

Title, *Drinkwater!* : The Citizenship of Art

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On World Water Day 22 March 2005, the French magazine *Le Monde diplomatique*, published an article examining what is now at stake in the management of "blue gold" as follows: "While around 1.4 billion people in the world are deprived of drinking water, others are wasting it. Intensive agriculture has led to rampant water consumption and unprecedented pollution. Instead of encouraging new modes of living, the governments of the world's rich countries have embarked on gargantuan projects such as the massive transfer of water from Canada to the United States. Several multinationals have appropriated water tables for themselves but are encountering resistance: in Kerala in India, women are fighting Coca Cola, which is drying up their wells, and several French municipalities, are bringing water distribution back into the public sector. In the face of this opposition, the world's major water companies are manoeuvring to maintain their grip on water supplies."¹

Water considered as a rarefied, perishable and coveted resource, this is precisely the question that *Drinkwater!* is addressing. An "artistic" endeavour, true, but also, like many of Lucy and Jorge Orta's other projects, one embracing broader horizons. In *Drinkwater!* the Ortas have set out to do more than simply "aestheticise" a problematic reality. Their premise is also an awareness-raising exercise, a concrete action to incite ecological respect: the criteria of an adult art, in phase with its time and implicated in the major debates of the period, in a word, an exercise in citizenship.

A functional aesthetic

The exhibition's title, *Drinkwater!*, is the English translation of "Bevilacqua" the name of the place hosting the exhibition, the Venetian premises of the Fondazione Bevilacqua La Masa, where the visitor to the exhibition is welcomed by a complex water filtration system: water from the nearby canal is pumped to the foundation and purified and bottled there. Then, a range of equipment all related to the question of the drinking water distribution: motorized tricycles, specially adapted carts, individual filtration kits and garments adapted for transporting drinking water.

Despite its formal and highly suggestive appearance, the exhibition does not stop there. It also has an "active" component, based in equal measure on direct implication and participation. Envisaged by the artists as a formal proposition but also as an event, the *Drinkwater!* project extends outside the walls of the Fondazione Bevilacqua into Venice itself, an initial territorial expansion ultimately destined to reach beyond the bounds of the "Most Serene" of cities and deploy itself *urbi et orbi*. In Venice itself this involves the distribution of drinking water and documents related to the theme and the organization of a forum open to specialists on water problems. Then, later, outside the city, it will involve local water management projects run by humanitarian aid specialists or local residents. The objects on display at the Fondazione Bevilacqua, were not intended to be ornamental or temporary exhibits but to be *used*, for water filtration, transport, distribution and consumption. They were designed to fulfil a specific function and to be reproduced and used in other circumstances and in other places. They are prototypes, destined to be reproduced in other materials and used not for ostentatious or commercial purposes but above all for material ones. The artists have not only planned this eventuality but also accept everything this entails: the dispossession of their "work", which will ultimately take on its own life and forge its own path in the real world with the artists no longer having any say in its actual use. The "prolongation" of the exhibition – its *in progress* aspect – is not only factual, or merely phenomenal. Acquiring a cognitive value, it becomes a transcendence of pure aesthetics and their surpassing in practice. The work's growth in space and time takes on a didactic dimension.

Implicating feeling and awareness

The exhibition's title, *Drinkwater!*, is intended more as a recommendation than as an injunction. One is apparently being invited to drink water purified in Venice itself, water taken from a lagoon that is hardly a model of environmental health and purity. The invitation to drink is a way of getting the "drinker" to reflect on the diverse problems affecting a resource essential for human life, on its pollution and increasing scarcity and on the means of combating this. The implication is that it is up to us to consider nature on a planetary scale and reflect on the diverse material questions (over-consumption) and political forces (unfair sharing) today affecting water management.

Life cannot go on without water. Yet that water is neither infinitely available nor equitably shared or distributed. After the euphoric post-war period when everyone believed in the infinite availability of all resources, there came the terrible realizations of the eighties and nineties: water, like coal or petrol is neither overabundant nor perpetually renewable, and just as prone to shortages, price rises, local deprivation and quasi-confiscation by imperialist powers via their multinational companies or their regional subsidiaries (the three major French water companies, Veolia, Saur and Suez-Lyonnaise des Eaux, control 40% of the world's drinking water distribution networks). Not forgetting the diseases linked to the degradation of drinking water. Diarrhoea causes ten of thousands of deaths yearly. There has been state mobilization in favour of equitable water sharing and water consumption economy but it has been insufficient. Five years ago, at the Millennium Summit in 2000, the international community agreed to reduce the percentage of people deprived of drinking

¹ *Le Monde diplomatique*, March 2005, p. 16.

water by half by 2015. In early 2005, Agence France Presse reported that “at the 2003 Earth Summit, this undertaking was even broadened to include populations without water treatment plants, but no plans were envisaged to provide the necessary funding. Even worse, humanitarian aid has decreased. According to the OECD, aid for public water supply decreased from 2.7 billion dollars in 1997 to 1.4 billion in 2002. It has stabilized since but is still well below requirements.”

This situation is known to all and *Drinkwater!* is not intended as an alarm signal. The Ortas' commitment here is not to innovate but above all to be *opportune*. The *Drinkwater!* project is more a contribution, a reactivation of a previous, ongoing action or commitment, carried out here with means specific to art. Means which have no recourse to fiction, as in Satyajit Ray's film *Ganashatru*, in 1989, and more recently, *Yaaba* by Idrissa Ouedraogo, in which poor communities are shown struggling with water contamination or lack of drinking water, but which involve concrete implication. Art is not necessarily idealism, the domain of the imagination. It can be conceived otherwise, as a vehicle of information, as a critical media conveying symbolism with an utilitarian vocation, as a *gesture*: the artist can be the person whose gesture no longer gives us “form”, or no longer *only* “form” but matter, via an action which, in the case of *Drinkwater!*, becomes part of the global field of humanitarian aid and whose consciousness is consolidated and stimulated by it. As an active mobilization, *Drinkwater!* formally addresses the now planetary problem of drinking water, a problem crucial in terms of resources (diminishing or unequally distributed) and management (the stranglehold of the multinational companies on distribution networks). One has to on the one hand provide a tangible *illustration* of this chronic problem that can alert people, and on the other hand encourage its solution via the personal and motivated implication expected of each visitor to the exhibition. An incitation to enlightened and concrete activism which is in a certain sense “propagated” by its very own way of addressing both the felt and the intelligible.

Contextual operationality

The well-known interest of this proposition, beyond its artistic existence (but also, just as much, thanks to it), resides in its proximity status, in its co-presence alongside the humanitarian preoccupations of the moment. It should be noted that *Drinkwater!* does not just “signify” the present problem of water in a militant or denunciatory mode. The work in itself is, above all, a media.

One senses that to act successfully in the media register presupposes a scheme of action outreaching the simple use of representation and spectacle. To do this, Lucy and Jorge Orta are again putting into practice what has become their hallmark, the collective mobilization of actors exterior to the art system, protagonists whose competence is solicited each time for a specific purpose correlated to the notion of urgency – the contributors in this instance being chemists, water filtration industrialists, designers, economists and ecology theorists. The work is conceived as a whole integrating on one hand the process of its preparation, particularly the design work, done in Paris, London, Eindhoven and Treviso, and its accompanying discussions and seminars, and on the other hand the elements exhibited, installed or made by the artists, plus a water distribution sequence in Venice itself, of water bottled at the Fondazione Bevilacqua in a specific screen-printed bottle. In addition to the initial sequence of conception of an exhibition and donation, there was the organisation of a forum publicising the event and opening it to a broader public than the traditional circle of exhibition-goers.

The processual time of such a work is less that of its exhibition than its potential functionality. The actual artistic involvement of the Ortas is therefore projective. Analogically, there is a link between this and the particular relationship to time dictated by the principle of sustainable development, which engages the future by binding it indefectibly to the present, which runs counter to the logic of consumerism. The work as an evocation, as a metaphor, yes; as a vector of concrete effectiveness, yes too; as duration incarnate, again yes. As duration incarnate, again, *Drinkwater!* deliberately sets itself within the enlarged perimeter in which art ceases to be merely an aesthetic apparatus and becomes ‘contextual’. Nourished to the utmost degree by reality, index-linked to the facts and gestures of the world, calibrated to events, in short, *present in the order of things*, all “contextual” creation denies itself autonomy. The artist is not outside the world. Nor is he a spectator of the course of things. On the contrary, he is at the epicentre of the cauldron, both the actor and ‘operator’ of his awareness. His weapons? Not simulative *mise en scène* or solipsist expression of a personal point of view but – more effective – reasoned and responsible commitment. For Lucy and Jorge Orta, this takes the form of a poeticisation of the life we live, approached according to the model of catalysis, in their case regulated by a sentiment of usefulness (art must have a use) and urgency (action is now).

A policy

Finally, the *political* question. It would be pointless to affirm on this point the perfect innocuousness of a project such as *Drinkwater!*. Lucy and Jorge Orta, are definitely not signing a manifesto, any more than they are proselytising for the benefit of this or that coterie. But this does not mean that their work is any less “political”, since it really does set out address a social problem. It refers to general government, the government of the *polis*, then, by extension, of the entire planet at a time when this globalised *polis* has become our frame of reference. Plato, in his *Laws*, argued that water was a gift of nature, and consequently belonged to everyone. As such, its management can only be administered democratically and private interests must be kept out of it.² *Drinkwater!*, echoes Plato's thinking, and the democratic principle that water

² Plato, *Laws*, Book VIII: “If any one intentionally pollutes the water of another, whether the water of a spring, or collected in reservoirs, either by poisonous substances, or by digging or by theft, let the injured party bring the cause before the wardens of the city, and claim in writing the value of the loss; if the accused be found guilty of injuring the water by deleterious substances, let him not only pay damages, but purify the stream or the cistern which contains the water, in such manner as the laws of the interpreters order the purification to be made by the offender in each case”

is a precious resource that nature gave mankind to share and therefore that it is up to civilised man to share it to the benefit and well-being of all.

Despite its artistic formulation, *Drinkwater!*, in its own particular way, also joins the battle for “water for everyone” that has been going on since the 1990s, particularly in the Third World countries, and the social forums that for fifteen years have punctuated the struggle against neoliberalism and its global appetite for privatising public structures and resources. The Ortas are not, like ATTAC, advocating a world tax for the development of aid to access to drinking water³, but at least it cannot be said that art has missed an opportunity to serve, on this precise point, the cause of the people. *Drinkwater!*, in this respect, is a realist work rooted in the tradition of activist and humanist artistic creation. Moreover, this realism, which commands our respect, has the virtues of a poem, of a powerful and inspired symbolic declension evoking finally only life: the battle to preserve it; our stressful struggle to preserve ourselves and our vital resources to remain in harmony with nature – with which we remain inextricably bound *ad vitam aeternam*, whether we like it or not. One could say, in this case, an opportune, sensitive and intelligible poem, recounting the history of man in the process of rediscovering the meaning of living matter and, in doing so, his own meaning. *Drinkwater!*, a civic art, art full stop.

³ “The NGO (non-governmental organizations) such as ATTAC advocate a world tax that would finance development. A tiny step in this direction was made in France last January when a law was voted authorizing local authorities, trade unions and water boards to allocate up to 1% of water rates to aid to development (...). According to the Water Solidarity Programme, which chaired one of the three conferences on water and Africa organized by Unesco from 22 to 25 March, if all water distribution organizations adopted it, the “1% water” could finance 120 million euros worth of projects in the Third World.” (Agence France Presse, March 2005)