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Performing Water: Experiments at the Intersection of Bodies, Cities, and Water

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Performing Water: Experiments at the Intersection of Bodies, Cities, and Water

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Abstract

This contribution is based on my doctoral thesis entitled *Cities, Bodies, and Water: Urban Bathing as a Spatial Practice*, completed at the University of Roma Tre in January 2025. The study's engagement with the spatial practices of bathing, and thus with the embodied experience of space, led to a parallel investigation into the performativity of water. This curiosity gave rise to a series of *experiments* at the intersection of the three central foci of the research: cities, bodies and water. In these investigations, *Performing Water* emerged as an embodied method for understanding the *hydrological* body (Neimanis, 2017) as part of a larger *environmental* body (Halprin; Ingold, 2000). Drawing on and being inspired by works such as Humphrey's *Water Study* (1923), Niemczyk's *Bath in the Fountain* (1960), Halprin's *The Bath* (1967) or *Experiments in Environment* (1967-1971), Chirico's *Mysterious Bath Fountain* (1973), and Huan's *To Raise the Water Level in a Fishpond* (1997), a series of site-specific, body-based actions have been developed and co-developed. The selected experiments presented here not only served as forms of embodied research but also as platforms for embodied pedagogy. Through this process, four conceptual frameworks have emerged as tools for future experimentation and engagement with water: *Embodying Water* (1), *Bathing Fantasies* (2), *Reviving Bathing Spaces* (3), and *Making Water Visible* (4). Together, these pedagogical structures provide a foundation for continued exploration and collaborative research.

Keywords: cities, bodies, water, performance, pedagogy

Experiments at the Intersection of Cities, Bodies, and Water

We are all part of a bigger body, and that bigger body is nature herself. We are water, metal, earth and air. (...) By connecting with this larger body, we can find a life-giving support that is often neglected and denied in our industrialized culture. (Halprin, 2000, p.119)

Placed within situated actions within academic contexts, where performance became both research and pedagogy, these *experiments* explore the intersection of cities, bodies, and water. They unfolded within specific spatial and social conditions, using the body as a tool to generate experiential knowledge and awareness related to water (Figure 1). From public thermal baths to ancient archaeological remains, from fountains in Rome to ephemeral gestures with the earth, these explorations respond to both the physical and symbolic absence or presence of water. What follows is a brief account of these performative moments, each of which attempts to reimagine the role of water in shaping our *spatial practices* (Dodd, 2019) and *hydrosocial cycles* (Linton, 2010).

Figure 1

Bathing Caracalla, 2022. Image by Alfonso Salamone.

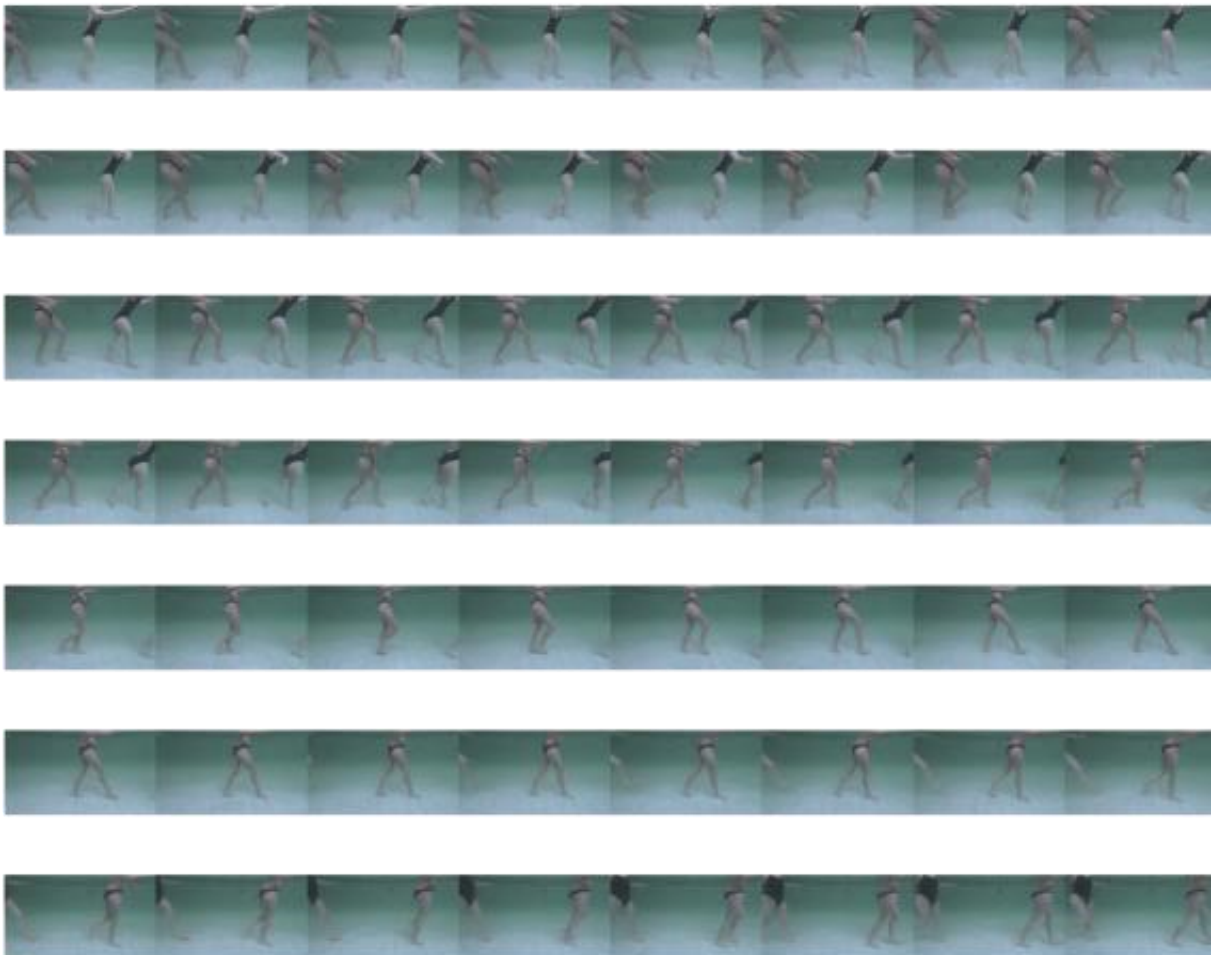


(1) Seminar Stadt-Körper-Wasser, University of Stuttgart, 2022

The first two *experiments* took place in the Seminar *Stadt-Körper-Wasser*¹ at the Chair of Stadtplanung und Entwerfen (SuE), directed by Prof. Baum at the University of Stuttgart. Conceived by the author and Malzahn, the seminar reflected on the interrelations between cities, bodies and water. The first experiment was carried out in a public thermal bath, Mineralbad Berg in Stuttgart, which draws its water from a natural thermal spring. During the session, students explored the inhabitation of water, how the body moves in water, how temperature is perceived, and how materials affect the sensory experience.

Figure 2

Experiment in Mineralbad Berg, Stuttgart, 2022. Image by the author.



¹ More information available at: <https://www.sue-uni-stuttgart.de/lehrformate/ss-2022-stadt-koerper-wasser/>

The second *experiment* took place at the Heisse Brunnen in Baden, an example of urban bathing that come out from a grassroots initiative called Bagno Popolare.² This experiment explored the experience of bathing in an open public space, and how architecture plays a fundamental role in negotiating the seemingly contradictory act of performing an intimate practice in public. The size of the pool allowed a small group of people to interact comfortably, since the height of the walls, the relationship to the bodies and the immediate surroundings, the material, the texture, and the temperature provided adequate conditions for them to discuss while bathing.

Figure 3

Experiment in Heisse Brunnen, Baden, 2022. Image by Mike Stricker.



The seminar ended with an exhibition of the student's reflections on topics such as *phenomenology*, by capturing soundscapes or identifying feelings linked with urban waters; *coexistence*, by studying the cohabitation in liquid spaces; *connectedness*, by exploring dependencies; *utopia*, by imagining urban spaces for bathing; *contradictions*, of private/public, healing/danger, pleasure/need; and *visibility*, by mapping or unveiling urban waters.

² Bagno Popolare is a community-driven initiative based in Baden, Switzerland, dedicated to reviving the city's historic thermal bathing culture. Established in 2017, the collective has been instrumental in reintroducing public bathing through projects such as *Heisse Brunnen* or *Bad zum Raben*, in Baden and Ennetbaden. See: <https://bagnopopolare.ch>

(2) Master's degree in Environmental Humanities, University of Roma Tre, 2023

As part of the Master's Degree in Environmental Humanities, directed by Prof. Careri and Prof. Angelucci, a joint activity on water was organised in collaboration with the collectives Ati Suffix³ and Hotel Regina.⁴ The project developed with the students was titled *Confluvium* (meaning confluence, place where streams of water/air meet). In Rome, while it is forbidden to bathe in the city's fountains, it is permitted to collect their water for drinking. The performance consisted of collectively gathering water from several historical fountains - Fontana dei Quattro Fiumi, Fontana delle Tartarughe, the twin fountains in Piazza Farnese, and Fontana dell'Acqua Paola - and transporting it in a canister from one site to another. The action culminated in a collective bath using the gathered water, symbolically creating a shared immersion in all the Roman fountains.

(3) Conference Performing Space, University of the Peloponnese, 2023

Since 2022, my participation in the organisation of the annual international conference *Performing Space*,⁵ coordinated by Berzal-Cruz and hosted by the Department of Theatre at the University of the Peloponnese, has offered opportunities to share and expand research on the relationship between performance and water. In the 2022 and 2023 editions, a series of workshops were conducted, involving various *experiments*, some specifically addressing cities, bodies and water. One example was the exploration of the sunken city of Epidaurus (2022), where participants embodied the submerged archaeological remains. Other examples include an exercise on Arvanitia Beach (2023), where participants entered the water dressed and floated towards the shore while reflecting on migration and displacement (Figure 4), and a student-led re-enactment of the city's abandoned hammam (2023), reviving its historical significance.

An additional example, developed in collaboration with the *Friends of the 750 Mineral Springs of Greece*,⁶ focused on reevaluating lost historic springs. The performance centred

³ ATI Suffix is an interdisciplinary collective based in Rome, established in 2013. The group adopts the Italian grammatical suffix "-ATI" to emphasize reciprocal and transformative actions. See: <https://www.atisuffix.net>

⁴ Kollektiv Hotel Regina is a Basel-based art and design collective, founded in 2016. Its practice spans art, design, and performance, characterized by a diverse use of media and a focus on participatory, site-specific interventions. See: <https://kollektiv.hotelregina.org>

⁵ Performing Space is an international research project exploring the relationship between performance and the built environment. The project brings together scholars and practitioners from diverse disciplines to investigate how bodies and spaces interact. See: <https://www.performingspace.org>

⁶ Friends of the 750 Mineral Springs of Greece is a research project inspired by Nikolaos Lekkas's 1938 publication of the same name aiming to document, explore, and reimagine Greece's neglected network of thermal and mineral springs. See: <https://www.750mineralsprings.gr>

on the search for a spring that once supplied the sanctuary of Asclepius in Epidaurus, described in Nikolaos Lekkas's guide (1938) as Ακρατοπηγή (meaning uncontainable, wild, free). The term sparked the exploration, and when the path to the source was found to be blocked, the group decided to perform on site with the available water, embodying the difficulty of access to water and culminating in a collective bath with the wet earth. (Figures 5,6).

Figure 4

Experiment in Arvanitia Beach, Napflio, 2023. Image by Giorgos Charalampakis.

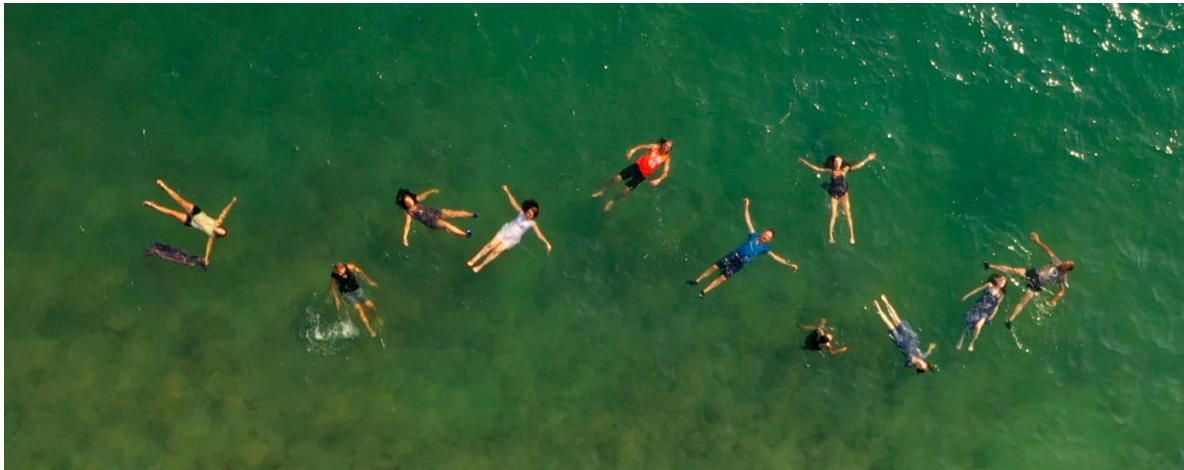


Figure 5,6

Experiment in the sanctuary of Asclepius, Epidaurus, 2023. Images by the author.



(4) Summer School Blue Paths, University of Stuttgart, TH Nuremberg, Academy of Fine Arts Palermo, 2024

Organised by the University of Stuttgart, TH Nuremberg, and the Academy of Fine Arts of Palermo, the *Blue Paths* Summer School brought together students and teachers in the Sicilian villages of Sclafani Bagni and Petralia Sottana. The transdisciplinary programme

combined embodied research/pedagogy (Figure 7), and community engagement to address the revitalisation of healing water sites. Participants developed five site-specific actions linked by a collective journey called the “Blue Path,” which included a public bathing performance at a village fountain, a tea ceremony, the construction of a changing room, and participatory installations at an abandoned thermal bath and a disused public pool. These embodied experiments emphasised sensory experience, local knowledge, and communal rituals around water, reimagining the practice of bathing. The Summer School concluded with an exhibition at Bad zum Raben in Baden, Switzerland, which translated the Sicilian experience into a new spatial and historical context through performative and multimedia installations.

Figure 7

Experiment in the thermal spring, Sclafani Bagni, 2024. Image by the author.



Conclusion

Through a series of performative experiments, this research explored how the human body navigates through the presence and absence of water in the built environment. These actions highlighted the social, cultural, and ecological significance of water (Linton, 2010) and positioned urban bathing as a critical tool for regeneration (Gideon, 1948), *jouissance* (Lefevre, 2014), and connectedness (Neimanis, 2017).

Four conceptual frameworks emerged from these *experiments* at the intersection between cities, bodies and water: *embodying water* (1), *bathing fantasies* (2), *reviving bathing spaces* (3), and *making water visible* (4).

The idea of *embodying water* appeared in the *experiments* at Mineralbad Berg and Heisse Brunnen, where the body was approached as a porous medium fluid, responsive, and shaped by its environment (Halprin, 2000; Ingold, 2000). *Bathing fantasies* explored the symbolic and psychological dimensions of water (Bachelard, 1994; Illich, 1986), as in the ritualised gathering of fountain water in Rome or the fountain bathing in Sclafani Bagni. *Reviving bathing spaces* took shape through site-specific actions in the abandoned hammam in Nafplio, and the abandoned bathhouse in Sclafani Bagni, reactivating overlooked spaces of care and community. *Making water visible* became essential in a context where water is often hidden or abstracted (Gandy, 2004; Linton, 2010; Chen, MacLeod, & Neimanis, 2013). Through mapping, immersion, or interaction with wet earth, water was reintroduced as a relational and ecosocial practice.

In searching for the lost spring of Epidaurus, the performers reflected on the scarcity of water, the intimacy of shared bathing, and the embodied urgency of reconnecting with our environment. As one participant noted, “we became water in a way” (personal communication, 2023)

With this reflection, the paper concludes by proposing a framework for future embodied research and pedagogical inquiry - *Performing Water* - which calls for transdisciplinary collaboration to explore new methods to engage with water.

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