

Article

Water as a Symbolic and Existential Medium in Contemporary Art: Phenomenology, Symbolism, and the Relationship with the Viewer

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Abstract

The article examines water as a symbolic and existential medium in contemporary art. Water, present in culture since the earliest times, constitutes both a fundamental condition of life and one of the most enduring archetypes of human imagination. The analysis is conducted from two theoretical perspectives: phenomenological, focusing on the embodied experience, and symbolic, presenting the cultural and spiritual meanings attributed to water, as well as contemporary concepts examining its role in relational and site-specific art. Particular attention is devoted to the analysis of selected case studies in which water serves as a medium for transformation, introspection, and boundary. The findings indicate that in contemporary art, water functions as a multidimensional medium, engaging all the viewer's senses and eliciting profound aesthetic and existential experiences. At the same time, its use reveals tensions between the authentic message and the risk of greenwashing, or over-technologization. The article emphasizes that the combination of symbolic depth with a responsible approach is crucial for the credibility of water as an artistic medium.

Keywords: water; symbolism; phenomenology; existence; contemporary art; aesthetic experience; narrative

1. Introduction

Water is one of the most enduring archetypes in the history of the imagination, myth, and art. This is closely linked to the fact that it is a fundamental prerequisite for human life, from the dawn of time to the present day. As an element essential to the emergence and development of civilization, its abundance or scarcity has determined the success of human endeavors. Agriculture, farming, and transportation—all these activities, and thus human existence itself, have depended on water. This deep dependence on water has led to water appearing “as a common thread woven through the religion, literature, and art of every culture”, as Moore described it (Moore 1994, p. 17), saturated with timeless symbols, myths, and beliefs. In fact, Eliade argued that water, from which all life originated, “can be found in a great many different versions in ancient and ‘primitive’ creation beliefs” (Eliade [1958] 1997, p. 191). Humanity has placed its hopes in water but has also seen it as the source of cataclysms. As Eliade wrote, “men disappear periodically in a deluge or flood because of their ‘sins’”—a motif common in all religions and beliefs (Eliade [1958] 1997, p. 211). Water, therefore, embodies paradoxes that reflect the fundamental tensions of human existence, such as life and death, permanence and destruction (Geva 2023b).

These paradoxes have found expression in art throughout the centuries. From ancient cosmogonic depictions of gods—guardians of the seas, rivers, and rains—such as the



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Greek Poseidon (Eliade 1978), who appeased sailors with favorable weather or punished them with storms or the Aztec Tlaloc (Miller and Taube 1993) and the Scandinavian Eager (Eliade [1958] 1997), through the portrayal of water as a symbolic element of purification enabling access to religious rituals in most modern world religions (Geva 2023b; Eliade [1958] 1997), to contemporary art installations in which the environmental significance of water serves as a pretext for discussing the state of the world (Roulière and Egerer 2022). Above all, the significance of water as the source of life stands out strongly. According to ancient and modern cosmogonies, the first life emerged from water; it constitutes the *fons et origo* (Baldock 1997) and enables symbolic rebirth “at once purifying and giving new life”, as described by Eliade ([1958] 1997, p. 212).

Water functions as an element of cosmological order and as a medium embedded in religious rituals. It is present in acts of purification, washing, and initiation—from baptism in the Christian tradition, through ritual ablutions in Islam, to symbolic cleansings in other belief systems. In this sense, water constitutes not only a physical substance but also a means of transition between states—between the profane and the sacred, life and rebirth. In myths, it appears both as the seed of life—the primordial matter from which existence emerges—and as a destructive force, embodied in the waters of the flood, bringing both annihilation and renewal of the world. As Hani emphasizes, in traditional symbolism, water is simultaneously a generative and destructive element, forming the basis of cosmic order and cyclical transformations of existence (Hani 2007).

Water has been used in art and architecture continuously from ancient times to the present day. “The relationship between settlements and structures and water is enduring and is a feature of nearly all cultures around the world” (Niemczyk 2002, p. 65)¹. Historically, humanity’s relationship with water—a source of both fascination and fear—has been a story of the struggle between them. Whether through engineering achievements such as ancient aqueducts and modern dams with hydroelectric power plants, where water has been harnessed to serve humanity, or bridges that have stripped rivers of their ability to isolate, the element of water has been almost completely subdued by humans. Although in the modern era water has largely lost its fascinating character as a repository of myths and dreams, reduced to a substance flowing through pipes, as Illich argued (Illich 1985), it has never ceased to be incorporated into the environment by artists and architects for its unique features.

This study aims to re-examine water as a symbolic and existential medium in contemporary art through the adoption of a phenomenological perspective, which emphasizes embodied experience and perception (Merleau-Ponty [1945] 2002), and a symbolic approach, focusing on cultural and spiritual meanings (Cassirer 2021). The relationship between water and the viewer will also be analyzed, showing how artistic practices activate not only aesthetic responses but also ethical, emotional, and existential reflections (Bishop 2012). This is particularly valuable in an age of desensitized architecture, focused on visual effects rather than rich, existential experiences (Pallasmaa [1996] 2024). The study will also provide specific methods for analyzing objects, and the proposed categorization, attributes, and ways they can be combined across categories can be used to further develop and apply these concepts to other works in the built environment, including architectural ones. By discussing selected case studies, the research will demonstrate how water serves as a medium for transformation, introspection, and boundary, combining traditional symbolism with the urgent challenges of contemporaneity.

2. Literature Review and State of Research

In the study of the symbolism of water, there are several works that today hold the status of classics. The processual dimension of water, its capacity to carry time, transform

matter, and symbolize continuity, finds its theoretical foundation in multiple perspectives. Moore's analysis demonstrates water's processual nature most directly: "*over the years, flowing water deposits minerals in streaks and patinas, leaving rich shadows and gleaming highlights*" (Moore 1994, p. 38). Water imprints the sensory, haptic dimension of time onto matter. His concept of fountains as "*sacred sources, the origin of life, and the initial stage of the water cycle*" (Moore 1994, p. 38) articulates how the process manifests through cyclical transformation. Eliade emphasized water's role as an element of purification, renewal, and contact with the divine (Eliade [1958] 1997). His cosmogonic symbolism—water as the origin of all forms, the deluge that dissolves the world only to enable its rebirth—establishes process as cyclical transformation. Moore notes that "*physical purification leads to spiritual rejuvenation*" (Moore 1994, p. 20), revealing how water's processual transformation operates in material and spiritual dimensions.

The introspective condition emerges from phenomenological and poetic approaches. Bachelard (1983) presented water as an element of material imagination, endowed with ambivalent meanings—from purification and life to death and oblivion. Bachelard's concept of water as a repository of dreams and memories establishes the introspective dimension. Moore attributes to water the ability to "*pacify the psyche and become repositories of dreams*" (Moore 1994, p. 22), directly echoing Bachelard's poetics of reverie. Moving water, through its capacity to produce effects "*animating, enlivening, relaxing, soothing, exploding, dancing*" (Moore 1994, p. 38), engages different emotional and contemplative states. Otto interpreted water as a medium of *mysterium tremendum* and *mysterium fascinans*—an element that simultaneously evokes awe and fascination (Otto 1958), challenging deeper reflection. Merleau-Ponty extended this introspective dimension through his phenomenology of embodied perception; water demands whole-body engagement, experienced through sound, scent, and reflected light (Merleau-Ponty [1945] 2002). "*Water reflects the buildings, absorbs their shadows, and emphasizes their depth*" (Geva 2023a, p. 3), transforming architectural perception into an introspective encounter. The concept of atmospheres (Böhme 1993; Zumthor 2006; Borch 2014) can be applied to water, enabling an emotional experience of space, connecting the viewer to *genius loci* (Norberg-Schulz 1980).

The boundary condition finds its clearest articulation in the study of the sacred and spatial phenomenology. Eliade's analysis establishes water as the archetype of transition from the profane to the sacred (Eliade [1957] 1959). Geva notes that water "*serves as a threshold and a tangible barrier between the outdoors and the interior,*" directing "*the worshiper from the profane to the spiritual realm*" (Geva 2023a, p. 2), emphasizing water's dual function as both a conceptual and material boundary. Bollnow's spatial phenomenology demonstrates how water can naturally create barriers, marking boundaries between the accessible and the inaccessible, shape paths, and set the pace of movement (Bollnow [1963] 2011). Moreover, water "*reflects light and serves as an acoustical barrier*" (Moore 1994, p. 4), which demonstrates how water's boundary function operates across multiple senses.

While the above categorization serves analytical clarity, water's phenomenological reality resists such division. Water's physical states, "*its physical movements as well as its spiritual inspiration from freezing to running through rivers, from bursting out from underground to falling from mountains, or calm waters in lakes*" (Geva 2023a, p. 1), carry spiritual significance, simultaneously embodying process (transformation between states), introspection (different contemplative moods), and boundary (different threshold experiences). This is what makes water such a powerful symbolic and experiential medium in art and architecture. A contemporary narrative approach points to the human being as *homo narraticus*—a storytelling being, experiencing the world as a story (Wierzbicka 2013). In this sense, water becomes the medium of a narrative concerning life, memory, passage, purification, and return to the sources. Yet this symbolic richness faces tension in contemporary contexts;

what historically functioned as sacred purification is often reduced to purely aesthetic function or becomes a political tool (Bishop 2012; Simoniti 2023), especially in the era of the climate crisis (Stoltz 2023). The most recent publications, particularly those of Yang, who systematized water elements in spatial art, indicate that the symbolism of water remains a current and important topic. His systematization acknowledges the different dimensions of water as “an interconnected system where each element influences and is enhanced by the others” (Yang 2025, p. 506). For this reason, it is crucial to consider the interdisciplinary nature of water narratives in analyzing works of art.

3. Narrative Analysis Method

The study was based on a qualitative method, combining a review of the literature in the fields of philosophy of religion, symbolism, art theory, and architecture with an analysis of selected artistic and architectural works, aiming at a synthesis that captures both common motifs and divergences. In addition, the study drew on reviews, curatorial texts, and statements by artists.

For the case studies, four representative works of contemporary art were selected, in which water functions as a sensory medium. The study adopts a narrative methodology as its primary interpretive tool, treating architecture and art not merely as physical objects but as a medium through which meanings unfold over time, experience, and use. In this framework, architecture, sculpture, and art installations are interpreted as spatial narratives that evolve alongside changes in modes of use, spatial relationships, and their semantic interpretation (Wierzbicka 2013), as well as through the artist’s reinterpretation and the process of public access. Each analyzed object and art installation was analyzed through five interrelated narrative dimensions:

- **Context of creation:** the spatial and urban context of the object, encompassing its relationship with its surroundings—whether landscape or urban fabric. Location is approached narratively as a factor that situates architecture and art within broader cultural and environmental processes.
- **Characteristics of the object:** the formal, material, and structural properties of the work, including its scale, composition, and architectural or sculptural language. This dimension examines how physical form mediates the relationship between water and spatial experience.
- **Expressive means of water:** the modes through which water is employed—whether as flow, stillness, reflection, sound, or vapor—and the sensory and symbolic effects generated by these materialities. This layer addresses water’s role as both medium and agent in constructing experiential narratives.
- **Narrative:** meanings encoded in the spatial organization, materials, and compositional elements. This layer functions as an architectural narrative that reveals itself implicitly—through movement, the sequence of spaces, and perceptual experience.
- **Meaning:** the interpretive synthesis arising from the convergence of contextual, formal, and experiential dimensions. This layer articulates the broader cultural, spiritual, or philosophical significance of the work, situating it within contemporary discourse on liminality, temporality, and embodied presence.

Narrative frameworks are conceptually linked to the three conditions of experience identified in the theoretical section—process, introspection, and boundary—which describe the ways in which meaning arises through temporal transformation, embodied experience, and transitions between different spatial orders (Table 1). These categories do not function as metaphors; they are operational analytical perspectives guiding the reconstruction of architectural and spatial narratives. They describe how spatial narratives are constructed and perceived, rather than the formal characteristics of an object (Tables 2–5).

Table 1. Three narratives in art and architecture created through water and its spatial means of expression.

Process—Narrative as Continuity and Transformation	Introspection—Narrative as Experience	Boundary—Narrative as a Transition
Water allowing the structure to evolve over time. The narrative continues through successive layers of use, environmental influences, conservation efforts, and reinterpretations.	Water allowing for a personal experience of space. The narrative emerges from the relationship between the viewer's body and the artwork/architecture.	Water as a transitional space between different realms of experience: the private and the public, the everyday and the ceremonial, the functional and the display.
It manifests itself through: • the physical traces of time, <i>Water is both a carrier and an indicator of the passage of time. It undergoes its own transformations and physically reshapes architecture. It imprints a sensory, haptic dimension of time onto matter (Pallasmaa [1996] 2024), acting as a substance that reacts with architectural form (Moore 1994).</i> • changes in modes of use and perception, <i>The perception of an object with water is closely dependent on its cyclical nature and the variability of its states of aggregation. Evaporation, freezing, or flow determine whether the space invites reflection on a still surface (Bachelard 1983; Niemczyk 2002), or whether it compels embodied, active interaction and movement (Merleau-Ponty [1945] 2002; Robinson 2019). This relationship shapes architecture as an open relational environment (Bourriaud [1998] 2002).</i> • the tension between the original intention and the contemporary context. <i>Historically, water has symbolized the sacred, facilitating purification and renewal (Eliade [1958] 1997; Baldock 1997; Geva 2023b). In contemporary implementations, this original, archetypal meaning is often replaced by a purely aesthetic function or becomes a political tool (Bishop 2012; Simoniti 2023; Stoltz 2023).</i>	It manifests itself through: • movement and orientation, <i>Water actively directs the viewer's attention and movement, engaging them in an embodied experience of space (Merleau-Ponty [1945] 2002). The movement of water symbolizes life energy (Moore 1994), fons et origo (Baldock 1997). A still water surface creates an atmosphere of existential silence, while violent movement introduces tension and dynamism into the space (Bachelard 1983; Moore 1994; Niemczyk 2002).</i> • light, scale, sound, and atmosphere, <i>Water creates a unique atmosphere through the sensory interplay of sound, scent, and reflected light. This allows one to experience architecture not only with the eyes, but with the whole body (Zumthor 1999; Pallasmaa [1996] 2024), which is crucial for creating meaningful, existential spaces (Merleau-Ponty [1945] 2002; Canetti Yaffe and Langenthal 2025). These physical characteristics constitute a specific atmosphere that enables an emotional experience of space (Zumthor 2006) and its genius loci (Norberg-Schulz 1980).</i> • the activation of memory and reflection. <i>A mirror image in water provides a space for introspection, allowing one to see the surroundings in a different way and to look at oneself; it serves as a repository of dreams and memories (Bachelard 1983) and an existential space (Casey 1987).</i>	It manifests itself through: • thresholds and sequences of entry, <i>Water is an archetype of the transition from the profane to the sacred, preparing the viewer for a shift in the order of experience (Eliade [1958] 1997, [1957] 1959; Geva 2023b).</i> • a change in the rhythm of movement, <i>Water demands attentiveness and focused perception, leading to a deeper experience of space (Merleau-Ponty [1945] 2002; Norberg-Schulz 1971; Robinson 2019). It shapes space, paths, and the pace of movement (Bollnow [1963] 2011).</i> • regulation of access. <i>Water shapes space and naturally creates barriers, marking the boundaries between what is accessible and what is inaccessible (Bollnow [1963] 2011).</i>

4. Case Studies

4.1. Olafur Eliasson, *Green River*. Moss, Norway (1998)/Bremen, Germany (1998)/Iceland (1998)/Los Angeles, USA (1999)/Stockholm, Sweden (2000)/Tokyo, Japan (2001)

Context of creation: A series of unannounced site-specific interventions in public spaces, carried out in several riverside cities around the world between 1998 and 2001. The interventions targeted rivers as seemingly insignificant spaces, often overlooked in the rush

of everyday life, transforming them into sites of heightened awareness within both urban fabric (Figure 1) and natural landscape.



Figure 1. Stockholm. Green River by Olafur Eliasson, courtesy of the artist; Neugerriemschneider, Berlin, and Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York/Los Angeles.

Characteristics of the object: The work consisted of temporary interventions involving the dyeing of rivers an intense fluorescent green, strongly contrasting with their natural or urban surroundings. The duration of each intervention was determined by the natural current and dilution processes. The project provoked extreme emotions and such considerable public concern that it was abandoned in 2001.

Expressive means of water: Water functioned as both a carrier and an indicator of the passage of time, its flow making visible the river's movement patterns and revealing the power and cyclicity of the element. The fluorescent coloring emphasized water's physical transformations through natural dilution, while the visible current introduced strong tension and dynamism into urbanized space, breaking routine perception and creating conditions for heightened experiential engagement.

Narrative: The everyday landscape is transformed into a space of conscious water presence, reminding viewers of the power of the element and shaping an open relational environment. Water actively directs the viewer's attention and movement, engaging them in an embodied experience of space. The visible movement of the river breaks the routine and introduces strong tension and dynamism into the urbanized space. The river constitutes an archetype of transition—its coloring suddenly makes visible the boundary between what is natural and what is cultural, changing the order of experience. Through movement and oriented perception, the work creates a spatial sequence that unfolds from a normalized everyday commute through chromatic rupture to heightened environmental awareness.

Table 2. Narrative analysis of Olafur Eliasson’s Green River.

	the physical traces of time	changes in modes of use and perception	the tension between original intention and contemporary context
Process	-	the everyday landscape transformed into a space of conscious water presence; a power of the element; an open relational environment	the archetypal significance of water becomes a political tool; a controversial manifesto addressing the climate crisis, greenwashing accusations
	movement and orientation	light, scale, sound, and atmosphere	the activation of memory and reflection
Introspection	water actively directing attention and movement, breaking the routine and introducing strong tension into the urbanized space	water creating a specific atmosphere (genius loci) through strong visual impact, enabling an emotional experience of space	-
	thresholds and sequences of entry	a change in the rhythm of movement	regulation of access
Boundary	the river constituting an archetype of transition, suddenly making visible the boundary between the natural and the cultural, changing the order of experience	-	-

Meaning: The archetypal significance of water becomes a political tool. The installation functions as a controversial manifesto addressing the climate crisis, though it has been accused of greenwashing. Water creates a specific atmosphere (genius loci) through strong visual impact, enabling an emotional experience of space. The work recalls the archetype of water as a medium of transformation and as a boundary between the natural and the cultural. Despite human intervention, water remains the foundation of the cosmic order. The project reveals the ambivalence of contemporary artistic practices involving water—interpreted both as an ecological manifesto drawing attention to the human relationship with nature and as problematic due to the necessity of transporting chemicals and complex logistics that raise questions about its actual ecological value.

4.2. *Anish Kapoor, Descension. Kochi, India (2014)/San Gimignano, Italy (2015)/Versailles, France (2015)/New York, USA (2017)*

Context of creation: Temporary installations in several locations around the world between 2014 and 2017. The installations in Versailles and New York were exceptional in terms of context—unlike the earlier versions, these two realizations were situated in open space, and an additional significant aspect was the presence of adjacent bodies of water that counterbalanced Kapoor’s vortex: the artificially created Grand Canal of Versailles (Figure 2), with its vast and reflective surface, and New York’s monumental and calmly flowing East River.

Characteristics of the object: The installations took the form of a water vortex several meters in diameter, with water set in motion, creating a spiral disappearing into a central opening, accompanied by a characteristic low murmur. Seemingly minimalist in formal terms, the artwork is in fact an advanced engineering installation designed to “play” with

the viewer. Kapoor introduced a dynamic “negative space”—the all-consuming black vortex gurgles at the center of a sculptural void, theatrically collapsing into the ground.



Figure 2. Versailles. *Descension* by Anish Kapoor; photograph by Jean-Pierre Dalbéra, licensed under CC BY 2.0.

Expressive means of water: The water vortex affected the viewer both visually and acoustically, while the optical illusion it generated further intensified bodily reactions. Water functions not as a tranquil element but as a force of transformation that attracts and engulfs, drawing viewers into an embodied experience.

Narrative: Water’s continuous spiral movement engages viewers in cyclical observation and repeated encounters with the infinite descent. The vortex commands focused attention and slowed observation, compelling viewers to pause and contemplate, while the hypnotic spiral alters temporal perception and pace of engagement. The swirling water symbolizes the process of the cosmic cycle—birth, death, and rebirth, with the spiral movement referring to one of the oldest cosmological symbols, signifying infinity and eternal return. The central void creates a natural barrier—viewers approach the edge but cannot cross into the consuming darkness, as the abyss marks the absolute limit between accessible surface and inaccessible depth.

Meaning: The characteristic low murmur of the vortex affects viewers acoustically, while the visual depth of the black spiral creates an atmosphere of mystery, arousing awe and fascination. The swirling abyss evokes the archetype of infinite motion and eternal return, with the all-consuming void functioning as a visual metaphor of the unknown, activating primordial responses to depth and transformation. By combining matter, form, and movement, the installation destabilizes the experience of the material world, drawing

viewers into profound contemplation of cosmic processes and the mystery that lies at the threshold of the visible and the unknowable.

Table 3. Narrative analysis of Anish Kapoor’s Descension.

	the physical traces of time	changes in modes of use and perception	the tension between original intention and contemporary context
Process	-	water as an ever-present dynamic form, maintaining constant trans-formation; the vortex’s perpetual motion, engaging viewers with the infinite descent	-
Introspection	movement and orientation water intensifying bodily reactions, attracting attention, directing movement around the central void; the illusion transforming intellectual into embodied experience	light, scale, sound, and atmosphere the low murmur affecting acoustically; the visual depth of the black spiral creating atmosphere of mystery, arousing awe and fasci-nation	the activation of memory and reflection the swirling abyss evoking the archetype of infinite and eternal return; a visual metaphor of the unknown, depth and transformation
Boundary	thresholds and sequences of entry -	a change in the rhythm of movement the vortex attracting focused attention and slowing observation, pausing and contemplating	regulation of access the void creating natural barrier; an absolute limit between accessible surface and inaccessible depth

4.3. Robert Smithson, *Spiral Jetty*. Great Salt Lake, Utah, USA (1970)

Context of creation: A land art installation on the northeastern shore of the Great Salt Lake, with its “bloody” red-colored water reminiscent of a primordial sea, designed in 1970. The spiral jetty is connected to the natural shoreline of the lake. Smithson repeatedly visited the lake shore while working on *Spiral Jetty*, experiencing its space firsthand, and the creative process took the form of a bodily immersion in the landscape (Figure 3). Standing on the shore in the very place where viewers stand today, he experienced it sensorially and translated that experience into the form of the artwork.

Characteristics of the object: The installation consists of a stone spiral formed of rocks, extending into the waters of the lake. The work has been subjected to transformation by natural processes—depending on the water level, the installation is at times fully exposed and at other times submerged. Natural processes and human intervention coexist and interact with one another, with the landscape shaped by both human and natural forces through the stone spiral and the water.

Expressive means of water: Water acts as the dynamizing force—sometimes surrounding the spiral, sometimes flooding it, with fluctuations in the water level naturally altering the perception of the work. The water alternately covers and reveals the work. The living and changing nature of the lake constantly transforms the form and atmosphere of the installation, making each visit slightly different as the reception of the work unfolds through direct experience.



Figure 3. Great Salt Lake. Spiral Jetty by Robert Smithson; photograph by Retis, licensed under CC BY 2.0.

Table 4. Narrative analysis of Robert Smithson's Spiral Jetty.

	the physical traces of time	changes in modes of use and perception	the tension between original intention and contemporary context
Process	transformation by natural processes; water leaving physical traces, inscribing geological time onto the spiral form	the changing nature constantly transforming the form and atmosphere, altering the perception of the installation	-
	movement and orientation	light, scale, sound, and atmosphere	the activation of memory and reflection
Introspection	the spiral form directing bodily movement in a meditative circuit	water as a primordial sea creating a distinctive atmosphere; the scale against the expanse of the lake emphasizing the relationship between the human and the natural	-
	thresholds and sequences of entry	a change in the rhythm of movement	regulation of access
Boundary	-	-	water's levels regulating access to the work; from inaccessible to traversable path; water as a natural barrier determining a way of contemplating the work

Narrative: The work has been subjected to transformation by natural processes, with water leaving physical traces through salt crystallization, erosion of basalt, and accumulation of sediments, inscribing geological time onto the spiral form. The changing nature of the lake constantly transforms the form and atmosphere of the installation. Sometimes the spiral appears as a path extending into the lake, sometimes as a submerged form visible beneath the surface, sometimes disappearing entirely. The spiral form refers to the rhythm of the cosmos, while the water, alternately covering and revealing the work, symbolizes the cyclical nature of time and transformation. The reception of the work unfolds through direct experience. The spiral invites walking along its path, directing bodily movement in a meditative circuit. However, water’s fluctuating levels regulate access to the work—when submerged, the spiral becomes inaccessible for walking, transforming from a traversable path to a visual object.

Table 5. Narrative analysis of Random International’s Rain Room.

	the physical traces of time	changes in modes of use and perception	the tension between original intention and contemporary context
Process	-	-	technology subduing a natural element raising questions about visual spectacle versus enriching reflection
	movement and orientation	light, scale, sound, and atmosphere	the activation of memory and reflection
Introspection	movement through the space directly determining where rain falls and where it stops; exploratory navigation testing the boundaries of the sensor system	the sound and visual of rain creating immersive atmosphere; water engaging the viewer on multiple levels, enabling tactile awareness and bodily presence	-
	thresholds and sequences of entry	a change in the rhythm of movement	regulation of access
Boundary	presence as a threshold between dry gallery and controlled deluge; viewer transforming from passive observer to active participant	rain demanding attentiveness and deliberate pacing, creating careful, measured engagement rather than casual passage through space	-

Meaning: Smithson experienced the space sensorially and translated that experience into the form of the artwork, creating conditions for viewers to follow his embodied encounter with the landscape. The “bloody” red-colored water reminiscent of a primordial sea creates a distinctive atmosphere, while the monumental scale of the spiral against the vast expanse of the Great Salt Lake emphasizes the relationship between human intervention and natural immensity. The natural barrier of water determines whether viewers can physically enter the spiral or must contemplate it from the shore. The iconic spiral, formed of stones and salt in the waters of the Great Salt Lake, can be interpreted as a contemporary inscription of a cosmogonic myth, with water functioning as an active participant in the artwork, a co-creator of both the artistic and the cosmological process.

4.4. *Random International, Rain Room. London, Great Britain (2012)/New York, USA (2013)/Shanghai, China (2015)/Los Angeles, USA (2015)/Sharjah, UAE (2018)/Busan, South Korea (2019)/Melbourne, Australia (2022)*

Context of creation: A series of temporary installations in several art institutions from 2012, including MoMA in New York and the Sharjah Art Museum in the UAE, where, since 2018, it has been part of the permanent exhibition. The installation was situated within gallery spaces, creating controlled rain environments indoors.

Characteristics of the object: Controlled rain within the gallery space responded to the movement of the viewer through an advanced system of sensors, halting the streams of water at the point where the viewer stood. Water was employed as a natural element harnessed through a precisely regulated process. The entirety of this relationship—water, technology, and viewer—constitutes the work, in which the viewer, engaging in interaction with the installation, becomes an indispensable component (Figure 4).



Figure 4. London. Rain Room by Random International; photograph by Random International licensed under CC BY 2.0.

Expressive means of water: Rain subjected to technological control loses its unpredictable character, becoming a sensory experience. Water used in the installation grounds the work in the physical world, engaging the viewer on multiple levels, not only through the sense of sight. The streams of water create a dynamic environment that responds directly to human presence and movement.

Narrative: The work has been subjected to transformation by natural processes, with water leaving physical traces through salt crystallization, erosion of basalt, and accumulation of sediments, inscribing geological time onto the spiral form. The living and changing nature of the lake constantly transforms the form and atmosphere of the installation. Sometimes the spiral appears as a path extending into the lake, sometimes as a submerged form visible beneath the surface, sometimes disappearing entirely. The spiral form refers to the rhythm of the cosmos, while the water, alternately covering and revealing the work, symbolizes the cyclical nature of time and transformation. The reception of the work unfolds through direct experience. The spiral invites walking along its path, directing bodily movement in a meditative circuit. However, water's fluctuating levels regulate access to the work—when submerged, the spiral becomes inaccessible for walking, transforming from a traversable path to a visual object.

Meaning: The entirety of the relationship—water, technology, and viewer—constitutes a posthumanist performance in which the boundaries between nature, machine, and human are blurred, and the experience of art becomes the result of their cooperation. Water employed as a natural element harnessed through a precisely regulated process has become a symbol of the dominance of intellect over nature. Technology employed to subdue a natural element raises questions about visual spectacle versus enriching reflection, yet water grounds the experience in physical reality, engaging the viewer on multiple levels and preventing the work from becoming mere simulation detached from embodied presence. The sound of falling rain and the visual spectacle create an immersive atmosphere that situates the work at the intersection of elemental power and human agency.

5. Discussion

The analysis of examples demonstrates that water functions as a multidimensional medium in contemporary art, combining phenomenological, symbolic, and existential aspects. Although theoretical analysis identified three distinct categories—process, introspection, and boundary—the narrative analysis of specific works revealed that none could be confined to a single category. Each installation engages all three conditions simultaneously, though with different emphases. This suggests that water is a medium with wide-ranging influence, whose power derives precisely from its ability to operate across multiple experiential and symbolic dimensions simultaneously. As Geva notes, water functions as “*material culture that transforms nature and the [...] building onto a set of beliefs*” (Geva 2023a, p. 2). These “*intangible virtues*” (Geva 2023a, p. 1) of water make it particularly resistant to categorical containment. Its presence transcends the context of individual works, embedding itself within cross-cultural systems of meaning that shape the understanding of the world, nature, and the human place within the cosmos (Bachelard 1983; Eliade [1958] 1997; Hani 2007; Cassirer 2021). At the same time, art, as a domain of the formation and revelation of meaning, continually refers to the dimension of the sacred—even when it does so indirectly or in a secularized form. In this sense, water, as present in artistic practices, becomes a medium that enables contact with what transcends everyday life and material experience, evoking primordial structures of meaning rooted in the experience of the sacred (Otto 1958; Eliade [1957] 1959).

The processual dimension shows water as a carrier of time and transformation. In Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*, water inscribes geological time onto matter through salt crystallization and erosion; the installation becomes a living record of environmental processes. But the work simultaneously operates introspectively. The red-colored water evokes primordial forces and creates a distinctive atmosphere. Fluctuating water levels regulate access and transform the installation from a traversable path to a visual object, working as a boundary (Bollnow [1963] 2011). Kapoor's *Descension* uses water's perpetual motion

to embody cosmological cycles, since “water symbolizes the primal substance from which all forms come and to which they will return” (Eliade [1958] 1997, p. 188). Yet the vortex also functions introspectively, generating awe and fascination (Otto 1958) that compel deeper contemplation while creating a boundary—viewers approach the edge but cannot cross into the void. The processual condition also exposes tensions between original intention and contemporary context. Eliasson’s *Green River*, conceived as an ecological manifesto, was accused of greenwashing because the chemical transport and logistics contradicted its message (Bishop 2012). This shows how water’s archetypal significance—historically functioning as sacred purification (Eliade [1958] 1997; Geva 2023a)—can be instrumentalized in ways that undermine its symbolic meaning.

The introspective condition demonstrates how water creates atmospheres that engage the whole body. It operates on the sensory level and “has the potential to be not only useful and beautiful, but also existentially meaningful” (Canetti Yaffe and Langenthal 2025, p. 15), particularly in the contemporary built environment, often dominated by tendencies aimed at visual effect while neglecting the other senses (Pallasmaa [1996] 2024). Random International’s *Rain Room* exemplifies this through controlled sensory immersion—the sound of falling rain, the visual spectacle of parting streams, and the awareness of potential contact ground the experience in physical reality. Yet the use of advanced technology in the artwork entails the risk of prioritizing visual effect over genuinely enriching reflection. An example of this is provided by works employing augmented reality, where human interaction with the artwork is only a simulation detached from real, embodied experience (Schuld 2023). In this context, water used in artistic works becomes the element grounding them in the physical world, engaging the viewer on multiple levels, not only through the sense of sight. The introspective dimension appears across all analyzed works, an aspect of water described by Moore as “the amazing ability to represent realities above and beyond itself, calling to mind something altogether larger” (Moore 1994, p. 49).

The boundary condition shows water’s role as a threshold between different orders of experience. Eliasson’s fluorescent intervention makes visible the boundary between the natural and the cultural, disrupting routine perception and demanding heightened environmental awareness. But this work simultaneously operates introspectively and processually, transforming everyday landscape into a space of conscious water presence. Kapoor’s vortex creates a boundary through the consuming void yet also engages introspection through an atmosphere of mystery. In *Spiral Jetty*, water regulates access and marks transitions, carries geological time, and creates a contemplative atmosphere. The *Rain Room* positions human presence as a threshold, though the installation equally emphasizes sensory introspection and raises processual questions about technology’s relationship to nature. This recalls water’s archetypal role as a passage from profane to sacred (Eliade [1957] 1959), though in contemporary practice this boundary often operates more ambiguously.

In public space, the use of water is increasingly associated with criticism concerning greenwashing—a phenomenon in which artistic and architectural projects “appear environmentally friendly, without meaningfully reducing its environmental impact” (Williams 2024, p. 2). In this sense, water becomes a medium with a double face: capable of mobilizing reflection on ecology while simultaneously exposing the instrumental use of environmental narratives. This tension is evident across the analyzed works. Eliasson’s *Green River* sought to mobilize reflection on environmental degradation, yet its execution raised questions about whether the ecological symbolism was superficially instrumentalized rather than authentically embodied (Bishop 2012; Simoniti 2023). *Spiral Jetty* is not exempt from analogous critique. Its ecological legitimacy has been explicitly questioned, with the observation that tons of stone and earth were displaced into the Great Salt Lake, making the work as destructive as it was monumental (Marjanić 2024). This suggests that the boundary

between authentic ecological engagement and its instrumentalization is a question that each work poses anew.

The discussion on greenwashing thus reveals a broader problem: how to balance the symbolism and aesthetics of water in art and architecture with its real impact on the environment and society. Here, water appears not only as a symbol of purification and life but also as a test of the credibility of artistic and architectural practices in the age of the climate crisis. It is precisely ecologically responsible creative practices that establish the authenticity and credibility of water as a symbolic medium.

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Note

- ¹ The original text, translated into English by the author: “Związki osad i budowli z wodą są trwałe i charakteryzują prawie wszystkie kultury świata.”

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