

Liquid Bodies

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# Liquid Bodies

on the Ritual of Bathing in the Public Space



Introduction	6
1. Bodies	10
1.1. Public bathing	12
1.2. Hygiene at a discount	13
1.3. Senses	14
1.4. Nakedness	16
2. Limit	20
3. Movement	22
2.1. Cyclical time	24
2.2. Choreography	25
Conclusion	28
Bibliography	34

# Introduction

The bath is a place, in which human body comes into the shape-shifting dialog with its liquid surroundings. The nearness of the liquid matter which surrounds the body while bathing brings the feeling of safety and intimacy. The water gives a sensation of weightlessness and freedom where one becomes detached from the daily struggles and at the same time attached to the physical matter around, becoming aware of the body's existence.

In the ritual of bathing not only the presence of water that surrounds us but also the act of being engaged in the 'doing' makes us forget about the passage of time. In the modernity of the linear time, we are engaged more with the meaningless routines or private bodily repetitions and less with the meaningful public actions which require focus of both mind and body – the rituals.



Fig. 1: Parrs, M. Men playing chess in the thermal baths of Budapest in Hungary. Source: [<https://www.ignant.com/2017/02/07/martin-parrs-unique-point-of-view/>].

Rituals are the meaningful movements of bodies performing actions, captured in the temporal space and temporal time, repeating referring to the cyclical time of nature. According to the etymologic dictionary the original concept of ritus (ritual) may be related to the visible order, the proper, natural and true structure of cosmic, worldly, human events (Etymologic dictionary, 2018). Therefore, the ritual is related to human actions connected to the rhythms of nature, to the cosmic events of the world, such as raising sun or the moon's influence on wave movements - events which can be experienced when we are outdoors, part of which is public space.

The ritual of bathing, which used to bring people together, disappeared during the industrial revolution, when bathing moved from the outdoors, indoors, but also from a village to a city. It is essential for public spaces to be able to accommodate new urban and inclusive activities, such as traditions or rituals, which help people identify with their cities (Mackic, 2017). Bathing ritual could once again bring private activities into the public realm, transforming routines into rituals. The bath could become a catalyst for social experiments and emancipations, breaking down old social constructs.

*What could be the meaning of bathing for the public space?*

The following essay is based on literature from diverse fields ranging from philosophy, anthropology, sociology to architecture and design. In the following pages, I will submerge you into the social ritual of bathing in public spaces and its many aspects concerning the **bodies**: social borders, hygiene, senses, nakedness; and the **limit** which causes **movement**:



choreographed actions of the ritual of bathing.



Fig. 2: Painting of Antoine Bastard of Burgundy depicting Medieval tradition of bathing while eating. Source: [http://wyborcza.pl/alehistoria/1,121681,17701351,Wanna\\_\\_luksus\\_dla\\_wybranych\\_i\\_gniazdo\\_rozpusty.html](http://wyborcza.pl/alehistoria/1,121681,17701351,Wanna__luksus_dla_wybranych_i_gniazdo_rozpusty.html)]

# Bodies

*My memories of bathing come back to my childhood, when bathing was a ritual. I was bathing once a week, not more. It was enough. In the bathroom I was never alone. I was taking a bath together with my sister while our grand-ma, grandfather or mum were helping us to bath. Growing older, I was becoming more and more aware of my naked body to after a while change the rituals into my private routines.*

The ritual of bathing engages the body in the act of doing. The body movements under the pressure of water become heavier and slower. Our senses sharpen, so the bath becomes a sensual experience rather than hygienic percept, getting us closer to ourselves and our surroundings.





Fig. 3: Edgar Degas, Woman in a Tube, 1883, Pastel on paper. Source: [<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/degas-woman-in-a-tub-t03563>]

## 1. 1. Public bathing

In the ritual of bathing human body is naked, there is nothing more to hide. Fears and feelings are exposed. The bath is a place of private and public fantasies; it brings hidden desires and impulses to the surface. It is an area of public action and display, a continuous parade of personalities and bodies, a stage for a cyclical dialect between exhibitionism and spectatorship (Koolhaas, 1972 as cited in Lucarelli, 2011).

“A bathhouse is a place in which social barriers melt, of reconciliation and vulnerability, where we take off the memories of daily life together with our clothes. A bathhouse is a “space of anti-conflict, anti-competition and anti-hierarchy.” (Toivonen, 2015 as cited in Withers, 2018)

Once a place for community life - social, cultural and political exchange, from Roman Baths and Hamman to Russian Banya baths were places for both relaxation and business deals, eroticism and crime. In the middle ages during weddings people gathered by the table to eat, drink and discuss while being partially submerged in the hot water (Rudofksy, 1980). (Fig. 2.) In the era of religious rules bathing together was more common than it is today.

Nowadays the bath is identified with a solitary imprisonment. With the access to warm water, spread of private bathrooms and strict approach towards sanitations, bathing became more focused on hygiene and less on cultural or sensual enrichment (Twigg, 2001). The scenes depicted by famous painters present how the communal activity of bathing became an almost exclusively private ritual. (Fig. 3)

## 1. 2. Hygiene at a discount

*"Częste mycie skraca życie - skóra się zdziera I człowiek umiera." My grandfather repeated this sentence every time I was about to take a bath. Translated from polish, it means: if you will bath constantly, you are going to remove your skin and finally die. In the western culture people pay a lot of attention to cleanliness. Dirty thoughts, garbage or natural odor of the body are being swiped under clean carpets.*

Contrary to a common belief, cleanliness is not inborn in man. The rules of cleanliness are cultivated and taught by way of persuasion or parental rules. Ritualistic laws, rather than medical precepts, traditionally promoted man's habit of purifying his body (Rudofsky, 1980).

The new culture of cleanliness rests on wealth and the development of industrial societies that produces hot water, soap and bathroom facilities. The body receives a new significance, in which higher levels of performance are demanded of it, being clean has become a necessary element in social inclusion (Twigg, 2001). Intensification of bathing and washing reflects wider social shifts as growing individualism and separation in relation to the body.

Today we live in the times of dry and sterile bodies, where dirt and filth causes terror. We fear infections, so we isolate ourselves to feel safe. In order to avoid the fluids to mix we set our boundaries clear. While in fact the border between you and not you does not exist. Only a few percent of cells in our bodies are DNA cells, the rest are bacteria, viruses, fungi and microbiota. We share our bodies with others, we constantly change and mix (Pacewicz, 2018).

### 1. 3. Senses

In the sensory experience of bathing, we can recognize the porosity of skin. Senses allow us the outside to enter the inside of our bodies through the (all wet) openings: porous skin, eyes, ears, vagina, and mouth. The experiences of the wetness, fluid and bodily experiences refer to the porous relationship we have with the space around us. Bathing is about the thermal sensations that heighten our sense of awareness destabilizing the mood (Koren, 1996). The experience of extreme opposite temperatures hot to cold or cold to hot is refreshing. The acts of bathing in a cold brook or taking a sauna among friends or even strangers are a way of getting to know each other. Through enhancement of our senses, we are able to appreciate the body, which is engaged in the surroundings. The sensed bodies are in symbiosis with the form around them, thus bodies are in symbiosis with bodies.

“And the toilet is the perfect place to listen to the chirping of insects or the song of the birds, to view the moon, or to enjoy any of those poignant moments that mark the change of the seasons.” (Tanizaki, 2001)

In the *Praise of Shadows* Japanese philosopher and poet Jun'ichirō Tanizaki writes about the Japanese toilets, which in comparison to the white Western toilets are dark and intimate. Compared to western culture who regard the toilet as unclean, Japanese transformed the most unsanitary room of the house into a place of elegance, fully filled with associations of the nature's beauties. The Western world, in its strive

for progress, is continuously searching for light, while Japan's subtle and subdued forms represent an appreciation of shadow. Tanizaki describes the toilet as a sort of ritualistic place in which senses play an important role. It is a completely quiet place of certain degree of dimness, in which one can hear the sound of the softly falling rain.

The bath is a place to escape from the the mechanical and technological world. Animistic, earthly, sensual baths, are created by geologic processes. Secluded, private environments, with womb-like tiny entrances described in the book undersigning the bath by artist and writer Leonard Koren, speak to our primal needs: when we have been safe swimming in our mother's womb. We came to this world through a narrow space. The liquid changed into air – as our first sensory experience.

Koren describes intimate spaces by the use of the Japanese term wabi-sabi. It manifests itself in things darker, more obscure and quiet. Wabi-sabi things are small, and inward-oriented. They tell us: get closer, touch, relate. They inspire a reduction of physic distance between one thing and another thing: between people and things (Koren, 2008). Being close to things is the fundamental aspect of human experience. Experience of nearness may be appreciated through the emotional familiarity of things (Sharr, 2007).

#### 1. 4. Nakedness

Being naked brings us back to our primitive nature and fully unites us with the space around us. The uncovered body soaks in all the ingredients of the surroundings, being the closest and the most responsive to its environment.

*Naked bodies are a common ingredient of Masuria landscapes – region famous for its 2000 lakes in Northern Poland. During summer holidays, I went there on canoe trips. Besides Polish people, the only other culture I have met was the German one. Provided the favorable weather conditions, German people were bathing naked. This led me to the discovery of the German Nacktultuur (free body movement), which refers to a network of private clubs promoting nudism as a way of linking the body closely to nature, giving it a freer presence in the great outdoors. In Poland, however, the view of a naked body is striking (Toepfer, 1997).*

Images of naked human bodies are the source of the most powerful and disturbing emotions. Bodies, most of the time hidden by clothes, hide emotions, and desires, consciousness, memories, mind and soul. The naked body is often used in art to make a powerful social or political statement. Portraying people in painting as nude emphasizes their vulnerability and humanity, thus the naked man is an unarmed man at the mercy of the elements. Because of its emotional connotations, nude figures has been often used in art to express ideals of female or male bodies. The contemporary artists confront the viewer with all the sexuality, discomfort and anxiety that the unclothed body may express.



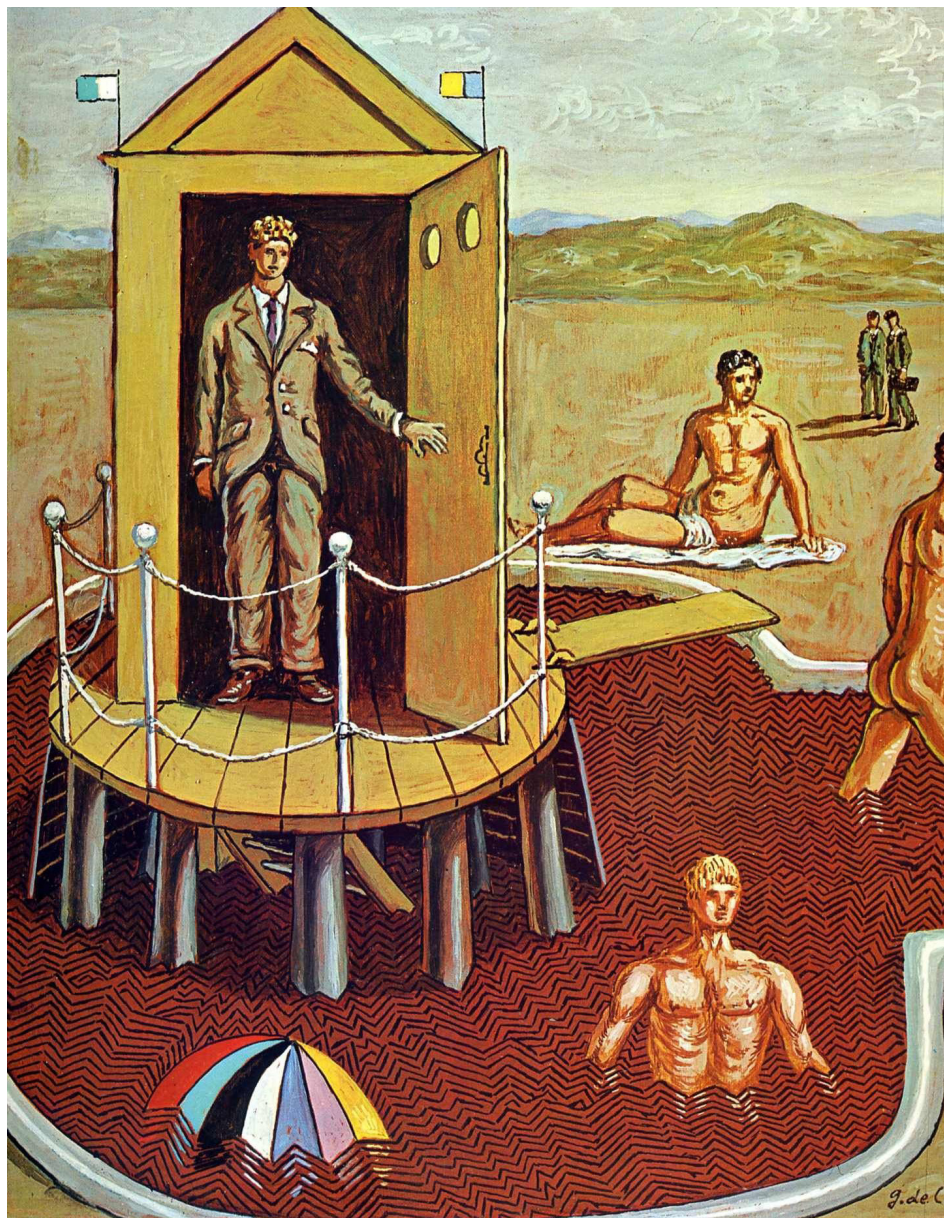


Fig. 4: Giorgio de Chirico, *The Mysterious Bath*, 1938. Source: [<https://wanford.com/the-mysterious-bath-1938-by-giorgio-de-chirico>].

The naked body can be even more striking when placed next to the clothed one. In the action of clothing we discover our nakedness. Contemporary, surrealist painter Chirico in the painting *Mysterious Bath* (Fig. 4) portrayed naked people swimming in the stream next to the fully clothed people standing on the dry land. The clothed and unclothed figures of men seem to be different species of the same animal. The clothed men are majestic, standing above the naked man submerged in the water. (Velissiotis, 2018). The little cabins are the in-between spaces for men transforming from one species to another. The painting represents men in two states and the architectural space in which they undergo the transformation.

The cultural clash between the clothed and unclothed bodies was also used by KOSMOS architects in their transformation of public space in the historical city center of Basel. (Fig. 5). They have re-purposed the fountain into a place to bath. Thanks to that intervention two species of humans meet to deal with the notion of what is allowed, making a city more inclusive for the diversity of human activities.



Fig. 5: Kosmos Architects, Thermae Urbano. Source: [<https://k-s-m-s.com/projects/HJYLvef8W>].



# Limit

British cultural anthropologist Victor Turner best known for his work on rituals, described the ritual as a transition space, which marks a person's transformation from one status to another. In his essay *Liminal to Liminoid, in Play, Flow, and Ritual: an Essay in Comparative Symbology* (2018) Turner describes the outcome of the ritual's liminality, where relations in between people discontinue and the social order turns upside down.

Additionally to the ritual's transformational liminality, the space in which the ritual take place has liminal characteristics. Therefore a space and an action are intertwined. The spatial aspects of the ritual's liminality were studied by an architect and educator Pier Vittorio Aureli. In his book *Rituals and Walls* he states that the movements of bodies performing rituals can be enacted only by imposing the limit.

We could understand the limit as a stoppage in the form of either a freestanding object or a wall. The body, suspended in the spatial enclosure, experiences the moment as exceptional and temporal interruption of the everyday. In this moment the rituals superimpose the routines.

In the ritual, the body movement is manifested through the liminality of the ritual space, such as a church or a paradise. The church, an enclosed religious space, is organized to ritualize, choreograph and finally control a collective body. The church's monumentality as a building distinguishes the ritual from everyday activities. Because of this separation, the rituality of the sacred is limited within the space.

On the contrary to the concepts of medieval life, which were represented by the geometrical and simple ritualistic forms, today's society of constant change, could be represented by the temporal interventions and adaptable spaces, in which functions constantly change. Philosopher Zygmunt Bauman uses the concept of Liquid Modernity to explain the changeability and temporality of modern society:

"Liquids, unlike solids, cannot hold their shape; they are always ready to change. For fluids, the flow of time counts more than the space they occupy. The space occupied by solids are filled in for just a moment." (Bauman, 2007)

The ritual of bathing, despite its liquid form, solidifies actions which brings a feeling of stability, needed ritualization of life in the temporal times, where everything changes causing fears. Instead of looking towards a progress one can enjoy the presence and the stability of the action, which repeats cyclically over the course of years.

# Movement

The practice of the landscape rather than its design on the ground leads to an awareness of its form. The ritual use of spaces allow people to engage in processes that contribute to a social change. Rituals engage bodily movements in a limited space, which is experienced as the temporal interruption of the everyday activities.

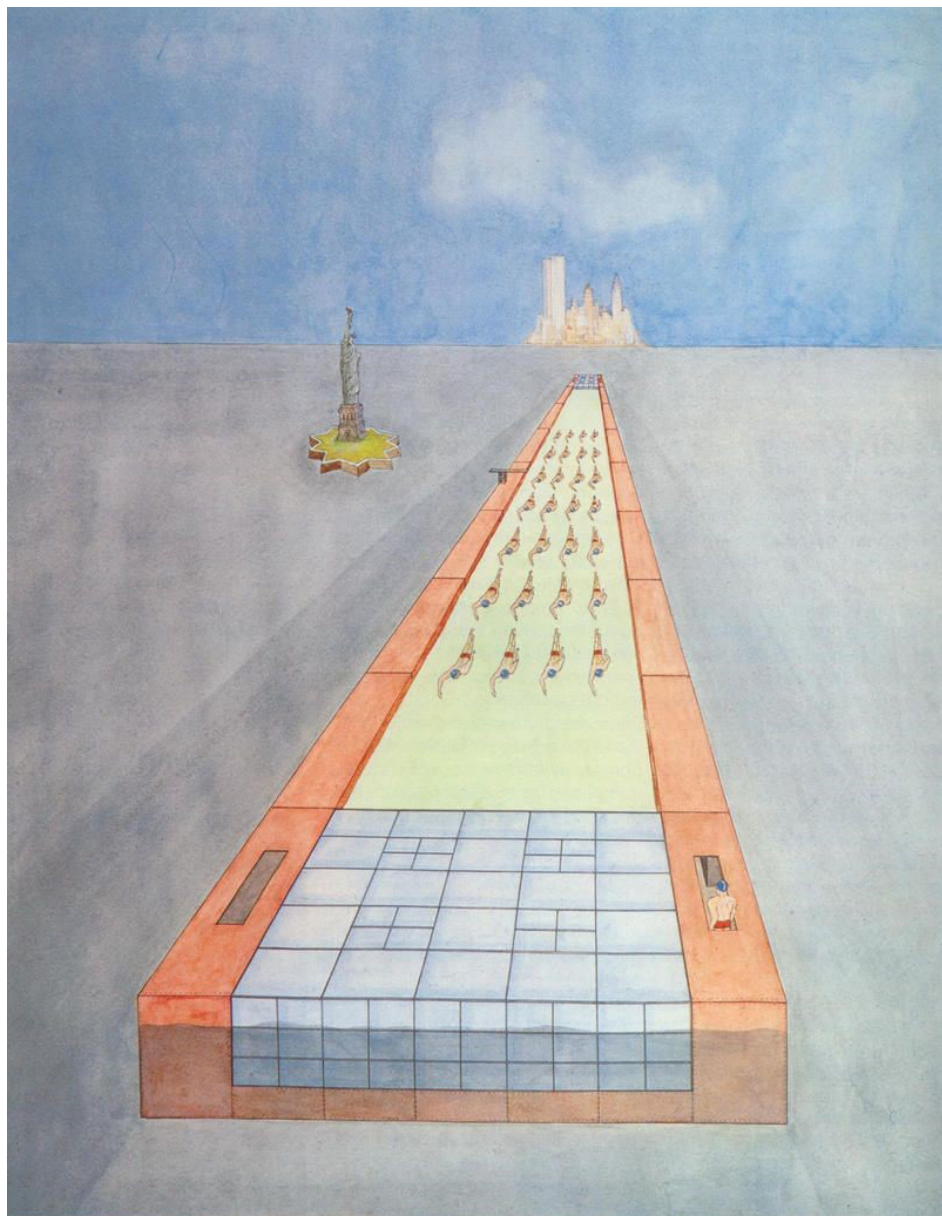


Fig. 6: Rem Koolhaas, The Story of the Pool. Source: Koolhaas, R. Delirious New York, USA, The Monacelli Press, 1994.

## 2. 1. Cyclical time

“Rituals are a form of collective dance when one forgets about oneself and becomes part of nature dancing with its rhythms.” (Halrpin, 1995)

This collective dance is related to the cyclical movements of nature, such as the repetitive movement of the Earth around the Sun. These cosmic repetitions, as defined by sociologist and philosopher Henry Lefebvre, are rhythms. One can experience bodily rhythms (respiration, heartbeat etc.) only in a cyclical time. The cyclical originates in the body, in the cosmos, in nature. Only the non-mechanical movement can have a rhythm. While mechanical, numerical, quantitative rhythms superimpose themselves on the natural rhythms of the body (Lefebvre, 2004).

In the rituals the seasonal rhythms of the environment harmonize with the activities of human community (Bell, 2009). The cyclical time of nature can be experienced by us in the ritual of bathing, when the sensual and emotional stimulation is heightened, because no one can adjust the temperature of neither the air nor the water.

Changes through seasons accommodate diverse bathing rituals. Water used for bathing outdoors changes from liquid to solid, from warm to cold. In wintertime people cut out an opening in the surface of the ice to take a ritual bath to welcome a New Year. Every season has different rituals. Thanks to that, people can reconnect with the cosmos and the changing weather conditions, acknowledging the presence of time and nature.



On the contrary to the cyclical time of the rhythmical movements of the body there are mechanical body movements restricted by the linear time. The mechanical swimming pool (Fig. 6) illustrated by architect Rem Koolhaas in *Delirious New York* (Koolhaas, 1994), exemplifies the automatic repetition of human body movements in the design of the movable swimming pool. Architects decided to use the pool as their escape to freedom. They had to swim towards the direction they wanted to escape from. Through the method of repetitive movements, they could go anywhere in the world where there was water. For Koolhaas, the portable metal swimming pool fueled by the human bodies is a symbol of Soviet man: strong, mechanical, going forward towards the never-ending linearity of time.

## 2. 2. Choreography

Choreography is a practice of designing sequences of movements of bodies. Choreography is exhibited as a pattern of movement in space, which defines the interaction between the individual body and its surroundings.

For the dancer and choreographer Anna Halprin the ritual's goal was to heal people through the re-union with the environment. In her book about the ritual dance she describes the long tradition of using ritual to affect the world. In the traditional cultures, rituals used to serve people to gather and unify in order to confront the challenges of their existence (Halprin, 1995).

Anna Halprin had a big influence on her husband Lawrence Halprin, who was a landscape architect focusing his work on choreographing people's movements in urban spaces. In the book *City Choreographer*, he explained the choreography of healthy public life of cities through rituals, which have social significance and imply performative and collective action. His designs focusses on processes that generate form, rather than on form that generates processes. (Fig. 12). Halprin searched for archetypal and primitive forms or resources fundamental to all citizens - which he discovered in nature and human ritual. He listed our primal human needs that provide a deeper foundation for human rituals:

“Example of a basic need is water, as it links us to our sources (...). Water as part of the made landscape relates us in profound ways to the origins of our beginnings. Its sounds and shapes call up deep emotional responses in us.” (Halprin, as cited in Hirsch, 2014)

Public spaces promote the expression of human and social actions. When a space acts as a ritual space: its temporality is reduced to specific moments that frame the experience. Rituals seem to specify at the same time sense of space, temporality and self-identity (Conan, 2007). The practice of the landscape rather than its design on the ground, leads to an awareness of its form. The ritual's use of spaces allow participants to engage in processes that contribute to social or cultural change.

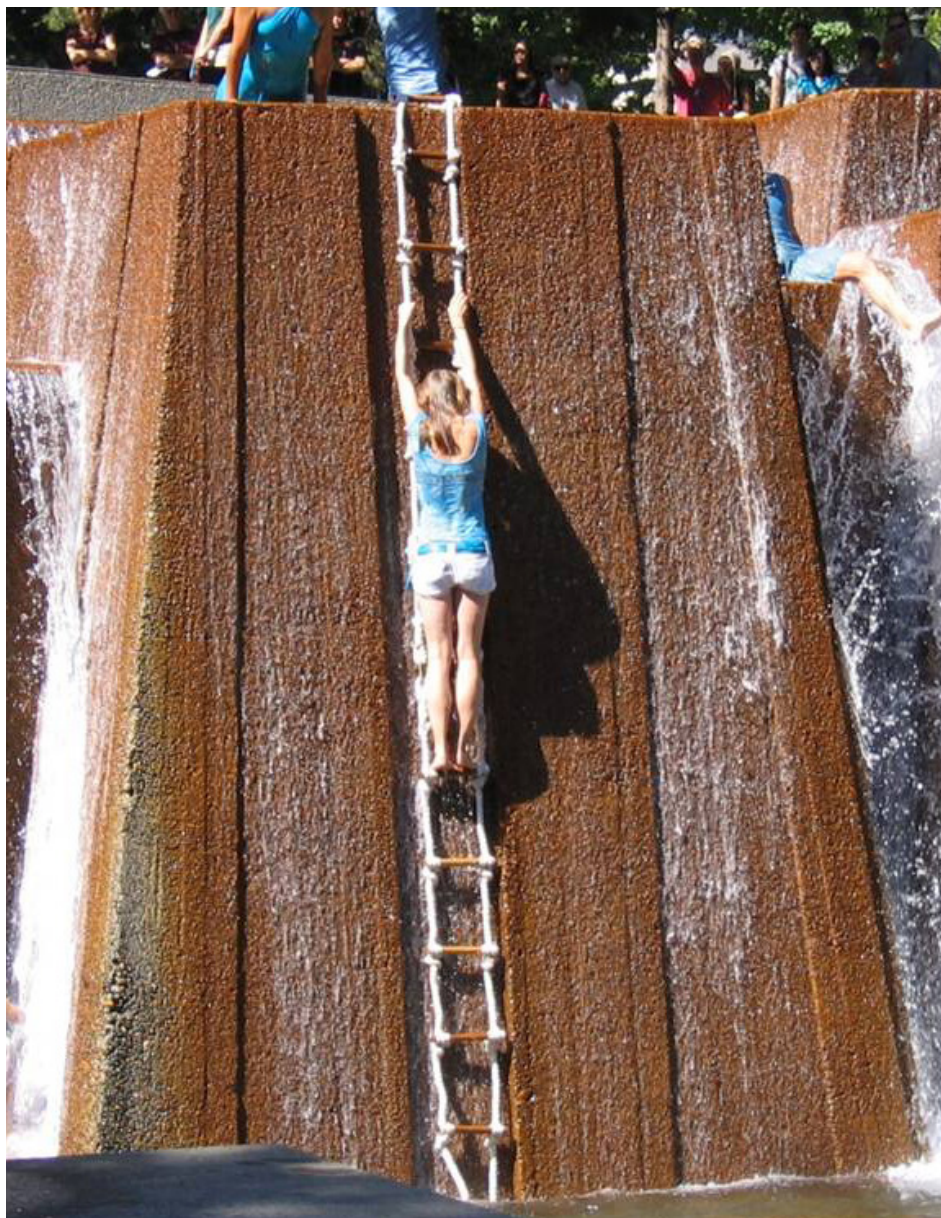


Fig. 7. Randy Gragg. *The City Dance of Lawrence and Anna Halprin*, Auditorium Forecourt Fountain, Portland Open Space Sequence, 2008. Source: [<http://grahamfoundation.org/grantees/87-the-city-dance-of-lawrence-and-anna-halprin-and-where-the-revolution-began>].

# Conclusions

*What could be the meaning of bathing for the public space?*

Understanding the meaning of rituals for public space is essential in the creation of inclusive and engaging in ‘doing’ cities, which instead of causing fear of the constant change, bring citizens into the action. The rituals are important in coping with the fear of chaos and provide the feeling of security and stability in hostile environments (Berghaus, 1998). Rituals contribute to the sense of identity and awareness of oneself, other bodies and the space around us. In cities affected by war or cities that change rapidly, memories and identities need to be re-discovered.

The conclusion of the essay is the set of the necessary elements to build a bath in a public space with. A place of possibilities to meet one another, where people from different

cultures, naked and exposed, meet on equal grounds.

*Limit.* A space in which the ritual of bathing can be enacted has to be enclosed. It is like a church: you enter another dimension, which makes you aware of your surroundings. When you are aware of the limit of a place you can feel safe, the space is all around you. Well framed spaces in the public realm cause responses in people. We start moving and it leads to the sense of the identity and belonging. The actions enacted in the space of the bath are as follows:

*Meeting.* In the ritual of bathing we get naked, we take off our masks. In the nakedness we are all the same. There is nothing more to hide. We get emotional, we show our souls to the others. The bath could become a catalyst for social experiments and emancipations, breaking down old social constructs. Public space should be the stage for community life, where we can perform, sharing and discussing our dreams, fears or desires. In the bath we exchange the gossips and solidify friendships. We discover that people from our cities share the same fears, we finally meet our neighbours.

*Moving.* We are engaged in the act of doing. We bath together with one another. Floating on the surface of the water, we forget about the daily troubles. Through dance we move on, overcoming our shared fears and become attached to the places we dance in. Through the repetition we solidify our memories. We meet in the familiar places, which bring our memories to the surface. We repeat our rituals cyclically, aligned to the rhythms of nature. Through movement we start identifying ourselves with our surroundings.



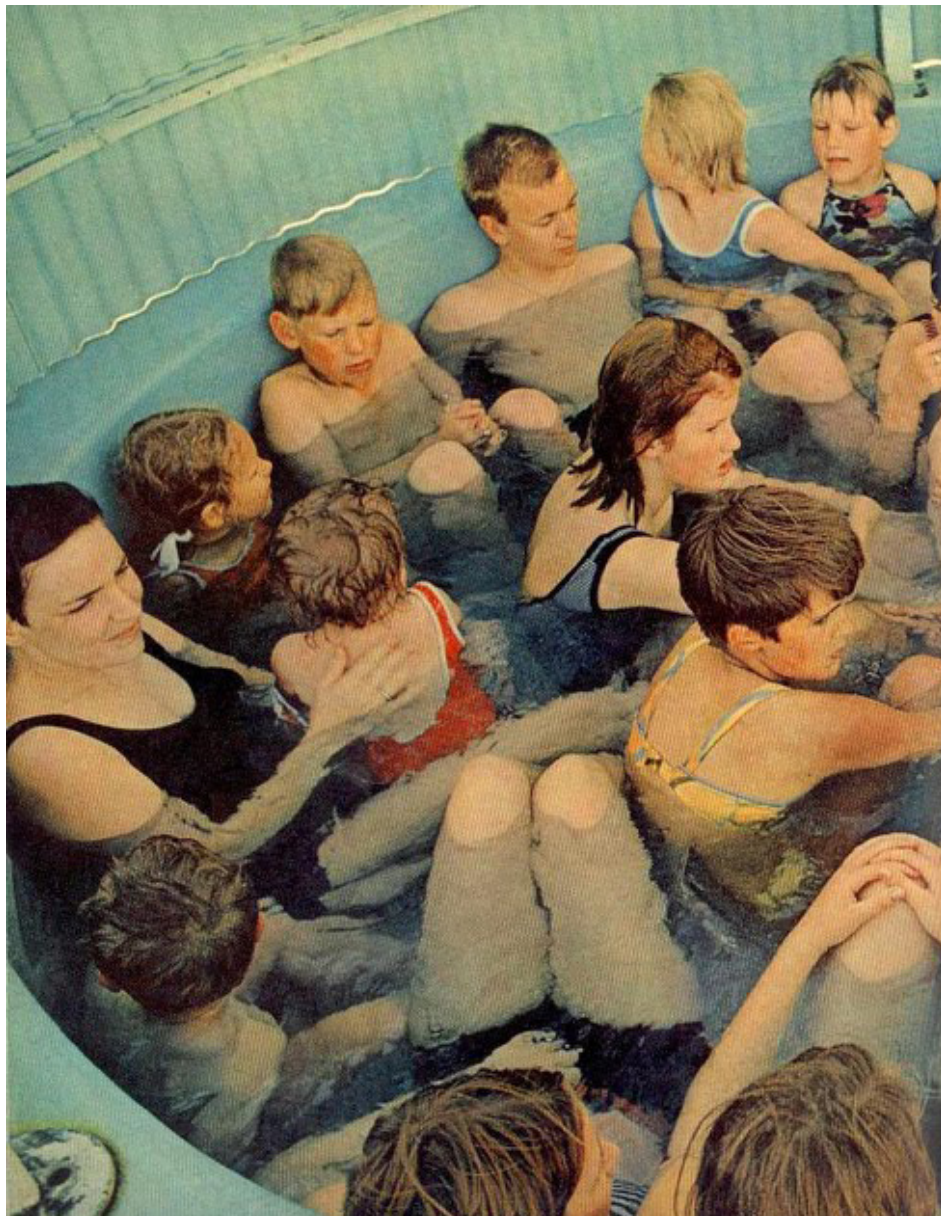
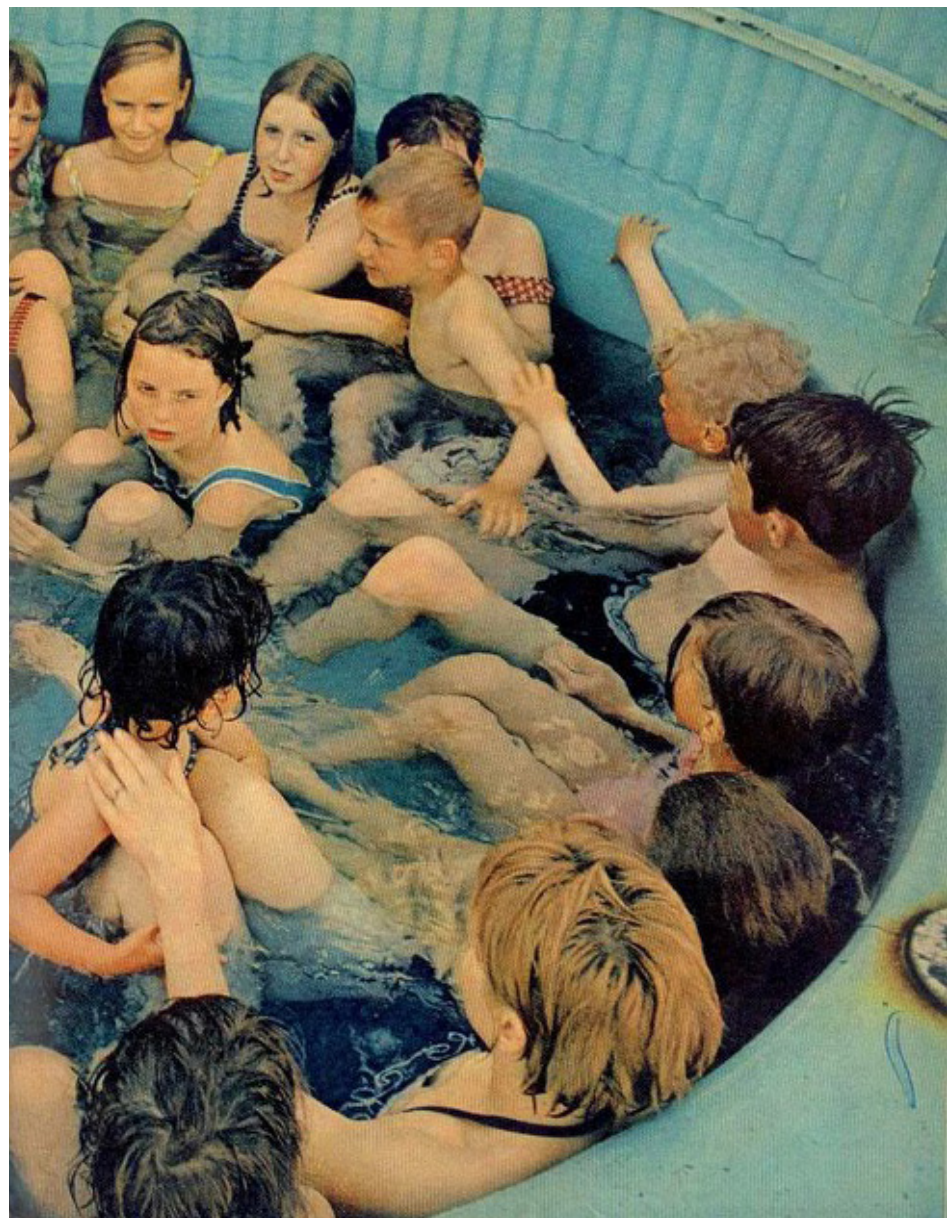


Fig. 8: picture from National Geographic August 1969. Source: [<http://reynoldsretro.blogspot.com/2007/12/panda-bear-person-pitch-observer-music.html>].









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