coast (1986) written by Paul Theroux. Allie Fox, a dogmatic and eccentric inventor, relocates his New York family to the midst of a Central American jungle to sell the inhabitants a useless product that they don’t need, and which takes extraordinary resources to manufacture. The ice-making machine, standing above the jungle canopy, is a phallic symbol for the capitalist invasion of other lands. Designer water is no different as it has been shown, again and again, that the plastic bottle is the “real” snake in the snake oil that is being sold. The polyethylene terephthalate (PET) bottles are a source of chemical contamination. The petroleum companies that supply the oil for their manufacture are the major contributors to the pollution and depletion of fresh groundwater, as are the transportation systems to get bottled water over from Europe and exotic places like Fiji. The manufacture of PET bottles releases toxic wastes (benzine, xylene, and oxides of ethylene) into the environment. The manufacture of plastic resin has increased in post-industrial countries, yet these bottles are not biodegradable. They swell landfills, release hazardous toxins into the air and water when incinerated, form a major component of roadside litters, and are not recyclable, despite the claims of being so.
Designer Water: The Natural Fix

During the first two decades (1980-2000) of the designer water industry (we might consider this phase as being shaped by a "pre-global warming" consciousness), an idealized and romanticized desire for designer water was created by corporate companies to meet the perceived lack of "safe" tap water. Enron (at one time), US Filter, United Water, and American Water exploited the situation by manufacturing doubt as to water quality found in large municipalities because its source was from rivers, ground water, wells and reservoirs—all susceptible to air and ground pollution. They then skillfully promoted designer water as a health and fitness benefit by putting forward three key values: water purity, mineral content, and its natural refreshing taste. The International Bottled Water Association (IBWA) promoted safety and assurance of purity by playing up the geographical and geological location of each water source by maintaining a strict binary between culture and nature, reversing in value Levi-Strauss's (1969) mythological dictate between the "raw and the cooked." Pure "raw" water was romantically idealized as being absolutely free of being "cooked," that is, touched by human culture. The emphasis and importance of pristine nature increased in direct proportion to the technological developments in society as the distance from nature began to increase. Thus all the technological processing of designer water (mystical processes like reverse osmosis, micron filtration, distillation, ozonation, ultra violet light radiation) are underplayed or downplayed by this ploy, as is any possible contamination of it by mining, logging, ranching, milling and the tourist trade.

The majority of the designer labels that promote this pristine raw purity of nature feature snow-capped mountainous scenes that are at the top of the watershed, devoid of human habitation. The most important aspect is the location of the spring, even if it is bore-holed. And, of course, the more remote and inaccessible the better. The longer the "spring" or geyser has been in operation the better since this translates into how "old" and "reliable" the water is—glacial water being endowed with more "rare" trace minerals as a "gift" of mother nature and inorganic colloids than well or spring water. The GlaciaNova website (www.glacianova.com/home.html) is perhaps the best example of idealized nature. One of its products, Serac is "harvested" only in summer to get the "glacial milk" that contains the organic and inorganic colloid suspension. The play on "milk" should not go unnoticed with its association to "mother" earth, nor should the "nipple caps" that many designer bottles sport to facilitate taking a swig. Volvic Natural Spring Water, which comes from a protected park in the Auvergne region of France, offers the very opposite claim. The layers of ancient volcanic rock act as a natural filter, which result in a low mineral content in order to achieve perfect balance and high purity. How deep beneath the earth water is found also
increases the likelihood of it being free of contaminants and therefore offers another selling feature. So, the height of this absurd development can be seen in the most expensive designer water available called Kona Nigari that comes from 2,000 feet down off the coast of Hawaii, bottled by Hawaii Deep Marine. Added to this is how exotic and remote the site is—like Fiji mineral water that is “untouched by man.”

The pretense that designer waters could indeed not be differentiated eventually became safe to unveil. The idealized fantasy of its packaging, labeling, and shape of the bottles whose haute design in some cases lies between vodka bottle packaging—the similarities being that vodkas are also indistinguishable in taste and their color is that of water requiring associations with coldness and purity—and the preciousness of perfume bottles was finally recognized and contested. In 1998, the 8th Annual Toast of the Tap: International Water Tasting & Competition held in Beverly Springs, West Virginia, introduced a new competitive category—packaging. From Beverly Springs in 1998 to Beverly Hills in 2007, a visit to the Aqua Bar website (www.aquabar.ws) reveals the heights of haute designer water targeted exclusively at the rich.

**Designer Water: The Technological Fix**

The fin-de-millennium has seen a major change in the designer water industry, especially in North America, Europe, and the “water wars” on other continents mentioned in my introduction. One might say that this antagonistic direction is being shaped by global warming consciousness, the increased recognition that hydrocarbon emissions create acid rain, while dioxins from industrial textile and paper mills continue to pollute the ground water, reservoirs and rivers. All of this makes it easier to sell the snake oil despite all the expended energy by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in assuring the public that the drinking water is quite safe and suitable to drink. Fluorine is usually the trump card played to convince the consumer that the taste of tap water is not suitable for everyone’s palette. Yet, in some cases designer water companies have had to introduce fluoride to keep up with tap water. While the two-pronged attempts of pristine assurance—glacial water above the treeline and water deep, deep in the earth—continue to drive the industries’ health claims of mother nature’s pure gift, more and more technological rhetoric has entered into the advertisements to meet the challenge of global warming in the “water rich countries.” At the same time, “water poor countries” struggle to keep these corporate giants from literally stealing their water.

This technological fix comes in two forms. The first is to maintain that water itself can be technologically altered to increase health benefits. The labels no longer refer to idealized Nature but to the added symbolic capital that technology provides. Hence, chemistry plays the
largest role here. The absurdity of this approach includes such products as: Life O2 Super Oxygenated Water, Hexagonal Scalarwave Structured Water™, eVamor, Negative Field Activation™, and Eniva’s proprietary Solutomic™. The names are as silly as their claims.

It has, however, been the *sports drink* in the 21st century into which all the technology has gone. This sector of designer water is competitively fierce as sponsorship for major sporting events where product placement and endorsement by superstars has been added to establishing the fantasy of improved performance requiring new marketing strategies. The corporate nipple of the plastic sports bottle has now replaced “mother nature” as the source of life-sustaining water. Gatorade (recently purchased by Pepsi), which owns 80% of the market share, is the sponsor of many Ironman and marathon events, yet it is vilified by many athletes for being too intense, sweet, and causing many upset stomachs. Nevertheless, it maintains sales through such sponsorship and distribution throughout Europe. Neither Coca-Cola’s Powerade nor Pepsi’s All-Sport can match it. With sports drinks we have the reversed ideology in play where the “cooked” is claimed to be superior to the “raw,” repeating the tension of a meandering border between steroid use and “natural” enhancing substances for performance.

The second form of the technological fix is perhaps more disturbing. Corporate giants now maintain that technology is the answer for water purification because Nature has become deficient. We can no longer rely on the “natural” cycles of purification. It’s time, once again, for pollution and contamination to provide new economic opportunities. This takes us again down the path of water privatization since there is very little green representation in the various levels of municipal, state (provincial) and federal governments. By and large, the environmental policies of the United States, Canada, and Mexico under the NAFTA agreement have been a disaster. The conditions for North American “water wars” are emerging given that Canada is rich in water as a natural resource (Barlow, 2005).

**“Risk” Society and Designer Water?**

The paranoia surrounding drinking water created by the nature/culture dialectic is part of a larger societal issue: the distrust of both government (at all levels) and the fear of conspiracies by large corporations, which at times seem to be confirmed. Consider the well-publicized 2004 failure of Coca-Cola’s launch of Dasani designer water in the United Kingdom, when it was discovered that Dasani had high levels of bromate (a suspected carcinogen), and that it was little more than filtered London tap water (CNN, 2004; Lawrence, 2004). Such a state of affairs seems to confirm Ulrich Beck’s (1992) characterization of a “risk” society, where “risk” does not mean that we face more dangers than
ever before, rather “we are now entangled, whereas the modernist dream was to disentangle us from the morass of the past” (Latour, 2003, p. 36). No assurances can be provided by the government agencies such as the National Resources Defense Council (NRDC) that water is entirely safe; nor by the “non-biased” scientist, since there is no such person; nor by the scientific quackery of the designer water industry, with its patented processes that continue to confuse and mystify. Like the Survivor series on television, the body (and the household by extension) is besieged by contradictory messages, and the “game” is to survive “self-reflexively,” another Beckian term, which (again) does not mean that today people are more “aware” and more “conscious” than earlier times. Rather, it is quite the opposite: self-reflexivity refers to the unintended consequences of actions that have become intractable. There is only a “heightened awareness that mastery is impossible and that control over actions is now seen as a complete modernist fiction” (Latour 2003, p. 36). In short, uncertainty has increased, even more so in the post-9/11 climate of terrorism. Just as smoking as a health-risk is on the decline, drinking bottled water is on the rise. Wilk (2006) notes “there are fewer and fewer public and workplace drinking fountains in the USA” (p. 315)—just like the vanishing public ashtrays. The more anxiety one has about the environmental situation, the more likely one is willing to invest money to “protect” oneself when it comes to health and security. Generally speaking in terms of class and education, the more money one has, the more likelihood that money will be spent for such protection (home security, health security, organic foods, gated communities, and so on). In this sense, the billionaire Howard Hughes’ so-called obsessive-compulsive disorder is the pathological symptom of a general anxiety that pervades “risk” societies.

This is certainly not the entire story. There are many complex reasons why designer water continues to be consumed and produced despite the staggering statistics. The big four mega-companies are not likely to stop bottling, given that the profits are so high. The ethical and political arguments for making water a human resource subject to social justice are dismissed and rationalized away by maintaining that they are adding to the economy of the (host) country. But, their “pitiful employment record, the $12 billion North American bottled water behemoth provided 6,709 low wage jobs in 2002,” tells another story (Lack, 2006). There is also the pretence of “green capitalism.” For every bottle sold a small percentage goes to providing water for the poor, relieving the privileged of their guilt. The non-thinking everyday consumer who reaches for whatever designer water is available in the local supermarket does so more for convenience, or has become habituated to do so for the taste of carbonated water rather than any issues of safety of the drinking water (Levallois, Grondin, & Gringras, 1999; Wilk, 2006). Ironically, it was
reported that the sales of bottled water in France declined in 2005 as people turned to tap water. It turned out that this was due to a price hike amongst the well-known brands Evian and Volvic, owned by Danone, and Vittel and San Pellegrino, owned by Nestlé (Yahoo, Finance, 2006). Despite the smaller percentage of bottles sold, the profits remained the same because of the increase in costs! It seems that the public turns to tap water only when they feel the cost of designer water in their pocketbooks. For the rich and well-off, designer water, like organic food, is the “healthy” choice that retains the aura of “distinction” which is, in Bourdieu’s (1984) terms, an aesthetics of taste and status differentiated by social standing and expendable money. How then can all of this be changed?

A Visual Pedagogy of the One and the Multitude— Lessons from Al Gore

First the Multitude: Building on the ’68 Generation

Waging an informational and educational “war” against designer water companies—to become politically active at the community level as “water warriors” as Tony Clarke (2006) put it—has certainly been the hope of the International Water Movement. When one reads and hears the inspirational speeches by Canadian water activists Maude Barlow and Tony Clarke offering examples of such resistance, one truly hopes that such a growing global consciousness is forming. The Water Liberation Movement in Germany even invaded supermarkets and convenience stores in groups to “liberate” water by pouring it down the drains to recharge the desiccated water cycle (Lack, 2006). In the last chapter of their book, Empire, Hardt and Negri (2000) write optimistically about “the Multitude against Empire” and then go on to further elucidate what they meant by it in a follow up book Multitude (2004). Perhaps the “anti-globalization protest” at Gothenburg, Quebec, Prague, Seattle and Genoa is a misnomer? The coalitions are not against globalization per se but are searching for new forms of its democratization (Hardt & Negri, 2001). This might prove to be the transversal line of deterritorialization Guattari hoped for, since the fight against global warming and its creeping environmental disaster is being lost despite the myriad of activists and NGO’s doing their level best to make a difference. The slogan to think globally by acting locally is falling into the reality of striving locally but losing globally. A transformative polyphonic and multivalent vision is necessary.

There are many proposals for such a possibility, but I find Richard K. Moore’s (2004) vision of global transformation persuasive. Moore recognizes that the West and developing countries require different strategies. He works hard to show that reformism doesn’t work in today’s world; he pleads for the need for a non-violent strategy, which does not isolate,
promote retaliation, nor alienate others from joining. He maps out what would be the response to such a popular movement—media blackouts, marginalization and demonization, distraction and diversion, co-option, suppression, infiltration by agent provocateurs who derail demonstrations. He cautions against the narrowness of Green Party politics within the European Union rhetoric and maintains the necessity of a synergy between Western and liberation movements in developing “third-world” countries. Moore does not have all the answers and, if we are to believe in the autopoetics of self-organizing systems that are bigger than any “one” person, such a movement must come about, otherwise we shall surely die as a species. For Stephen Hawking (2006), the battle is already a foregone conclusion: the only hope is a technological one—to colonize another planet. Other scientists hope to technologically affect the climate of mars to green it. It is our closest hope.

Then the One: “Becoming Water”

For visual and cultural art education, our task against the backdrop of what I have written seems eminently clear: It is the visual imagination and the synesthetic attachment to water that must be engendered in our art classrooms—by “becoming water” (after Deleuze and Guattari’s “becoming animal,”1987). But there is a danger here. “Ecology,” Guattari wrote, “must stop being associated with the image of a small nature-loving minority or with qualified specialists” (2000/1989, p. 52). The mystical nature, as a reenchantment of the earth, can be marshaled as a “countering discourse” (in Gayatri Spivak’s terms, see Cohen, 1994, and Conley, 1997) to the Romanticization of Nature mobilized by the designer companies. New “scientific” evidence suggests that water in trees contracts and responds to lunar cycles. Its crystal make-up will change to different kinds of music that are played. Angry talk at water engenders a different crystal formation, while plant life and its colors change according to the molecular crystal formation of the water that they drink. So one can imagine what is going on when coral reefs become bleached and lose color. Such “mystical” findings require us to pause in the way nature/culture are intimately woven—in the strange way deep ecology and indigenous people’s intuitive understandings meet in the recesses of unknowable Nature. “Becoming water” allows the human to imagine life from an inhuman perspective. The Swedish eco artist Henrik Håkansson (Andrews, 2004), influenced by Deleuze & Guattarian theory, attempts to decenter human perception through installations like Sweet Leaf (2000) where alliances with the non-human (in this case birds and insects) are formed. By calling on the virtual “army” of eco-artists who are already generating an enormous amount of exemplary performances and installations to help sensitize the public specifically to the water “issue,” we teachers can utilize their multitude of visions and approaches to further students’ sensibilities to
dissolve the nature/culture divide in the search for a more symbiotic, gentle and complex vision.

While it would take another essay to articulate the incredible array of possible projects, a quick trip to the greenmuseum’s website (greenmuseum.org) yields an astonishing array of practicing artists from all over the world whose multiplicity in their singularities form a “becoming water” sensibility. For those that specifically work with water—be it with oceans, their beaches and fishes, bacteria, stream systems, ponds, river systems, wetlands, and deserts where water is lacking — I can point to the following partial list: AMD&ART (treatment of drainage water from mines); Ulrike Arnold (site-specific water and earth landscapes); Mark Brestvan Kempen (drinking fountain designs); Betty Beaumont (ocean waste); Patricia Johanson (ecology and ocean-water gardens, pools); Brandon Ballengée (marine life, algae, tides); Brian Collier (properties of water); Basia Irland (RioGrande: source to sea); Betsy Damon (a pioneer as a “keeper of the water,” water gardens); Albert Flynn DeSilver (lunar tides); Gloria Lamson (time and tides, coastal beaches); Isabelle Hayeru (digital documentation of wastelands, coastlines); Ichi Ikeda (WaterArt installations); Herman Prigann (water from mining); Aviva Rahmani (salt marsh wetlands); Fern Shaffer and Othello Anderson (ritual, acid rain); Steve Bradley (site-situated river installations, rubbish); Ruth Wallen (sea sculptures); Laurie Lundquest (desert watersheds); Nils-Udo (water-movements); Christy Rupp (watersheds; Lada Sega (sea pollution); Andy Goldsworthy (ice sculptures); Buster Simpson (agit performances, acid rain)…. These are singularities of vision that offer One as a Multiple that may form into a Multitude.

This host of artists offers many ideas for site-specific installations, agit-prop performances and ritual approaches to water as stepping-stones for environmental projects in class. Such an array counters romanticized nature and introduces new imaginings and new fantasies as to surrounding an ethical and political relationship with the earth’s ecospheres, since new fantasies to market water by exoticizing it are equally readily available. Wilk (2006), for example, had 25 marketing professionals at a major U.S. business school generate brilliant new exploitative possibilities for designer water within 15 minutes. This “studium” approach (I am using the German word to suggest that the studio must be contextualized to social issues and concerns outside the confined space of the artist’s workplace and the school room) is one part of a necessary two-part approach to “ruin” the representation developed by designer capitalism. While this pedagogical turn establishes counter-possibilities as to our relationship with water, it is necessary that a further pedagogical strategy be developed alongside it so as to directly attack the symbolic system, to empty it of desire and further ruin representation. This second pedagogical tactic is the obvious semiological deconstruction of idealized Nature (the patter)
as represented by the design of the labels, on designer water Internet sites, the pseudo-science that surrounds the processes, and so on. But more specifically, it must combat the technological imagination (more pointedly the technocratic imagination and the symbolic capital it offers) that has been set up as a solution to global warming. It is here that I take several lessons from Al Gore.

And Now Some Final Lessons from Al Gore

Al Gore’s much-acclaimed greenhouse warming lecture in the documentary An Inconvenient Truth (2006) offers many instructive pedagogical lessons. I was struck by several developments that are of strategic pedagogical use for the visual cultural art classroom. In a postmodern information world where the aestheticized image has become the rule of/to spin ideology in a postideological world, there is no possibility of claiming the moral high ground to expose “false consciousness,” nor is it possible to “lift the veil” and expose the truth that lies hidden there as in the “good-old days” of ideology critique. Yet, Al Gore “still” tries to do this—and succeeds, somewhat. What sustains the fantasy of belief is a particular idealized image of one’s self, the social order, and the global state of the environment. It is that specific image which props up any sort of perceived lack that we may have. It maintains a belief system that is not necessarily based on any reasonable and rational facts. Such a particular psychoanalytic tact has been argued by the many writings of Slavoj Zizek (see for example, 1989). No amount of shocking statistical data will necessarily change this image and the behavior it engenders, if it is not registered on the “skin.” If the nerves are not sent into disarray, no affective bodily experience is felt. The contradictions are smoothed-over.

With this in mind, Al Gore’s environmental lecture is instructive in the way it purposefully uses a hyped sense of visual rhetoric to challenge, dispel, and illustrate global warming, laying out the evidence visually so that the nerves are indeed shaken. The power of the image registers first on the body before any attempt is made to explain what one is seeing. While this is not the place to provide an overview and critique of the documentary, what is rather apparently dramatic is Gore making every effort to dramatize and theatricize each point—helped by Duarte Design, since 2003, using Apple’s Keynote. Whether what he offers is true or not, that is not the lesson for us. It is the affect that is striven for. The insightful explorations of graphic rhetoric by Edward R. Tufte, a trilogy that begins in 1983, might easily be applied to grasp the way Gore’s exaggerations operate to dramatize the statistical evidence. “Bad” graphics, according to Tufte, lie by distortion, obfuscate by omission, and confuse by decoration. Tufte’s point is better served by saying that any graphic distorts, obfuscates, and confuses. And this is precisely what the
right-wing Heartland Institute attempted to do to expose Gore’s presentation, calling it “a triumph of data manipulation,” “slick propaganda,” and “deceptive” (Bast, 2006). Marlo Lewis (2006), a senior fellow in environmental policy at the Competitive Enterprise Institute (2006) in Washington, DC, created a video rebuttal on the Heartland Institute’s behalf to contradict Gore’s images and visual graphics on pollution, Hurricane Katrina, the warming rate, and ice moulins.

Gore’s “key” visual graphic (2006, p. 67), referred to as the “hockey stick graph,” shows the close correlation over the past 650,000 years between climate warming and the amount of CO$_2$ in the atmosphere. The current CO$_2$ concentration is 350 parts per million (ppm), the highest ever recorded. Gore dramatically illustrates the rise in CO$_2$ and consequently the rise in temperature within the next 45 years, by raising himself on a hydraulic platform, not once but twice, to show that the CO$_2$ ppm figure will eventually be off the chart. This visual has been heavily criticized for not being able to provide viewers with information as to whether warmer temperatures precede or follow the rises in levels of carbon dioxide and that the scale along the vertical “y” axis was not clearly labeled (see overview by Womack, 2006). Cynics read the biographical moments of Gore (being affected by his son’s car accident, his election loss to Bush, and his father’s ethical rejection of growing tobacco) as the “true” message of the film. They purport that Gore wants to make money and change his “wooden” image as an intellectual in order to run again for office. Yet, undeniably, Gore is pedagogically seeking to place his audience in a subject position where doubt is transformed into a convincing visual tour de force in his belief that what he is offering is the “truth.” It is this compelling force of his visual rhetorical argument that we as educators should take as our lesson, and to recognize that counter spin is offered to create more doubt, much like that previously initiated by the tobacco and cigarette-manufacturing giants.

Three further pedagogical lessons struck me. First, was the standard frog analogy where, if the water temperature is raised slowly, the frog doesn’t know it and will (as a foregone conclusion) become cooked. In Gore’s animated version the frog is pulled out in time and rescued, illustrating hope and utter conviction that a movement to stop the disaster is still possible. The second is the way Gore attacks his opponents’ common perceived notions (e.g., it’s part of the “natural” historical weather cycle; the rate of atmospheric CO$_2$ is only slowly rising, ocean temperature has always been subject to cycles, and so on) as to why they maintain that global warming will not happen, offering a better explanation as to why it will. There is a claim to “the” truth—but it is tempered in ethical and political terms to stop or slow down global warming. The inconvenient truth, for Gore, is to answer to corporate power rather than to the “good” of the people.
Finally, as Gore says on a voice-over, he has done this lecture over 1,000 times all over the globe, each time, no doubt, improving the visuals and graphics to communicate his ideas. We see him constantly working on his computer in planes and trains to clear the obstacles he believes get in the way of people understanding this danger. He then reflects: “The only way I know how to do it is city by city, person by person, family by family, and I have faith that pretty soon enough minds are changed that we cross a threshold.” The question of personal responsibility (and corporate responsibility) is the most important lesson for any visual cultural art educator who believes in ethics and politics that surround designer water and the crisis of global warming. We (you and I) do not have the luxury not to attempt to introduce ecological issues into the visual art curriculum, for what is at stake is to reach at least One—to continue to build toward the moment when the multitudinous frog jumps out of the water before it’s too late—having already cooked ourselves raw, so to speak.

References


