

Water Stories: Visual Poetics and Collective Voices

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Abstract

Water Stories: Visual Poetics and Collective Voices is a two-part project that brings together multiple points of view from local youth, community, and poets in Alaska to share what water means in their life. *Visual Poetics* combines a live poetry reading by Alaskan poets and interactive video in which the poets' voices trigger generative visual elements. *Collective Voices* is a sound work featuring excerpts of community voices sharing water-based memories against a backdrop of processed environmental sounds of Alaskan waterways. *Water Stories* is part of a year-long artist residency (2021-2022) with the Anchorage Museum culminating in a series of listening sessions broadcast at the Anchorage Museum and Out North Radio, live interactive poetry readings at the museum, and video projections on the museum façade from November 2022 through January 2023.

Keywords

Generative, digital poetics, audio-reactive software, community engagement, collaborative, ecosystems, resilient societies, multiple scales.

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Introduction

Alaska's climate is projected to warm several degrees by the end of the century, more than twice the warming compared to the rest of the country. The record-breaking temperatures experienced by Alaska communities have resulted in thawing permafrost, thinning sea ice, and more wildfires. The *Water Stories: Visual Poetics and Collective Voices* project engages the Alaskan public to consider how climate change alters their experiences of the land, and to consider the role of water in their lives.

Background

Water Stories is the most recent artistic collaboration between the authors, and is part of a series of works focused on climate change and the environment. *Reading the Wrack Lines* (2021), an outdoor audio video projection on a lighthouse, featured community-sourced textual reflections on climate change. *Open Waters* (2020) was a multiple-media installation exhibited at museums in Rhode Island, and New York, connecting the five-hundred-year imaginative history of the open polar sea and northwest passage with current geopolitics and arctic climate change. Another previous audiovisual collaboration, *Ice Core Modulations: Performative Digital Poetics* (2017) included generative imagery and poetic texts controlled via historical CO2 data taken from ice core samples made available from the National Snow and Ice Data Center (NSIDC). All three of these works have been presented at past ISEA Conferences.

These collaborations have sought to create engaging works that address complex environmental issues through a plurality of artistic, poetic, and scientific perspectives. The collaborators have brought to bear individual expertise in audiovisual generative computer programming, visual art media, poetry, and electroacoustic sound composition to synergistically create works unified by shared source materials that include place-based personal narratives, historical source material, raw scientific data, local audiovisual media collected on site, and original poetic texts.

Goals, Objectives and Artistic Dimensions

Water Stories seeks to amplify voices of Alaska residents through storytelling, poetry, and local landscape imagery. The overarching project goals and objectives include:

- Collaborating with local community partners.
- Revealing evidence of a changing climate in lived spaces through creative voices and artistic media.
- Using narrative storytelling as a way to bear witness to our changing environment through personal experience.
- Seeking to draw out the poetic from connections between visual arts, language arts, science/technology.
- Presenting community voices via innovative multi-sensory formats.
- Creating a reflective and engaging digital poetics experience thematically focused on environmental change and disappearance of place.

The artistic dimensions of *Water Stories* are framed by community storytelling and creative writing that focus on the local water and environment in Alaska. Based on these objectives, *Water Stories* resulted in two distinct works showcasing community voices from Alaska:

- *Collective Voices* is an audio composition that amplifies voices of Alaskan youth and community through stories of what water means in their life.
- *Visual Poetics* is a dynamic audiovisual work (Figure 1) developed with Processing software in which poetic fragments, background photography and abstract visual elements interact in response to a live poetry reading.



Figure 1. Videostill of Ruckle's poem "Ferry" in audio-reactive projection

Ecosystems of Collaboration

There are two synergistic types of collaboration taking place within the *Water Stories* work. In the first, the collaboration between the creators of the work allows artists to bring their own unique perspectives and

disciplinary skill sets together. As the collaborators have previously worked together on site-based work exploring themes of climate change, several methods already developed to facilitate this collaboration were leveraged for this effort, in particular the use of original poetic phrases to provide asemantic glue unifying different visual, sonic, and textual elements. In this case, the performative nature of the collaboration was underscored by having a live poetry reading be a central element of the work. With the poet present, hearing their words while seeing the work respond to their speech connected the underlying collaborative synergy between text and image on the surface, and at a deeper level, with the connections implicit in the semantic connotations and subject matter of the poetry itself.

The second level of collaboration in the work connects the audience and creative producers, capturing community narratives through interviews and recorded reflections. *CollectiveVoices* empowers individual voices through community collaboration, allowing them to interplay and be heard in a public creative context, fostering a reflective audio-based ecosystem through which the listener experiences a plurality of narrative and poetic perspectives. Through its use of intertwined recorded personal reflections, the work bridges the private/public gap, and was shared publicly via broadcast on radio, internet, and as part of an outdoor audio installation at the Anchorage Museum.

Visual Poetics

Alaskan poets Erin Coughlin Hollowell and Jen Stever each composed ten poems as part of this collaboration. Framed by her Iñupiaq culture and history, Stever's poems focus on the local environment, family, and the changing climate. Hollowell's poems explore careful observations of the coastline and reflections of visual language and form. Distinct phrases from each poem were incorporated into the Processing software in several different visual representations. Randomly selected phrases fade in and subsequently fade out within the audiovisual work, with some phrases coalescing from and dispersing into granulated pixels.



Figure 2. Poetry Live Reading Performance

During several trips to Alaska, photographic and video source materials were collected and used as background imagery within the work (Figure 2). Adding to the text and shifting background imagery, different visual elements and behaviors were developed in Processing for each poem, using a vocabulary of moving generative forms include triangular networks, shards, and ellipses, each with distinctive color palettes tied to the background imagery (Figure 3). A reactive audio system was developed to listen to the poet's voice, using amplitude and frequency to trigger and modulate the generative forms, with different behaviors for each poem.



Figure 3. Video still of Hollowell's poem "Choreographic" in audio-reactive projection.



Figure 4. Video still from Stever's poem "Swan Lake Fire" on the Anchorage Museum façade from November 2022-January 2023.

Two versions of the work were developed. The first version was a live performance in which both poets were present reading their works, accompanied by the audio reactive Processing software running in real-time to generate visuals projected behind the poet. The second version (Figure 4) was made to project nightly on the façade of the Anchorage Museum for several months, and was made by recording a performance of the work as a video file. The two versions thus exhibit differences of scale, accessibility, and connection to the spoken voice.

Collective Voices

To create the eight-minute audio composition *Collective Voices*, several recording sessions took place at the Anchorage Museum and OutNorth Radio in which community participants shared personal narratives about place and local waterways. The authors would like to gratefully acknowledge community partners Indra Arriaga Delgado and OutNorth, a progressive arts organization with a mission to advance contemporary art in Anchorage, support underrepresented voices, and promote cultural dialogue by amplifying the alternative voice. In order to promote a diversity of voices, many different community groups were invited to participate including high school students enrolled in the Anchorage Museum's afterschool Teen Climate Communicators program and members of the general public invited to record their stories at the recording session venues. Selected excerpts from these narratives were edited into an audio work using Logic software and combined with multiple layers of local processed environmental sounds from the Anchorage Museum's audio collection. *Collective Voices* was presented at a listening station at the Anchorage Museum during their November First Friday community event, broadcast on Out North Radio, and made available for internet listening via SoundCloud.

Conclusion

Water Stories: Visual Poetics and Collective Voices engages multiple points of view from local youth, community, and poets in Alaska to share what water means in their life. Grounded in a year-long artist residency at the Anchorage Museum, this interdisciplinary project explores the changing environment through place-based ecosystems of collaboration.

Authors Biographies

Andrea Wollensak is a multimedia artist, designer and educator. Her work spans media from traditional and digital fabrication to generative-interactive systems and includes frequent collaborations across disciplines. Wollensak's work has been exhibited internationally, most notably at the Göteborg International Biennial of Contemporary Art and the Brno Biennial of Design. Her work has been supported by the Rockefeller Foundation, the International Artist Studio Program in Sweden, Anchorage Museum, Banff Centre for the Arts, and the National Science Foundation. She has presented her artwork at numerous venues including ISEA, CAiiA, Generative Art, and College Art Association. At Connecticut College, she is on the faculty in the Studio Art Department, and an Associate Fellow at the Ammerman Center for Arts and Technology where she served as Director from 2012 to 2020.

Brett Terry is a composer and sound artist, when not busy with his daily life as a software engineer. His electro-acoustic, choral and chamber compositions have been performed at venues such as SEAMUS, ICMC, ISEA, CAiiA, and Sound Culture in addition to collaborating with visual artists on numerous audiovisual works. As an associate editor of *Computer Music Journal* (MIT Press), he has curated a special issue on Visual Music.

Bridget Baird is a Professor Emerita in Computer Science and Mathematics at Connecticut College and a past Director of the Ammerman Center for Arts and Technology. Her research examines the intersections among the arts and various technologies. Projects include investigating an archaeological site in Ecuador through virtual reality, exploring music and dance through motion capture and multiple modalities, using digital techniques and algorithms to better understand and mine historical documents, and more recently, addressing climate change and environmental concerns by using generative art. Baird collaborated, as a Fulbright scholar, with colleagues in both Mexico and Ecuador. Involvement with the local community has also been important to her and a constant interest has been to increase the number of women in the sciences.