



**WATER, ITS PRESENT, ITS FUTURE:
A LOOK BACK AT 'LIQUIDITY, INC.'**
BY HITO STEYERL

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Abstract

"Liquidity, Inc." is an unpredictable video art that plays for 30 minutes. What's being shown by the artwork might not be something that we can relate to straight away, moreover in the context of Bali. However, this paper aims to pour the artwork back to another clean container, to look back at one of Hito Steyerl's bizarrely montaged fictional documentaries. As water becomes a more and more important matter to talk, think and encounter within our daily lives in the changing climate, along with possible connections on Bali's *tirta* (water) belief, this writing aims to give a perspective on how we could view water in its present and future, in Bali and beyond, through an artwork such as "Liquidity, Inc."

Keywords: water, liquidity, video art, installation

INTRODUCTION

It got to the point of our life to question how can we ever not live with water? Our body is filled mostly by it, we need it all the time, in order to live. With the climate change currents, all eyes are on the occurring drying lands, melting ice caps, drying rivers and uncontrollable weather. At the same time, clean water access is still very much a problem for many to continue living in this world. In the Balinese Hindu, *tirta* and water are important aspects, therefore you are cleansed by it throughout your life.

Water as a liquid is the fundamental base to anything needed to be liquefied. Its liquidity to make fluidity happen is necessary. Yet in the English language it also becomes another term that I did not think of finding it at: the business language. For that liquidity becomes an important term. Based on the Oxford English Dictionary, it refers to "the state of owning things of value that can easily be exchanged for cash" [1].

This curiosity started in 2014, when a lecturer introduced the class to a bizarre video art clip by a German female artist, Hito Steyerl. Our topic at the time was about the introduction to "World Cognition". Even though I do not recall much of what we learnt, that day was forever planted in my brain, for that particular visual from the video art called "Liquidity, Inc."

It was inspired by the 2008 recession where we get to follow the journey of a jobless finance worker named Jacob Wood who decided to make his hobby a career: mixed martial arts. The video art followed Bruce Lee's statement to "be shapeless, formless, like water" therefore arriving at "liquidity" as "fluid" to talk about everything related to it,



namely: the weather, water, circulations, information, assets [2]. While following the ex-finance worker, you get to see all of these matters presented (or rather represented). And you watch it lying on a wave-like ramp, therefore *you are in the waves of the liquid* when watching it. So when it becomes a title of an artwork, especially having inc. (i.e. incorporated) in the end, you wonder what it is actually talking about.



Figure 1. Installation View, 'Hito Steyerl' at Artists Space, 2015, showing "Liquidity, Inc." (2014)
[Source: Reference [4]]

I eventually experienced this installation a few times. First at Stockholm, Sweden in 2015 then at Singapore in 2019. And within that time span, the experience grew to be seen and felt differently. Just like the experience when you first remember being touched by water, and eventually when you are delving into it as an adult. It got me thinking of water, its present, its future; what is there to learn from "Liquidity, Inc." about water's present and future? What kind of "liquidity" should we consider as our way of living on this earth? And what could be the relation to the current climate change, water scarcity, and water as part of the Balinese Hindu *tirta* belief?

RESEARCH METHOD

In order to answer these questions, the methodology would be finding the possible responses and arguments that have existed towards the artwork. This comes from articles on journals and websites, a book and exhibition catalogues. Besides that, readings of art and culture relating to climate change, water as an element of life, and the *tirta* belief will also be used. With this it is hoped we have a better understanding of the artwork's physical presence and metaphorical messages (meanings).

In the book *Make Waves: Water in Contemporary Literature and Film*, it has a book chapter discussing "Liquidity, Inc.", which I will refer more later in the Discussion section. On the first pages of the book, Editor Paula Anca Farca [3] described how "we associate water with life itself" when we heard Mars has liquid water, especially that "our history on Earth has been a history of and with water". Farca pointed out how water nourishes us, essential in producing our food, and how "water is irreplaceable" along with being "priceless" compared to fossil fuels. Water has become "a cultural icon" with its "symbolic associations" as it possesses "purification and regeneration powers" - it symbolises "life, wisdom, fertility, purity, and even death". Until today, that continues along with "a new

layer of environmental issues” including climate change and water scarcity. Hence, “Liquidity, Inc.” came to be a part of this book.

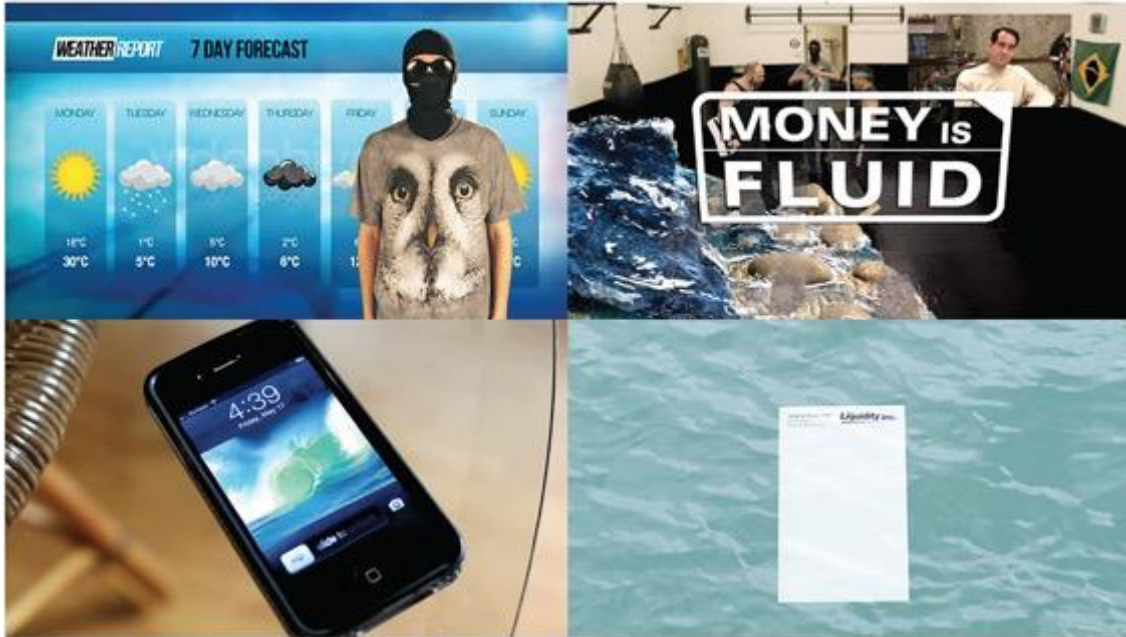


Figure 2. Hito Steyerl, “Liquidity Inc.”, 2014, four stills from the 30-minute colour HD video [Source: Reference [17]]

A couple of reviews took place when they saw the work at Artists Space, New York in 2015 [4],[5],[6]. They all started with a general yet intricate introduction to Hito’s way of working.

Michael Blum from a Hyperallergic article [4] reviewed that Hito Steyerl’s works are difficult to pin down to “any traditional image of an art practice” with its “constellatory richness” of her “unique” productions. As her artworks are mostly moving images, it might be hard for one to sit through her works. To Blum, the categorisation of her work is a “critical cohabitation” of fiction and documentary. This is also confirmed by Vanessa Gravenor from The Seen Journal,

Stylistically, both Steyerl’s lectures and videos take on the form of montage, reflecting her research tactics, which often include both virtual and on-site coverage of production sites [5].

Meanwhile, reviewer Rachel Stevens for Millenium Film Journal stated,

Steyerl is an eloquent narrator of the current conditions of image circulation, media lows, globalised geopolitical spaces, and a host of other interconnected and urgent zones of discursivity. To spend time with her work is to be drawn into shifting and theoretically complex spaces spun from media fragments, radical political sympathies, and pop-culture mash-ups with a sometimes absurdist aesthetic [6].

It made sense if we could picture Hito Steyerl’s way of creating it by making various layered collages using different types of data that she has collected for her moving image of a fictional documentary. As stated on the Tensta Konsthall catalogue for their “Liquidity, Inc.” exhibition at Stockholm in 2015,

Using montage as its idiom... with Liquidity Inc., Steyerl consolidates her position as a playful, connected, and urgent artist. The thirty minute video is equally a story about the lack of contours and about control, about Inc., Incorporation. About water as a company, and the company as a movement in water that infiltrates, washing across all bodies [7].

A number of writings [3], [4], explained that Steyerl produced an essay titled “Too Much World: Is the Internet Dead?” while working with “Liquidity, Inc.” The essay and the artwork somehow works hand in hand in understanding her processes in creating the artwork. Her expressions are intriguing such as “data, sounds, and images are now routinely transitioning beyond screens into a different state of matter” as “they spread through and beyond networks... they wow and woo”. She finds “networked space is itself a medium” as it even “archives all previous forms of media” and that “in this fluid media space, images and sounds morph across different bodies and carriers”. Eventually she mentions, “but this space is also a sphere of liquidity, of looming rainstorms and unstable climate” [8]. This does not only show the way she practised, yet also on how she eventually produced “Liquidity, Inc.” She sees that the form of media that we are in that is connected by the internet as a way of communicating is like water, flowing, unstoppable. Which is also read by Sebastian Choe [9] that “Steyerl senses through her media mix that we operate in a society that fetishises liquid motion”. At the same time, it also reflects the water matter and problems within our lives happening through climate change i.e. uncontrollable weather and water scarcity.

However, there is another reading of the work at Institute of the Contemporary Art (ICA) Boston, as written by Cate McQuaid: “Her message: Cultural and climatic events wash over us, and we have no choice but to be fluid and adapt” [10]. So instead of knowing that media is fluid, our bodies (that literally contain water) are asked to be adaptfully fluid, in which McQuaid “doubts” that we could ever be water and adapt like it (fluidly). Which again gives a-not-so-wrong perspective about ourselves as humans. Especially that Bruce Lee’s quote in “Liquidity, Inc.” also stated “water can flow, or it can crash”, can we be both? Can we face both? In our histories, floods, tsunamis, water scarcity and economic crises are the four examples where liquidity crashes and somehow ends as a human tragedy. Rather than when it flows peacefully and with no stoppage, we are totally fine with it. It could be true that we cannot be “fluid and adapt”.

These trains of thoughts have reflected how “Liquidity, Inc.” talks about water within the context of climate change’s effects and water scarcity. While it doesn’t straightforwardly reflect on the Balinese Hindu *tirta* belief, it seems that “Liquidity, Inc.” suggests an urban belief towards the existence of water in our current contemporary life within the geographies and screens that we live with. The artwork crafted a way of seeing towards a belief that existed in our globalisation i.e. capitalism economy that existed until today.

As a background to the *tirta* belief, translated from Ngurah Suryawan [11], he explained that the water culture in Bali grew from the people of Bali. With the philosophy of its belief seeing the ocean with its shores are sacred areas, “the shores would be ‘fenced’ by many pura [temples]” i.e. guarded by the gods. Balinese culture’s water cycle would start at the mountains and become water springs, which then run the rivers “prosper the lives of humans and living beings” and ends in the ocean. Suryawan continued,

My first research on Batur gave a portrait of how water is very important in the religious and cultural structure of the [Balinese] society. It’s not wrong to say Batur Lake, as one of the *Balidwipa* water sources...Subak is one of the important elements of Bali’s agriculture civilisation...a medium for the *ritual* and cosmology practice of *Agama Tirta* (water belief)...*Sekaa Subak* became the important organisation to make sure the water civilisation works towards the

society's farmers' lands....besides that water is the heart of living, it becomes its own philosophy....Batur, with its Mount Batur, Batur Lake and temple Pura Ulun Danu Batur has its main rituals of worships, including towards water.

With this water civilisation importance, in which Farca [3] would state where water becomes a cultural icon and possesses purification, there are artworks that would take on the notion of liquidity and environmental issues in Bali. Yet they are not as abstract and require such effort of visual engagement like "Liquidity, Inc." However, such urban belief artworks related to Bali existed in the exhibition "Spiritualitas Urban" (Urban Spirituality) taking place at Sudakara Art Space, Sanur, Bali in 2015.

Translated from one of the writers of the exhibition, Wayan Seriyoga Parta [12], stated that there are two forms of artwork presentations "from the mapping of scope and crosses of the two words spirituality and urban":

1. The tendency of artists to question spiritual values not only through its medium but also digging and re-understanding the transcendence values into their creative practice;
2. The tendency of artists to question spirituality in the urban phenomenon that touches upon religiousity and culture, using their critical framework on encountering this matter into producing their artworks i.e. the perception of an "urban spirit".



Figure 3. Wayan Upadana, "Memoscape", 2015
[Source: Reference [12]]

Parta stated that through the artworks' explorations in this exhibition, it seems to show how the art world is "questioning" itself in its modernity constellation, along with "differentiating" itself from the moral and science. This seems to be an interesting take on representing urban spirituality to the public audience. One of those artworks that are similarly giving water encounters was Wayan Upadana's "Memoscape" which had a resin based sculpture upon a LED TV showing moving waters on the shores and audio playing on the background. Parta explained,

...to Wayan Upadana the growing technology development has the potential to echo the transcendence experience...the monitor showing waves from the South West of Bali, illuminating the transparent mountain shaped sculpture...expressing a personal experience, about a spirituality appreciation [12].

His other artworks that reflected similar notions yet involving sculptures of human bodies are “Manusia Imaji Air dan Cahaya” (2018), and “Blue Energy” (2018). Translated from the catalogue [12], it has similar concepts of how humans are a “light-dependent being” that shifted from indulging sunshine to our sophisticated gadgets, along with how Uluwatu, Bukit Pecatu (where the waves of water footage was taken) have also shifted from being a sacred area [11], including for spiritual cleansing that are presented by the sculpture of human bodies [13], to an over-developed touristic gaze to take photos with its exotic views. Upadana expressed,

In this artwork I want the audience to feel again nature's presence through television as the medium, to bring emotions to the table and how “memories” stimulate feelings towards those who view it.

“Liquidity, Inc.” and Upadana’s water related artworks seemed distant. Works such as “Liquidity, Inc.” have been put inline within Dark Ecology [9], while Upadana’s works are also in its critical framework towards over-developed tourism affecting waters, it is still within the *tirta* belief-urban spirit spectrum. However, as Timothy Morton [14] explained Dark Ecology,

...My approach to ecological thought can be characterised as something I call ‘dark ecology’. Dark ecology doesn’t mean the absolute absence of light....[it’s] the dimness. Light as such isn’t directly present, you can’t pin it down and you can’t fully illuminate it: what illuminates the illuminator?...In Tibetan Buddhism, the time between one life and the next is called the bardo, the ‘between’. All kinds of haunting images appear to the consciousness in that state, images based on past actions (karma). We feel that things are different now, that we are in a bardo-like transition space regarding ecological awareness.



Figure 4. Wayan Upadana, “Manusia Imaji Air dan Cahaya”, 2018
[Source: Reference [20]]

This Dark Ecology theory can also be seen through Upadana’s water related artworks as it speaks of light, dimness, and references a state of spirituality. All in all, Dark Ecology is like Morton’s belief in approaching ecological awareness. Therefore we can talk about these artworks on urban water beliefs hand in hand. A theory called blue media studies

explained by Bogna M. Koinor [15] could also be the bridge on the matter of water flowing imagery through the screens,

Blue media lie between the dynamic process of decomposition and extinction, as well as the invisibility of history, be it migration and slavery, both entangled with the narrative of the Anthropocene. The invisibility of environmental change, an event that plays out through inhuman (although human-induced) temporality, alike poses a representational challenge.

The text [14] also mentions Astrida Neimasis feminist blue humanities in *Bodies of Water*, which argues as humans are “bodies of water”, they create “a non-patriarchal” and “non-colonial” environmental ethics. This suits both Steyerl’s “Liquidity, Inc.” description [7, 10] and Upadana’s spiritual cleansing related artworks [13]. The text continues to talk about visual culture’s role of having moving images covering the ocean’s ongoing degradation and of Steyerl’s view,

While singular natural disasters can produce news events, the pollution of the oceans cannot become a media event because of its ongoing, gradual nature. Is it therefore not surprising that visual culture—from mainstream disaster movies to activist artworks—has taken it upon itself to fill this vacant space of awe...Rather than walking away from moving images, which, as [Hito] Steyerl argues are “dangerous devices of capture: of time, affect, productive forces, and subjectivity,” or even “tools of disappearance” that “drain away your life”, the artworks are recorded and replayed, their temporality tamed and manipulated. In this way, the terror of decay is partially domesticated.

With these responses in hand, the next step of weaving discussions through the author’s first hand experiences of viewing “Liquidity, Inc.” are hoped to give a perspective on how we could view water in its present and future, in Bali and beyond.

DISCUSSION

2015, Tensta Konsthall, Sweden, “Liquidity, Inc.” Exhibition.

It was quite a journey to Tensta Konsthall, located at Tensta just on the north of Stockholm, Sweden. The gallery was not far from the station where I got off. In the cold weather, as I recall it was a bit rainy or snowy, I went inside the darkened hall. There was a beaming light from the huge screen, and upon it a place to sit and watch. As I mentioned in the Introduction section, you watch it lying on a wave-like ramp, therefore *you are in the waves of the liquid* when watching it. As McQuaid [10] explained that there is “a great, blue, wave-shaped viewing platform, outfitted with bean bag chairs” which should be comfy, yet it was “hard to get up and out” thus shows our “passivity as viewer on this video” and “as consumer of the tsunami coming at us every day through our screens”.

It was not quite what I expected coming to this exhibition, which is a part of “The New Model” Exhibition Series. With a little baggage of memory seeing a clip of this artwork back in 2014 and the knowledge I have learnt during my completed studies, I tried to understand the artwork. It was like being introduced to these waves of fluidity filled with many kinds of information in data, conversations, images of screens within screens from a phone, television, even a browser on a computer. As mentioned earlier [7] the “montage” is “as its idiom”.

“I am liquidity incorporated... I run through your veins, your eyes, your touchscreens and portfolios.”

As I found these words again in another catalogue of Steyerl’s exhibition [16] that shows the work, I could not help but remember it too. That this is the literal explanation, this

liquid and fluid media, reflected by the water moving image, that it is somehow an incorporation.

What's interesting about the writings that were discussed in the Method section was the variety of encounters that the writers remembered. It is interesting to see this because "Liquidity, Inc." is very heavily collaged, montaged of moving images of data. And for myself, the interface of Tumblr was the one that caught my interest. Katsushika Hokusai's "The Great Wave off Kanagawa flashed" in different colours and added music that I remembered vaguely.

Both Choe and McQuaid highlighted this part. Choe [9] stated how some words or phrases are poetic and suddenly have "flashing Tumblr GIFs [graphics interchange format file] of Hokusai's iconic 'Great Wave'" before "transitioning to a world map" that is annotated based on its world zones' readings rather than the country's names. While McQuaid [10] sees "the video swings away from [Jacob] Wood to [Hokusai's] 'The Great Wave of Kanagawa] on repeat and caffeinated with colour". "The Great Wave" did appear several times besides as Tumblr GIFs which placed that iconic artwork to become a symbolism of water into this video art as well.

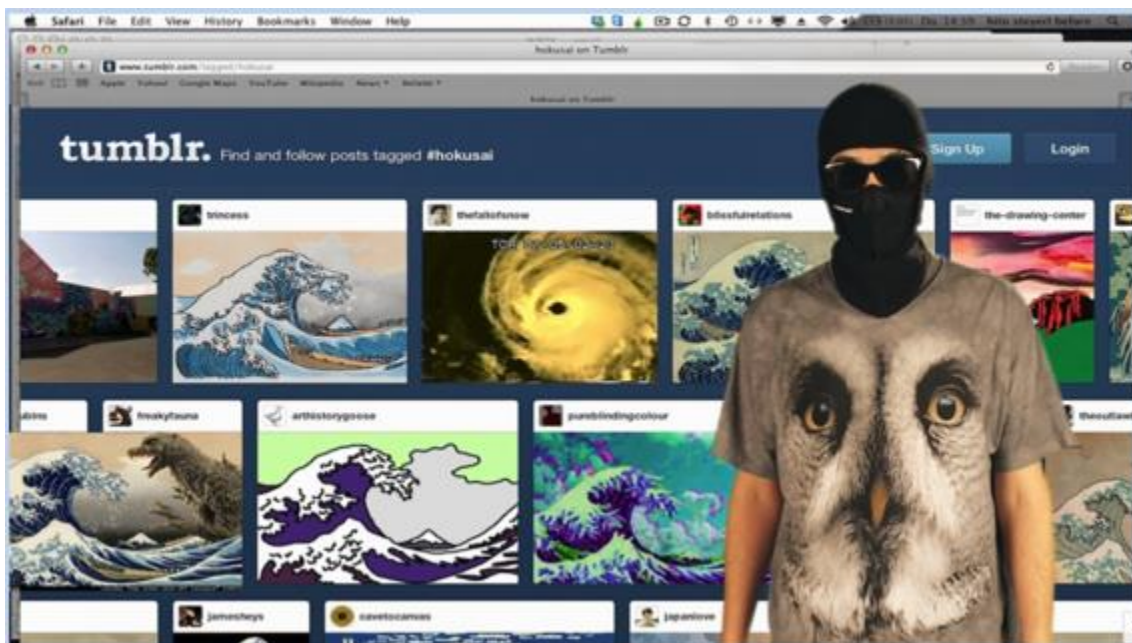


Figure 5. Still from the Tumblr page scene of "Liquidity, Inc."
[Source: Reference [21]]

Another quote I slightly remembered was what McQuaid [10] explained after seeing "digital water animations" comes "weather reports offered by a man in a ski mask" that has a deep voice speaking of weather yet with the annotated map mentioned previously.

"Your feeling is affecting the weather, and you're feeling not so great... You might be insane."

That quote seems a bit off yet when seeing what the artwork shows along the way seems to make sense. What is always annoying about watching a quite durative video art is that you don't remember everything straight away. Yet the quote from the weird weather man is how I felt watching the video art for the first time, how "bright and fizzy, bubbling with humour, eye candy" it can be. How the "dizzying colours, quick edits, insets and animations" reflects our communication today, along with being "sweet, speedy and

bright” reflects humanity’s journey has been “riding waves” and getting more “turbulent” with the technology today [10]. Therefore, watching this “Liquidity, Inc.” made me like being introduced to water (again) for the first time in a different form. With the provided seating area like the Great Wave itself, it’s like my body was washed away and came back, like being cleansed on the shores of Bali.

2019, NTU Centre for Contemporary Art, Singapore, “The Posthuman City” Exhibition

Visiting Singapore in 2019 landed me at Gillman Barracks. While coming for the Singapore Biennale, at the corner of it stood NTU Centre for Contemporary Art (CCA) Singapore which has a symposium that I am attracted to. It turns out the symposium is part of an exhibition called “Posthuman City” which has “Liquidity, Inc.” as part of it.

I was quite surprised to see it there, yet it made sense with the curation. I was even more surprised to see it in a neighbouring country. The exhibition is part of the NTU CCA Singapore’s overarching research topic of “CLIMATES. HABITATS. ENVIRONMENTS.” In which this exhibition is “examining the urban fabric in its condition as a habitat for a diversity of life forms” and “through imaginative propositions at the intersection of art, design, and architecture” [17].

As it is a group exhibition, the installation of “Liquidity, Inc.” is located along with other artworks upon neon green walls, which is opposite to lonesome artwork in the darkened room of Tensta Konsthall that I visited four years earlier. Even so, the artwork and its installation still feels familiar. Located on one side of the gallery, you get to see the giant screen in your own time. This time watching it feels like what is described by Damon Krukowski in his Artforum Sound section,

I lay down on a blue martial-arts mat placed before the screen and let its story flow and crash. It crashes repeatedly—like waves, like our computers, like the economy. Twenty minutes in, all three of those crashes coincide, and desktop messages begin to pop up on the screen [18].



Figure 6. Hito Steyerl, “Liquidity, Inc.” at NTU CCA, 2019
[Source: Author’s documentation]

I was more acquainted with the sound and the methods Steyerl used in making this video art. I was more aware of the CGI (computer generated imagery) water rather than knowing it as real water previously. It might be because I was surrounded by colleagues working in an Interior Design office which works with 3D (three dimension) graphics softwares. According to Stevens [6], Steyerl feels working with these 3D graphics that involve “lengthy rendering times...affects her editing”. She said “staring at the rendering bar” and not to see it after sometime is “a kind of ‘speculative editing”.

Meanwhile, Blum [4] sees how the digital artefacts and 3D renderings blurs the real and the image as a moment of the video art would show “dynamic 3D body of silvery, plasmic water...set against a 2D static, blue desktop wallpaper horizon”. Blum also sees that the frantic film along with its animations is a metaphor of “staying afloat”, while Steyerl is “liquid herself” as she built the CGI herself. Responding to that, Gravenor [5] even give forward the thought that “there is no rubble because the space-time continuum in the liquid modern world is already broken” that there is no flowing onwards, only backwards as images are broken “due to a web accelerated simulacrum effect”.

Christina Gerhardt and Jaimey Hamilton Faris, who discussed “Liquidity, Inc.” as part of the Make Waves book [19] express that there is a “confusing build up of liquid and water metaphors” between Wood’s story narrated and the “visual montages” including “CGI waves, water drops, texts referencing water, clouds, tsunamis, and more”. To them, Steyerl has always worked “nonlinear and playful” on issues of “contemporary politics, economics, environmental studies and informatics”. Therefore, the artwork actually challenges the audience’s understanding of the 2008 economic crisis,

...comments on how the notion of the economy as a ‘natural’ ecology of water is instrumentalism throughout the cultural sphere, used, in effect, to displace and disguise the human forces at work.

There are so many ways of interpreting this artwork and every one of them seems to make sense in discussing water's various positions which affect its present and future. Moreover, Steyerl argued [8] that “reality itself is postproduced and scripted” as “image and world are in many cases just versions of each other” although their gap allows “speculation and intense anxiety” to take place. Hence, “Liquidity, Inc.” supposedly does create such uncertain feelings for the audience in the end - “a virtual superstorm of clichés about liquidity” [18]. Its “punning, metonymy, and playing shifting meanings” opens up the “dialectical tension” of “image and world” [4].

As the group exhibition speaks of posthuman times, it is not a surprise to find other artworks having a thread of similarities to “Liquidity, Inc.”. As “Liquidity, Inc.” is also a product of extensions of the human body yet awash us in the same time when viewing it. Facing this artwork for the second time, my baggage of knowledge was much larger as I was involved in various work experiences in the arts. Therefore, the liquidity that I am facing is being within the arts and a grown up female living on earth. The one that Steyerl stated as “sphere of liquidity, of looming rainstorms and unstable climate”. As I dove for the second time, I was in the middle of the ocean water, I got cleansed a second time, and eventually questioned, *where do we go with water now?*

CONCLUSION

This practice of looking back on “Liquidity, Inc.” by Hito Steyerl becomes an interesting delve of its own in this time and age. With my earlier questions,

What is there to learn from “Liquidity, Inc.” about water’s present and future?

What kind of “liquidity” should we consider as our way of living on this earth?

What could be the relation to the current climate change, water scarcity, and water as part of the Balinese Hindu *tirta* belief?

It is hoped what has been written in this paper is able to answer those questions. As you can see, there are many ways to read such video artwork and there might be more ways of reading it when developed further - as a subchapter of the artwork or something else with a similar spirit of water and/or its liquidity.

Even though the word “liquidity” has been seen as heavy and hard to understand for some, Steyerl has been playful with it and presents a very mashed up video art with many elements. Her way of working being playful and nonlinear in her fictional documentaries, as stated by several writers [6],[7],[18], shows how a notion of play gives you a chance as an audience to look again in another or alternative perspective. These alternative views won’t erase what has already existed, instead it adds more diverse views in understanding each other.

As previously stated, there are so many ways of interpreting “Liquidity, Inc.” for a better understanding towards water and liquidity in life. Along with a further question at the end of the previous section, “*Where do we go with water now?*” opens up for further research and inspires exploration that can also be continued by anyone out there.

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