

## JWTC Blog

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### Liquid Modernities: On Kim Anno Water City, Durban 2012, Goethe Institute

Photograph #1: A suit-clad young man stares at the camera, his back turned on the ocean, the water, timeless, boundless, unidentifiable. The viewer knows that the invisible city behind the beach is Durban, but she can't see it. "Watching," 2012.

Photograph #2: The frame captures the profiles of two suit-clad young men staring towards the ocean, facing the water, timeless, boundless, unidentifiable. This time, the city has entered the frame, the backs of the two men turned against the urban landscape of Durban. "Two Men Facing East," 2012.



Zygmunt Bauman's *Liquid Modernity* alerts us to the frantic rhythms of the present, the modern solids that have now turned into liquids, moving freely and formlessly from one vessel to another (Polity, 2000). What happens, however, when liquidity stops being a metaphor and becomes a natural threat? What happens when an exhausted, abused and overstretched modernity melts nature's solids into water? *Water Cities* happen. Liquid modernity is the projected, almost apocalyptic future of a failed modernity.

When Bauman described deterritorialization and the dissolution of boundaries brought forth by modernity in its late, liquid form, the borders he had in mind were not coastal ones. However, the young "actors" –as the artist calls them– in Kim Anno's work are faced with the very

real watershed of Bauman's liquid modernity: a menacing, mobile, watery border, anticipated in the form of a natural disaster –discursive, and at the same time, potentially factual.

Similarly, the young actors in the two photographs described above gaze either towards, or against the liquid future ahead of them and, respectively, the present and past of their lives in the cities they live in. But Kim Anno's work challenges precisely this other invisible border marked by the opposite directions of the two men's gaze: the border between future and past, between the event and the mundane, between disaster and the everyday, between, even, the liquid and the urban, water and earth.

So how do we imagine *Water Cities*? What will, if, everyday life be like? Together with the young actors she captured with her camera, Kim Anno devised a new beach game, a water sport: one ball, a few bodies and water. Water, the quintessence of the everyday in the port cities faced with the threat of sea level rise, acquires a peculiar quality: it embodies the looming anticipation of disaster, the potentiality of another everyday, dystopic, bleak and excessively liquid. Yet the photographs and videos maintain an uncannily peaceful and mundane leisurely quality. To paraphrase the artist herself: "Even in the eve of disaster we remain humans, we need to play, to move on." In "Donna," 2012, a young actress, is flipping through the magazine "artsouthafrica" while floating on water; in "Bed," 2012, we see a liquid still life, once again blurring the boundaries between the future and the past, the everyday and the eventful. A floating mattress, a dress on top, a cushion, a necklace.

The actors wear suits, ambiguously corporate and businesslike as if to mirror the failed modernity that induced the *natural* disaster of sea level rise. Yet, the suits are further evidence of the quality of the everyday that Kim Anno tries to capture with her art: life goes on, the young actors in *Water Cities* still have to go to work after the event, while engaging in some play in between. "Who is it that will be affected" (by the disaster?), asks Kim Anno.

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"Hidden" somewhere in the photographs and installation, lies a commentary on the role of the nation state in handling *natural* disaster. Or, rather, the failure, as the artist believes, of the nation state in preventing climate change or managing a disaster partly caused by its politics. "Raising no man's flag," 2012, in the water, the newly acquired (or lost, depending on one's respective) territory of the *Water City*. No man's flags, artificial ironic symbols of non-nations that point to a fellow viewer's observation, the fact that is, "... that it is because of the environment, rather than human matters that we need to think beyond the nation state."

Installation #1: A projection of young actors, suit clad, playing the new water sport of the *Water City*. The value of leisure. At the front, a floating paper city, alluding to the moment of its transformation into a *Water City*. As if the wave washed away the artifacts of the everyday: buildings, a car, a chair, a lighthouse, a ball. Is it the same ball they used for their game? "Water City, Durban," 2012.

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