

WATER RITES:
Reimagining Water in the West
Edited by Jim Ellis

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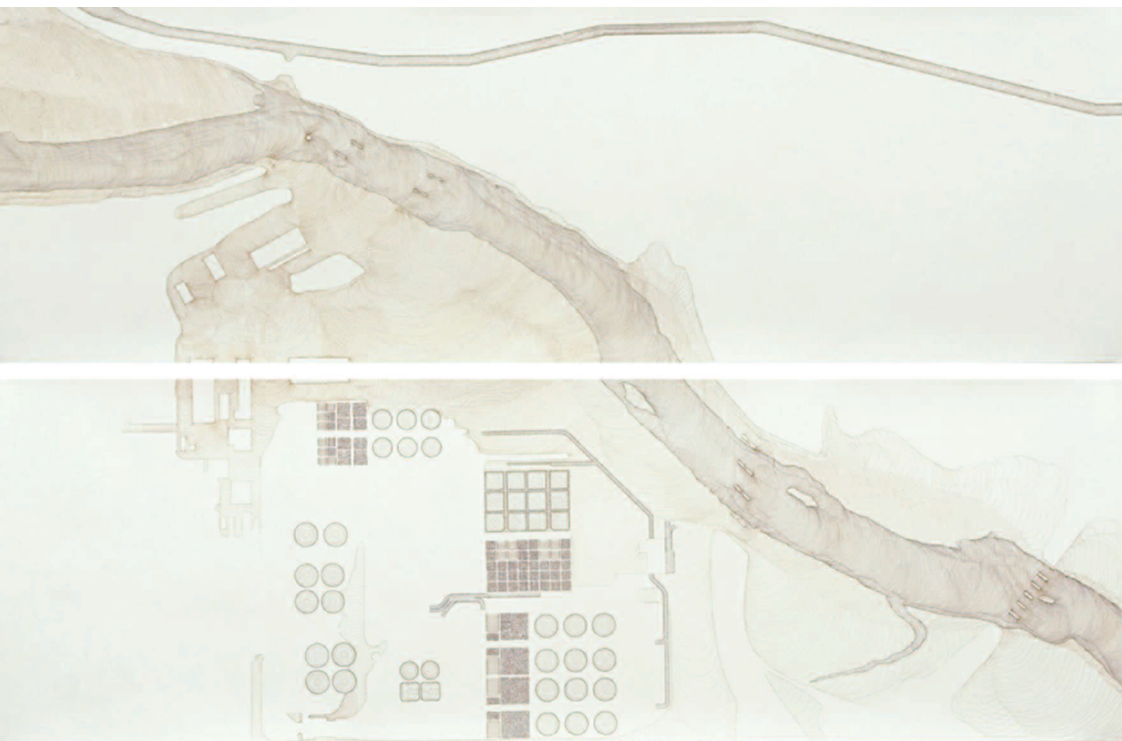
Forest Lawn Lift Station, photo: Sans façon.

watershed+

rethinking public art

ciara mckeown

The Bow and Elbow rivers are deeply intertwined with Calgary's identity and sense of place. Calgarians know the rivers and the watershed recreationally, and have an appreciation of and respect for the rivers and the watershed system by proximity. They are drawn to the water regularly to walk alongside it via hundreds of kilometres of river pathways, to swim, wade, canoe, and paddleboard. There is a visceral, tacit knowledge of these waters. Watershed+, a Calgary public art project, reveals how the rivers and the watershed system are more than a geographical site; they are part of how people build individual and collective identity in this city, and forge a sense of place. The rivers hold people's memories, and shape their experiences. Watershed+ aims to unearth these connections and since 2011, countless city staff and artists have worked together to develop a process that inspires civic and citizen stewardship for the watershed's ongoing health while producing challenging public art for the urban realm.



Bow Flow by Rachel Duckhouse, courtesy of The City of Calgary.

A large vinyl Watershed+ sign with bright pink lettering hangs in a studio on the second floor of the City of Calgary Water Centre just southeast of the downtown core. After years of having lead artists embedded within the Utilities and Environmental Protection (UEP) municipal department, they have become such a part of everyday life in the UEP that, save the sign, they otherwise go unnoticed. A rare and visionary initiative in 2009, Watershed+ stems from a philosophical belief that artists, public art, and multidisciplinary collaboration “can create remarkable places that encourage sustainability and stewardship of the environment.”¹ The UEP Public Art Program posits that artists are integral to the generation of ideas, with regards to the entire process of evaluating, protecting, and managing the watershed.

After the city of Calgary’s Public Art Policy was approved in 2004, UEP and the Public Art Program envisioned the opportunity to establish a new way of working over time, a vision that would be holistic rather than reactive. A ten-year plan was developed to direct public art funds in a strategic and cohesive way to support a diversity of artistic practice and approaches. *A Public Art Plan for the Expressive Potential of Utility Infrastructure* (2007) focused on two of the four business units within the department, Water Services and Water Resources, whose work includes monitoring flow levels and studying flow dynamics; building and upgrading massive water treatment plants that manage drinking, waste, and storm water; and constructing smaller in-situ bank reinforcements to support healthy habitats. This endeavour was rare for its time: few municipalities were developing public art plans specifically for one department, especially one that focused on a subject with both abstract and concrete geographical boundaries, with infrastructure often underground and unseen. In identifying the need for a framework that would support a series of conceptually related artworks over time, rather than just site by site, UEP and Public Art staff helped lay the groundwork for an ongoing collaborative investigation into the watershed system by artists, city staff, and Calgary’s communities.

One of the initiatives in the plan was the *Visual Language Project*, identified as the “cornerstone commission” for the UEP public art program that would “create a conceptual framework and visual tone for how UEP wants citizens to recognize and respond to its infrastructure.”² A collaborative team led by artists Sans façon (Tristan Surtees and Charles Blanc), and made up of an architect, a water engineer, artists, a graphic designer, and a social geographer, responded to this call. Over a twelve-month research period, they began to see that there was much to unearth about how Calgarians understand and relate to the watershed. This would prove to be complex and intriguing material for Sans façon and the interdisciplinary team to delve into. Ultimately, working with city staff across multiple departments, they created Watershed+. At the project’s core is Cal-

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gary's watershed, which — along with the Water Centre and the spaces, locations, and sites where water staff work, plan, and manage the watershed — forms the whole context. Watershed+, both in its name and in its collaborative process, recognizes that “the art responds to the subject, the art is not the subject.”³ Given the expanse and mysterious force of the watershed it is a vast subject, and such a calling requires a sustained dialogue and collaborative relationship between artists and city staff.

The principles, or “Statements of Belief,” laid out in the Watershed+ manual convey the project's philosophical purpose. These beliefs guide, ground, and check all the decisions Watershed+ undertakes. In fact the entire Watershed+ manual, written at the outset to frame a means of moving forward, articulates a purposeful approach that aims to achieve collaboration in new ways. Successful collaborations allow for time — a key factor in making room for disruptions, alterations, and failures. A pilot period protected space for experimentation, allotting time to test projects and initiatives that acknowledged the process. These initial pilot projects were then intended to inform the future development of Watershed+. Time, the desire to be responsive, and a collaborative methodology — an intangible way of working — form the structure from which each project emerges. Thus each project reveals aspects of UEP's complex work, and proposes a reimagining of how citizens might enter into an enriched emotional relationship with the watershed. And because projects stem from this rich process, those who experience it reap a depth of insight, expertise, and the experiences of multiple people, raising the artwork's critical value for citizens, staff, and artists.

One early work, *Fire Hydrant Drinking Fountains* (2012), brings to life how Calgary's invisible water system functions, and reinvigorates the user and casual observer's perception of this by bringing people together socially around water. The work is a series of three differently interconnected shiny bronze pipe fittings and drinking fountains attached to a fire hydrant. *Strangers* brings two people too closely together; *Family* is a set of fountains stepped at incremental heights so everyone can reach; *Group* brings everyone together in varied arrangements; and the overflow runs into dog bowls. Each fountain invokes a curiosity about where our drinking water is coming from, about how it travels and its quality, and each asks us to share in that experience together in different ways.

The project is emblematic of the Watershed+ vision and process. Staff invited the lead artists to be part of thinking through how a water fountain could be a vehicle for conveying information about the city's drinking water system. After researching and conversing with staff, lead artists returned with concepts that “opened up” the inner workings of where water comes from, moving beyond an informational decal. The foun-



Fire Hydrant Drinking Fountain, photo: Sans façon.

tains invite the public at events throughout the city to experience the delivery of our most basic resource. *Fire Hydrant Drinking Fountains* is indicative of how as trust builds over time, and as generous space is given, the ongoing relationship between embedded artists and city staff deepens the meaning of the work, which fosters a shared aspiration for a healthy water ecosystem and an engaged civic dialogue that supports it.

Watershed+ approaches public art by way of process, a long-term durational exercise, where each project and initiative builds upon the last, just as the watershed, with its constant shifts up and down, requires an evolving response. The project did not intentionally set out to challenge existing notions of public art, but did so by being embedded within the bureaucratic system. The artist was there to offer perspective, to add to the thinking and play a complementary role with city staff — not to problem-solve or fill a gap, as is common with traditional public art approaches. As Chris Manderson, the South Region manager for City of Calgary’s parks and urban conservation recalls, “the involvement of artists on a project creates the space for a different discussion ...We moved on from asking ‘do we want public art on this project’ to ‘is it a project where we want an artist at the table?’”⁴

sans façon as lead artist

In the formation of Watershed+, it was identified that lead artists embedded within the UEP department over time would bring continuity, criticality, and a unique perspective to the everyday workings of the department. The role of the lead artist, as critic and curator, is more common overseas than in North America, and is important in considering how Watershed+ evolved. As lead artists Sans façon engendered a critical curatorial process within a municipal department that constantly reconsiders the water system and the work of water management in context.

It takes a certain kind of artist to work within a bureaucratic system, to move from the studio to the cubicle. Sans façon’s artistic practice is based on building relationships between people and place. Their approach is to collaborate with others to think through ideas, situations, and definitions of place. They situate themselves in a specific context and take time to meaningfully understand the perspective of this place: what it is and how it is functioning. The intention is not to remake place, but to know the materiality and psychology of it in a fuller way, in order to create a critical, context-specific response. The work is both the process and the end result, depending on what is required. The artist works from within the system, looking at it from a place of knowledge. For Sans façon, the context means more than just site. It is, at any given moment, all of the

intricacies, stories, and invisibilities that happen and form the identity of that place. This context-specific methodology has roots in the conceptual art practices of the recent past. These artists become researchers, investigators, facilitators, and magicians. They are “lyhörd,” a Swedish term meaning to be an involved listener. Listening, as Magdalena Malm of *Curating Context* notes, “is a key quality in contextual practices, because these artworks are ... in some way porous, reflective — mirroring the shifting images of their surrounding.”⁵ The nuance lies in how the artists uncover this functioning (people + place), which is constantly changing. Thus, their response shares an experience that opens up the streets and spaces to invite anyone in, an effect that is lasting for those people and that place.

Collaboration is lived at every level of Watershed+, with participants developing on the other’s strengths so that every encounter, conversation, and project moves the dialogue forward. Consistent meetings over months and years bear thoughtful, critical results. Sans façon, as lead artists, also became ambassadors for water, for a way of working, and for the mission of collaboration — helping to shape, with city staff, the identity of Watershed+ publicly. Knowing that an accepted methodology and philosophy is the goal, less than a certain end point, the whole Watershed+ team embraces a state of flux, held together by trust in the process. The character of those in the position of lead artist therefore must help facilitate this trust through a demonstration of calm and committed selflessness, which results in a dialogical artistic approach that, as part of its concept, negotiates and intervenes in bureaucratic structures.

Part of that intervention was to have the lead artists experiment with different ways of working, for example a design-team model. *Forest Lawn Lift Station* is one of many stations scattered throughout Calgary, which if marked on a map, together would visualize one of the paths taken by the water in our watershed system. Lift stations are neutral, functional buildings that blend into the landscape. They pump wastewater from low to high areas so it can continue its gravitational flow on to its next destination, the treatment plant. Atop a knoll in the northeast, Forest Lawn’s lift station overlooks beautiful city views. It was ready for replacement, and the UEP and lead artists understood that the involvement of artists from the beginning could shape how this building might recast the role of urban infrastructure. Working within the design team, without any preconceived ideas about what the art might be, the intention was to articulate the building’s purpose in order to draw people into the story of how water works, to heighten awareness of how we are part of the water system, and to grow an appreciation for this infrastructure. The project is visually dramatic; it evokes curiosity. A map, comprised of LED lights that are connected to sensors monitoring the flow in the pipes, is seen through

the building envelope of perforated, dark metal cladding, and represents the exact, scaled representation of the pipes that connect the neighbourhood to the lift station.⁶ The changing colours of the lights, in real time, show the happenings inside the lift station at all times. The lead artists and staff on this project, together, demonstrated the creative thinking around how these systems can be understood and appreciated; the project is an example of how Watershed+ is greater than the sum of its parts.

bringing artists in

The intention of the Watershed+ residencies was to introduce national and international artists to the work of UEP, to “support, promote and facilitate innovative and collaborative contemporary art practices responding to issues relevant to Calgary’s watershed and water management,”⁷ to think through the work of water within a municipal setting, to share their perspectives, and to learn from UEP. This internal access requires delicacy at every level, as well as a thoughtful and careful approach. Artists were supported with time, studio space, and a team of experts with whom they worked in a reciprocal way. Artists had to be willing to come to UEP without a pre-determined approach or desired outcome, willing to have their ideas challenged and deepened by the multiple inputs of others. This often meant that Watershed+ artists had a practice not necessarily grounded in one medium, but rather in process, and wanted to investigate and collaborate to create an informed response.

Rachel Duckhouse, the first artist-in-residence with Watershed+ (2012-13), is a visual artist based in Glasgow. Working in a range of media including drawing and printmaking, her work is formed by exploring complex patterns and systems in nature, human behaviour, and the built environment. During her residency, Rachel became interested in flow dynamics and began a process of visualizing the patterns of flow and the movement of water. Her time in Calgary was particularly poignant as she experienced Calgary’s watershed both before and after the 2013 flood. Rachel’s research process and large-scale drawings, exhibited publicly in partnership with the artist-run centre TRUCK, articulated the dramatic shift in water flow during this time, and helped Calgarians see the Bow River as two rivers, before and after, to re-imagine it visually in a new way. This residency set the tone for subsequent ones; as a generous, curious artist, Rachel was fascinated by the knowledge and expertise of city staff. She built strong and meaningful relationships with them, and worked in tandem with one engineer to speak about this work and their collaboration at various forums in Calgary. The experiences and approaches of each artist coming in to Watershed+ were shaped and supported by the lead artists and the Watershed+ team. The delicate balance of staff time, the interests of the artist, the critical con-

text, the ongoing logistics of facilitation and project management, are all part of the hidden magic of UEP public art: two lead artists, a public art project manager, coordinator, core group of invested, committed water and public art staff, a communications advisor, and many more, all making this initiative happen, every day.

conclusion

Beyond a series of public art projects, Watershed+ is an exemplar of how the relationships and interactions people have in their daily lives can reveal deep social insights when time is spent examining them. Watershed+'s framework, which might be characterized as "environmental psychology meets conceptual art and relational practice," is a critical investigation that fundamentally shifts definitions and ideas about what public art is, and what the role of the artist can be. There is not enough space left in commissioning public art, in working with artists in a public context; a freedom to move and shift within strict parameters, to find a truer expression of the artist's vision, is lacking. For too long, the field of public art has been weighed down by perpetual sameness; commissioning all the time, in the same way, results in public art that is broadly about objects put into a space. Watershed+ brings us back into the world by asking us to observe and question how we relate to it, and to one another, through art. Just as Watershed+ reveals how integral the often-invisible water infrastructure is to the urban environment, it also reveals how an integrated relationship between artists, city staff, and citizens together in this project quietly furthers emotional connections to and respect for the watershed. Watershed+ demonstrates how trust and reciprocity can reformulate public art beyond itself, how it can truly draw people closer to each other and cultivate a sense of place on an ongoing and constantly evolving basis.

notes

1. A Public Art Plan for the Expressive Potential of Utility Infrastructure, prepared for the Utilities and Environmental Protection Department, City of Calgary, 2007, 2.
2. Ibid., 1.
3. Plus A Succession Plan for Watershed+. Calgary, 2017, 173.
4. Ibid., 174.
5. Magdalena Malm, ed., *Curating Context* (Stockholm: Public Art Agency Sweden, Art and Theory Publishing, Stockholm, 2017), 12.
6. Plus A Succession Plan for Watershed+. Calgary, 2017, 60.
7. Ibid., 73.

DECEMBER 2, 1882.

CANADIAN ILLU



BLACKFOOT CROSSING, BOW RIVER, N.V.



N.W.T.—FROM A SKETCH BY GENERAL STRANGE, R.A.

1882

Blackfoot Crossing, Bow River, N.W.T. by Thomas Bland Strange, 1882, engraving on paper, Glenbow Archives, 61.32.21; Calgary, AB.