

There is no element in the world like hydrogen oxide, commonly known as water, one of 5,000 names in all the world's still spoken languages. The way contemporary societies understand water is of critical importance to understand the future of humanity. Water is the vital, irreplaceable resource in contemporary economic and geopolitical systems. Water permeates all life, and is a transformative force -- it shapes landscapes, ecosystems, countries, stories and economies. Water is a unique substance -- so familiar and intimate, so politically contested, and still with profound spiritual significance in most traditions. In a global context of crisis where in many places in recent years demand for water has systematically outstripped supply, it is necessary to elevate water as a fundamental aspect of the human rights agendas for the beginning of the 21st century.

Water exists in three main states: solid, liquid and gaseous. Water has been domesticated for centuries (as in river dams), yet it also exists as an untamed force. Water is an element that transforms: it precipitates, it surfs, it flows, changes colour or shape depending on the

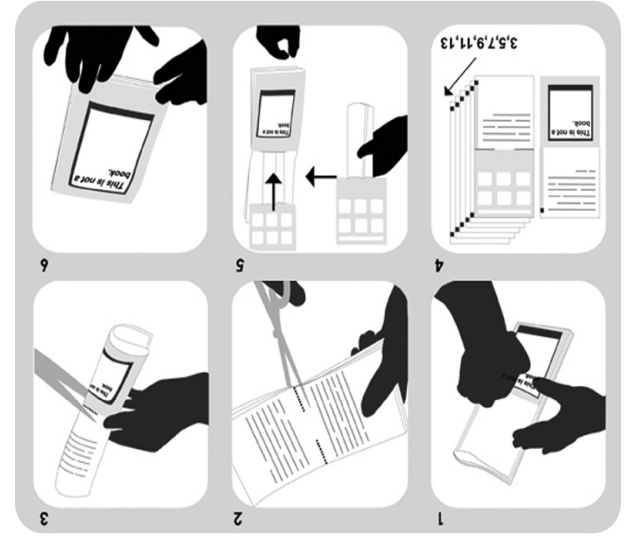
with social and cultural consequences that are still to be appropriately understood.

In the Sufi poem *The Story of the Sands*, a River has crossed all obstacles in its course to the Ocean. As it approaches its last one, the sands of the Desert, the River realizes its waters disappear as soon as they touch the sands. A voice from the deep of the Desert whispers that if the Wind could cross the sands, so could the River. The River objects saying, the Wind could fly and that's why it could cross the Desert. To which the Desert replies, "You will never cross through if you throw yourself with violence. You will disappear or become a wetland. You must let the Wind carry you." The idea was not acceptable to the River. It had never been absorbed before. It didn't want to lose its individuality. Finally, the River accepts to be evaporated, be carried by the Wind and then be dropped down as rain to become a river again. In that way, the River learnt about its true identity and capacity to morph. We are who we are because we change, like water.

Socio-technical change is permeable and multivariable in a relentless pursuit of what do we want to become. Our becoming will always be linked to H2O.

# H2O

Juan F. Salazar and Alejandra Canales



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**Juan F. Salazar and Alejandra Canales**  
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element or container that contains it; yet it always maintains its chemical identity as H<sub>2</sub>O. Water has been called the miracle element as all living forms on this planet depend on it.

Water is never linear and always simultaneous. If we have supposedly moved from the solid modernity of the vertical structures of the industrial age, a Fordist economy and the Cold War, to a liquid modernity of deep globalization, networks and flows of people, ideas and things, does it mean we will in turn move to a gaseous modernity in the next 100 years? Will this be a holographic virtual society? Can societies move back in time

Our bodies are solid matter. Yet our bodies are primarily composed of liquid water. Water behaves unlike any other liquid. We are water. As such we are permeable, we melt, freeze and evaporate. We are ever becoming like the transmutable phases of water. Can societies freeze, evaporate, melt, condense and sublimate like water? Are our social institutions and networks organic like water?

Water is a fundamental element that regulates the metabolic system of the world's metropolises -- where the economic system of our times is

managed. The urban metabolism of late capitalist cities depend on water to produce and recycle and the cost of virtual or embedded water in everything we eat, wear, and use is increasingly complex. Yet most major corporations and financial establishments, whose main goal is to generate short-term profits, increasingly dominate the administration of water as a private property. The management and privatisation of water is a concrete, urgent and global concern. The future of humanity is intimately linked to the future of water, as the flow of water is closely linked to contemporary global flows of power. Water is the most abundant molecule on the atmosphere and surface of the planet yet wars are waged on its name. Access to water is so critical, that the ownership of water can determine the difference between life and death. It is considered that 1,100 million people around the globe have no guaranteed access to drinking water, and another billion have access in dangerous conditions of poor sanitation. Other estimations indicate 5,000 children die every day due to water related illnesses. The breakdown of the hydraulic cycle and health of rivers, oceans, lakes and wetlands is a major cost of this crisis