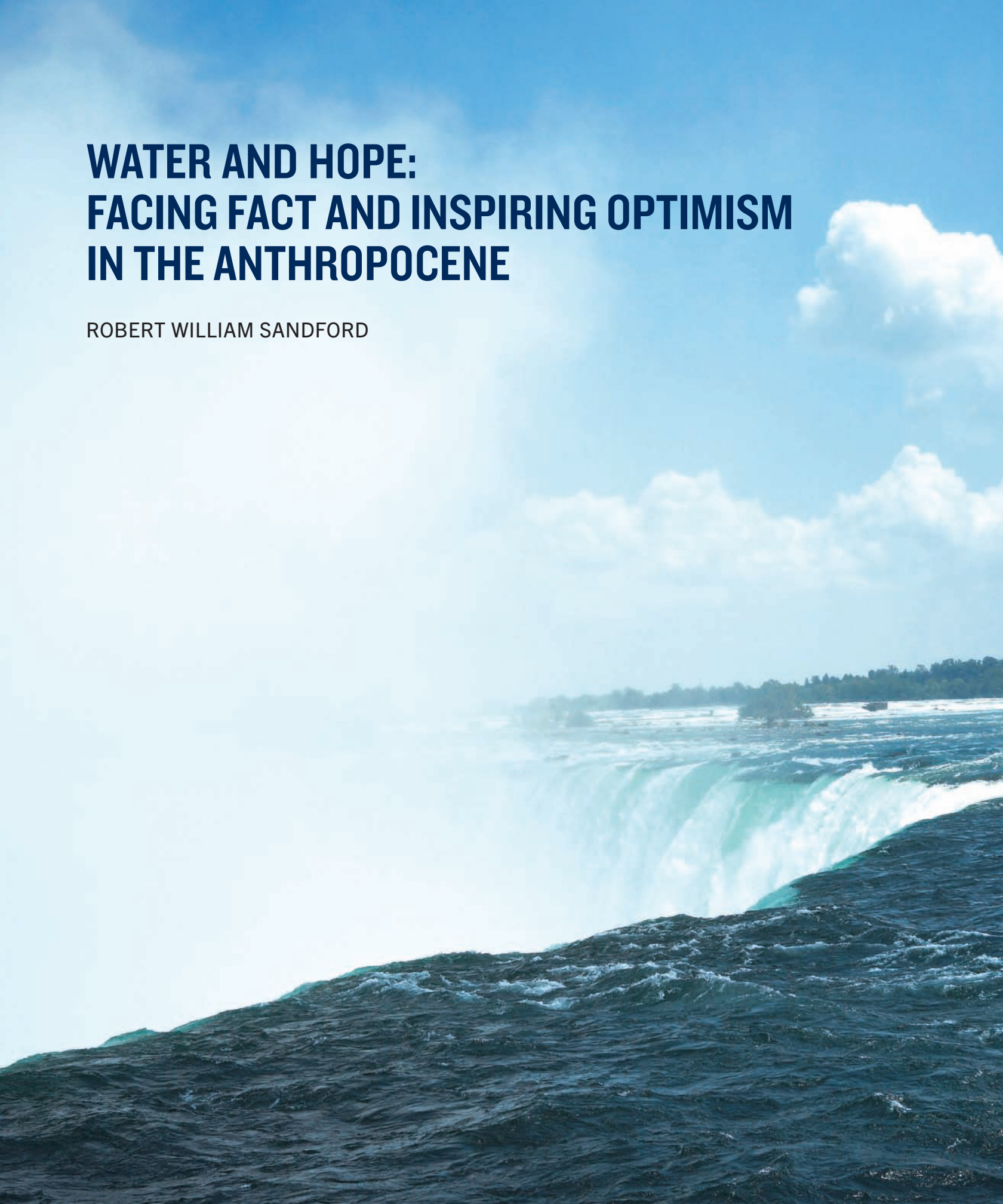


# WATER AND HOPE: FACING FACT AND INSPIRING OPTIMISM IN THE ANTHROPOCENE

ROBERT WILLIAM SANDFORD



ABOVE  
**Soheila Esfahani**  
*Wish on Water* [detail], 2013-14

OPPOSITE PAGE  
**Gu Xiong**  
*Niagara Falls #2* [detail], 2014

The goal of the work in which I am engaged with the United Nations is to build a better bridge between science and public understanding on matters related to water and water-related climate impacts. It was under the auspices of this work that I was invited by Patrick Mahon to speak on the subject of water's relationship to climate before a group of internationally renowned artists who happened at the time to be at the Banff Centre creating works that would later be shown in an extraordinary exhibition called *The Source: Rethinking Water Through Contemporary Art*, which opened the following year at Rodman Hall Art Centre.

I was very interested in this opportunity because I have always believed that art is an important medium for sharing understanding of what is central about our relationship to one another and humanity's relationship to the rest of the world. Art, in my estimation, is a form of perceptual leadership. Meaningful art allows us to see clearly into the depths of reality and to return again to the surface of our everyday lives with new insights and hope for the future. People tend to trust art, not just because it speaks on so many levels to so many matters that are of importance to us, but because even though they may have views different from the rest of society, artists speak sincerely from the heart. Because I was speaking to artists, and because I so respect art, I made sure I spoke from the heart also.

As a foundation for discussing what hope is up against in our time, I told the artists involved in the project all I could about our current knowledge with respect to the state and fate of water and its effect on climate in Canada. I observed that our weather appears to be all over the place and explained why. I explained why rainstorms, ice storms and snowstorms are paralyzing our transportation and electricity distribution systems, why both high and low temperature records are being broken everywhere, why cold snaps are persisting – with snow falling in places and in volumes seldom witnessed before – and why flooding is occurring widely.

What we are seeing, I said, is that changes in the composition of the global atmosphere have caused enough warming to change the rate and manner in which water moves through the global hydrological cycle. While we know that hydrological conditions on this planet have always been changing, we have been fortunate to have had a century or so of relative hydro-climatic stability. That era, however, is over. The long-term hydrologic stability of the climate we experienced in the past will not return during the lifetime of anyone alive today. This is a huge new concept – a societal game-changer – and it is going to take time to get our heads around it. This, I offered, was why, as much as any other time in the past, we now need the perceptual leadership that only art can offer. We need art, I said in conclusion, to help show us the way to hope.

The artists to whom I spoke, however, did not seem to accept that there is much to be hopeful about, based on the information I shared with them. They could not see how more forceful interpretation of the evidence should make one any more hopeful about a positive outcome to the climate issue.

Gu Xiong, who is originally from China, was working on a massive sculpture that would interpret the most recent catastrophe to hit the front pages in his home country, which involved some 16,000 rotting pig carcasses disposed of in a river. He maintained that, given the regime presently in power in that country and the damage being done to natural systems, and in particular to water, he could not countenance hope. Such threats had been highly visible in China for decades and little had been done to react to the worsening situation.

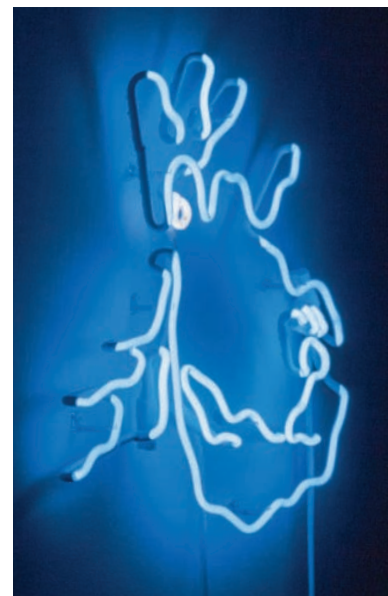
Soheila Esfahani, who came to Canada from Tehran about twenty years ago, was carefully crafting exquisite ceramic bowls and covering them with painted motifs that suggested they represented the different cultures around the world that might use them to drink water. After witnessing the rapid decline of the quality of life circumstances in her home country, she indicated that she could point to no hope politically that suggested that things might turn out differently than they currently are in the Middle East. If nations continue to exist without possessing at least a hint of positive interest in addressing the declining state of our planetary life-support system, then, for her, hope seemed logically out of the question.

Gautam Garoo, an artist from India, a Hindu, had a different view. He declared that hope was not something he expected to have, in that practicing Hindus are trained to accept the world as it is and don't attempt to impose their personal values upon that which operates at a higher level of order and destiny.

And Nadine Bariteau, an artist from Quebec with a great interest in water, indicated that she had given up on having hope for the future long ago. She is forty-two, she told me, and is not having children because she thinks it irresponsible to bring people into the kind of world she sees clearly coming into existence.

As the conversation proceeded, none of the artists backed away from these positions. All we could agree upon was that we should all hope to have hope in the future. What we arrived at was in essence what psychologists call "radical hope," a condition in which those who hold hope do not yet have an appropriate understanding of the end to which hope might be directed.

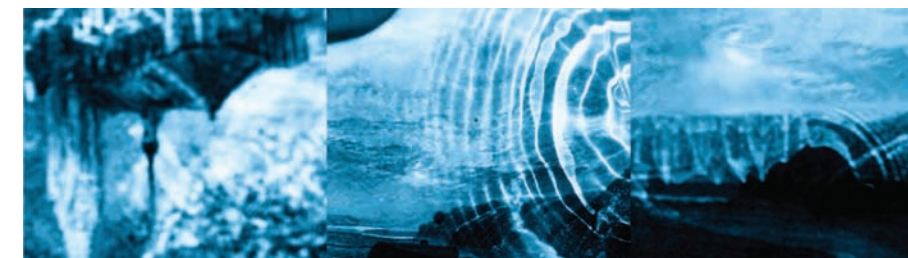
These troubling discussions left me with no alternative but to give further thought to how one might frame hope within the context of the rapid changes that are occurring



**Colin Miner**  
*Afterimage #22* [installation view], 2014



**Lucy + Jorge Orta**  
*Antarctica Flag, 2007*  
Lamda colour photograph mounted on Dibond  
Edition of 7 (3 A.P.)



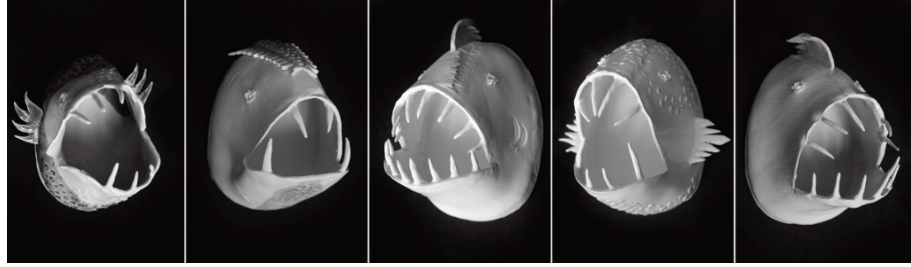
**Patrick Mahon**  
*Water Table #2* [video stills], 2014

in the world, changes that threaten to make it a very different place than the one from which we emerged and evolved toward in our current circumstances. So, in a real sense, by challenging my optimism, art performed its function. It has forced me to articulate more defensible reasons for having hope and to describe a new end toward which hope might be directed.

I decided the best way to initiate this new inquiry was to poll graduate students and younger working professionals with an interest in water on what hope means to them and why we need to have it for the future. I did this by way of two workshops offered as part of a major water conference held at Queen's University in Kingston in May 2013. I asked volunteer participants to weigh in on three matters related to what we think our prospects for the future may be as a society. The first was whether there is hope. The second asked – if indeed there is hope – what there is to be hopeful about or, to put it another way, in what we should invest our hope. And finally, I invited them to explore how, if there is hope, we can inspire others to possess it and act on it.

I was surprised by what we learned. By the shaking of their heads, I came to understand immediately that, nope, this group was not buying it either. It occurred to me that it may be fashionable in youthful circles to accept that the world in the future is going to be somehow less than the world today. Perhaps this generation has been told this so many times that they are blasé about it. But I didn't have to press very hard to find out that this was just a front. While there were some holdouts, when challenged, most participants acknowledged much more reason for hope than they initially let on. They saw the value of education, the potential for technology and innovation to make things better, and the possibility of unanticipated shifts in perspective that could make the future brighter. There was also a significant difference of viewpoint regarding hope based on where you grew up and what hope meant in those circumstances.

If you grew up in Iran, or Egypt, West Africa or India, the parameters of hope were different than if you came from Canada or the United States. If the country you came from had a history of instability, the preconditions for hope are different. Hope for people who come from such places is situational. They hope loved ones are safe; that people they care about are not going to die in meaningless crossfire; that the countries from which they came would not become failed states. They could not understand why Canadians declared themselves resigned to hopelessness for no good reason when we have all the tools – the education, the technology and the wealth – to construct any future that might be imagined.



**Nadine Bariteau**  
*Protecteurs des mers*  
 (Protectors of the Seas) [details], 2013

Once shared, these arguments proved persuasive, and soon almost everyone conceded that they were, in fact, at least somewhat hopeful about the future. But along with hope there was also fear. Grave concerns were expressed about human numbers and the impact of ever-growing populations on the integrity and function of the earth system. Deep frustration surrounded how denial and prevarication were standing in the way of the public and adult conversation we so desperately need to have, on how volatile nature has become and how bad things must be before we act. In this context it was held that hopelessness was a cop-out, a form of passive denial. If you have a duty toward water, one participant said, then you have a duty toward hope.

It was noted that in many instances it is helplessness that begets hopelessness. It is critical, therefore, to reject helplessness. Participants in the forum were emphatic that not everyone is apathetic. We have to get past the apathy that does exist and restore gratitude for what we have. We have to fight against fatalistic acceptance. Humans are capable of making changes and are willing to do it. We are all in this together, they pointed out. Young people need to become the leaders they want – a new energized form of civic engagement is needed. Networking is critical. Intergenerational dialogue is necessary. It was interesting that when asked to create a symbol of hope for the future, the results almost always had something to do with water. The most common symbol of hope for the future was a boat.

In all of these discussions, however, the general sense was that the future is still going to be largely an extension of the world as we know it today, suggesting a certain “linearity” to the idea of hope. But that is not likely to be the case. The loss of hydrologic stability has created effects that have already begun to cascade through every ecosystem on the planet and through every economy. In a dramatically changed world, hope will also lose its linearity. So, how shall we frame hope in a different world? We may have to reframe the world first and then frame hope around that new world.

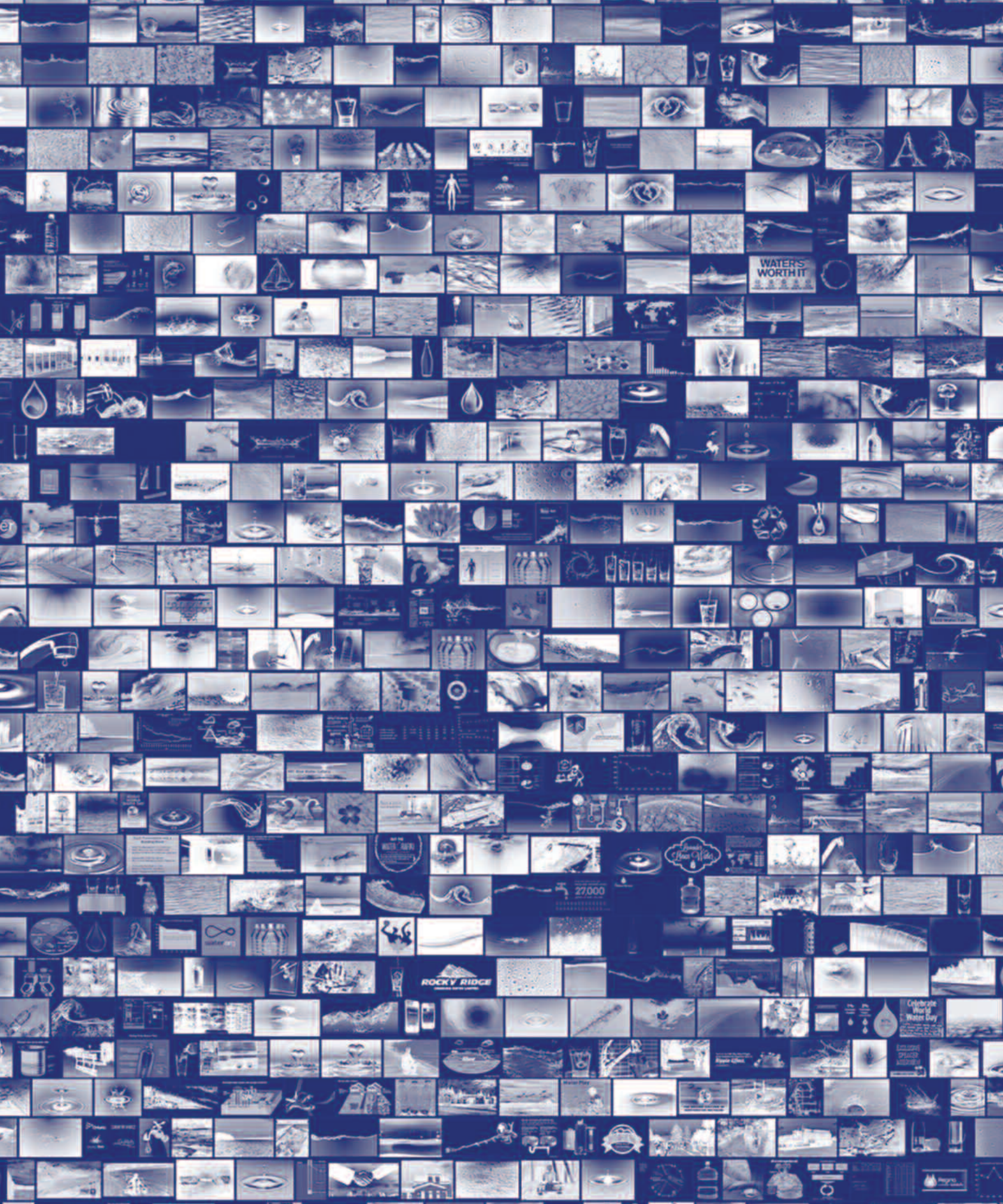
One way our current situation is being reframed is through the notion that we have entered a new geological era in which human activities rival the processes of nature itself. This new geological era is being called the Anthropocene. Unlike earlier epochs in the earth’s history, which were brought about by meteorite strikes and other geological events that resulted in mass extinctions, this epoch is marked by our overall impact on the earth system. Climate disruption is only one of these impacts. By virtue of our numbers and our activities, we have altered the global carbon, nitrogen and phosphorous cycles. We are causing changes in the chemistry, salinity and temperature of our oceans and the composition of our atmosphere. Changes in the composition of



ABOVE  
**Soheila Esfahani**  
*Wish on Water* [installation view], 2013-14

OPPOSITE PAGE  
**Gu Xiong**  
*Waterscapes* [detail] 2014





the atmosphere, in tandem with land-use changes and our growing water demands, have also altered the global water cycle. The cumulative measure of the extent to which we have crossed these boundaries is the rate of biodiversity loss. We have entered an era in which we can no longer count on self-willed natural landscapes to absorb human impacts on the earth system. We now have to assume responsibility for earth-system function we have damaged. We have no choice now, for example, but to work *with* a changing climate, not against it. We have to prepare for more powerful storms and more frequent flooding, because that is what we are likely going to get.

As a witness to the rapid hydro-climatic destabilization that is taking place in Canada and abroad, I have often been asked if in such circumstances it really is possible to have hope for the future. When I ask exactly what is meant by that question, the answer I most often receive relates to whether there is any hope for a resolution to these problems before they accelerate beyond our capacity to manage them. Can we turn these problems around while they are still more or less linear and incremental? Before they become non-linear, and everything we rely upon for stability in the world begins to change all at once? There is widespread recognition that our political systems are not designed and structured to easily allow them to be capable of addressing issues of this magnitude. The scales are all wrong. While political systems are designed to function over periods of four or five years within limited and often competing jurisdictions, the problems we have created for ourselves are mismatched both spatially and temporally. Many people doubt it is possible to rescue our political systems from the influence of vested economic and ideological interests, and the self-referential focus of party politics, in anything close to the time needed to prevent the collapse of important elements of the earth system.

A growing number of people today do, in fact, feel helpless to do anything to prevent the society of which they are part from sliding over the edge into the abyss. This feeling of helplessness often masks as a loss of hope. Nevertheless, so many who I have worked with, including the artists involved in this project, concluded that we are not helpless. While we must always be on guard against false optimism and self-interested government and corporate happy talk, this is not the time to allow hope to fail us. While in their more defensive moments artists may proclaim otherwise, the making of art is fundamentally an act of hope.

There has likely never in the history of humanity been a time when we have needed art more than now. The works in *The Source: Rethinking Water Through Contemporary Art* prove – once again and as always – that society can count on art for the uncompromising honesty, clarity and perceptual leadership that insists we unflinchingly face the fact of who we are, and what humanity must do now if we are to have hope for the future. Welcome to the Anthropocene.

OPPOSITE  
**Raymond Boisjoly**  
*Immersion Emergencies Collaborative Poster*  
[image detail], 2014  
collage, mixed media