

WET

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Cover of Wet Magazine, September/October, 1978
IMAGE COURTESY OF LEONARD KOREN

An interview with Leonard Koren

by Christie Pearson

WET

glug!

glug!

It used to be
"drinks at seven on the terrace," or
even "dancing til dawn by the pool," but nowadays
with Los Angeles' life-threatening air quality,
those in the know
have taken the plunge into smogless pools.
Deep water
cocktail parties (see photos) are all the
rage among health-conscious trendsetters, with
marketing analysts predicting a boom market with
the middle class through the 80's.

Initiates and analysts both concur that "the deep
six happy hour," is the social watering hole of the
future, as the toxic skies of L.A. augment and
descend poolward. "Staying afloat will not be
enough
protection," says one deep water party doyenne.
Afficionados cite other benefits of the "deep six
drink," such as:

1. No smoking.
2. Clothes get freshened-up.
3. All drinks
are watered-down
and
4. supercilious
chatter and
banter is kept
to a
minimum.

—Ann Bardach

BOBBY

LAMM, 36,

Songwriter

and piano

player in the group
Chicago.

Born: Brooklyn, New
York.

First hour upon
awakening: I can't
remember.

Diet: I have two diets.
On the road: whatever
room service will bring
me after twelve at night.
Usually it's something

like onion soup gratinee/
club sandwich with
potato chips and old
milk. At home: Varied
but sometimes I
chocolate out on Hagen
Dazs Chocolate-
Chocolate Chip.
Exercise: Run, tennis and
snow skiing.
Clothes: I like to express
myself with clothes that
help me to feel better. It

might be a real miserable
day out so I'll dress a
little crazier and flashier.
But a lot of times I'll
just dress to fit the
occasion. If I'm going to
dinner with some
conservative people I'll
wear a pin stripe suit
with my A.S.C.A.P.
lapel button.

Male role model: Cole
Porter, Harry Truman,

and other tough sons of
bitches.

Female role model: Any
woman who is both
beautiful and gets things
done.

In five years: I'll
probably be painting and
drawing again. But
practicality will probably
dictate that I continue to
write songs and produce
record albums.

Photographs by Guy Webster

ウエット人間のファッションとビューティ
FASHION

We are soaking in a bubbling froth. The room is small, softly lit, a skylight aimed at darkness above us. In the deep, hot water, our limbs loll like seals as our baby obligingly sleeps in his stroller nearby. People have been coming here to The Berkeley Sauna since 1977 to immerse themselves in alternative thermal and moisture environments. This is a California thing. To guide my adventures exploring Californian bathing, I bring Leonard Koren's *Undesigning the Bath* and every copy of *WET Magazine* I can get my hands on.

In the rest of the world the public bathhouse goes into decline with the spread of the private bathroom, but I am happy to discover 20th and 21st century experimental bathing all over this state. The culture of hot tub bathing and saunas that emerged in western America in the '60s and '70s was part of a broader sensual renaissance, favoring raw tactility in reaction to the aesthetics of the modernist machine. A desire for less mediated experience embraced alternative psychologies, psychedelics, and a back-to-the-land movement, *Whole Earth Catalog* style. Water figures in the imagination of this culture, signaled in the 1967 musical *Hair*, which announced the dawning of the Age of Aquarius. While astrologers differ on this Age's actual date, the fact remains that the cultural moment *felt* liquid.

Leonard Koren found himself at this watery juncture in 1972. After finishing graduate degrees in architecture and planning at UCLA, he spent four years creating dozens of bath-based artworks and parties in Los Angeles and New York. He hosted events in locations such as Russian-Jewish schvitzes (bath houses), New York's famous Mudd Club, and friends' backyards. In 1976, Koren founded *WET: The Magazine of Gourmet Bathing*. In its five-year run, *WET* transformed from a thoughtful exploration of a sensual revolution into a west coast cult object of style and critical thought. It included descriptions of family bathtub rituals, wild proto-punk fashion spreads next to North Beach Leather ads and inquiries and ruminations on all things from cooking to music to sex with an edgy

humour. Koren describes the magazine as capturing a "why not?" moment in which rules and barriers were thrown into question, riding the line between the serious and the facetious. By 1981, this spirit was fading, and Koren decided to end the project rather than let it be taken over by its own increasingly commercial success. It's hard to hold that line.

Koren sees the best baths as conducive to certain kinds of subtle thoughts, self-reflective, ruminative activities and fine emotions. These are slippery and easy to lose in harsh lighting. His travels in Japan came after his bath party days, and experiences of Japan's highly ritualized bath culture diminished any remaining appetite he had for American public bathing. He went on to write books

on traditional cultural practices such as meditation, Japanese *wabi-sabi* and garden design; these books continue to be revered as an underwater thread swimming amongst student projects and writings in the design disciplines.

The Berkeley Sauna is shared with other people, in a sense, and yet we feel quite alone here. In contrast to a Japanese public *senzo* or a Turkish *hammam*, we do not get naked with strangers. We reserve time in one of the many cubicles within the establishment, a sauna or a hot tub. We dress in the small antechamber in front of each space. We are being private out in the city. The place is used by a small sliver of the population: the vaguely hippie-hipster, the health-conscious, the post-workout. This is the water of personal cleansing, a deep hygiene movement which is a response to a toxic world and a toxic body. Impurities out, colonics in, for it is the water *inside* of us which is to be transformed—our inner dirt. The idea that this activity is best done outside of the home is significant. We don't need to go to the movie theatre to watch movies anymore, but our own public performance in going out is a pleasure. With the practical impetus of sharing expensive water heating now absent, we may instead be seeking to absorb the collective vibrations. At this point, perhaps it is our very isolation in the home that we wish to wash off.

A couple of blocks away I find Hot Tubs of Berkeley: "Home of the 60-minute vacation". While it is prohibited to use the tubs under the influence of medications or intoxicants, nobody seems to be enforcing any rules. The hot tubs here are available for 20 bucks an hour, and the space offers a selection of rooms with a tub, shower, and a plastic-wrapped double bed on a platform. I'm happy to see the euphoric expressions on the satisfied customers leaving. Comments on Yelp revel in details of the impropriety of the place. In ancient Rome, emperors were under frequent pressure to segregate sexes in the imperial public baths, where prostitutes and intercourse were common. Medieval European public baths, once under the custodianship of the churches and monasteries, eventually became known as stews with the spread of venereal disease and the plague. The hot spring baths down the coast at Big Sur were the territory of cruising gay men before the Esalen Institute took over control. For some, the public bath is nearly synonymous with gay male cruising and sex, although this scene has been altered by the spread of AIDS. Public sex is part of any history of public bathing.

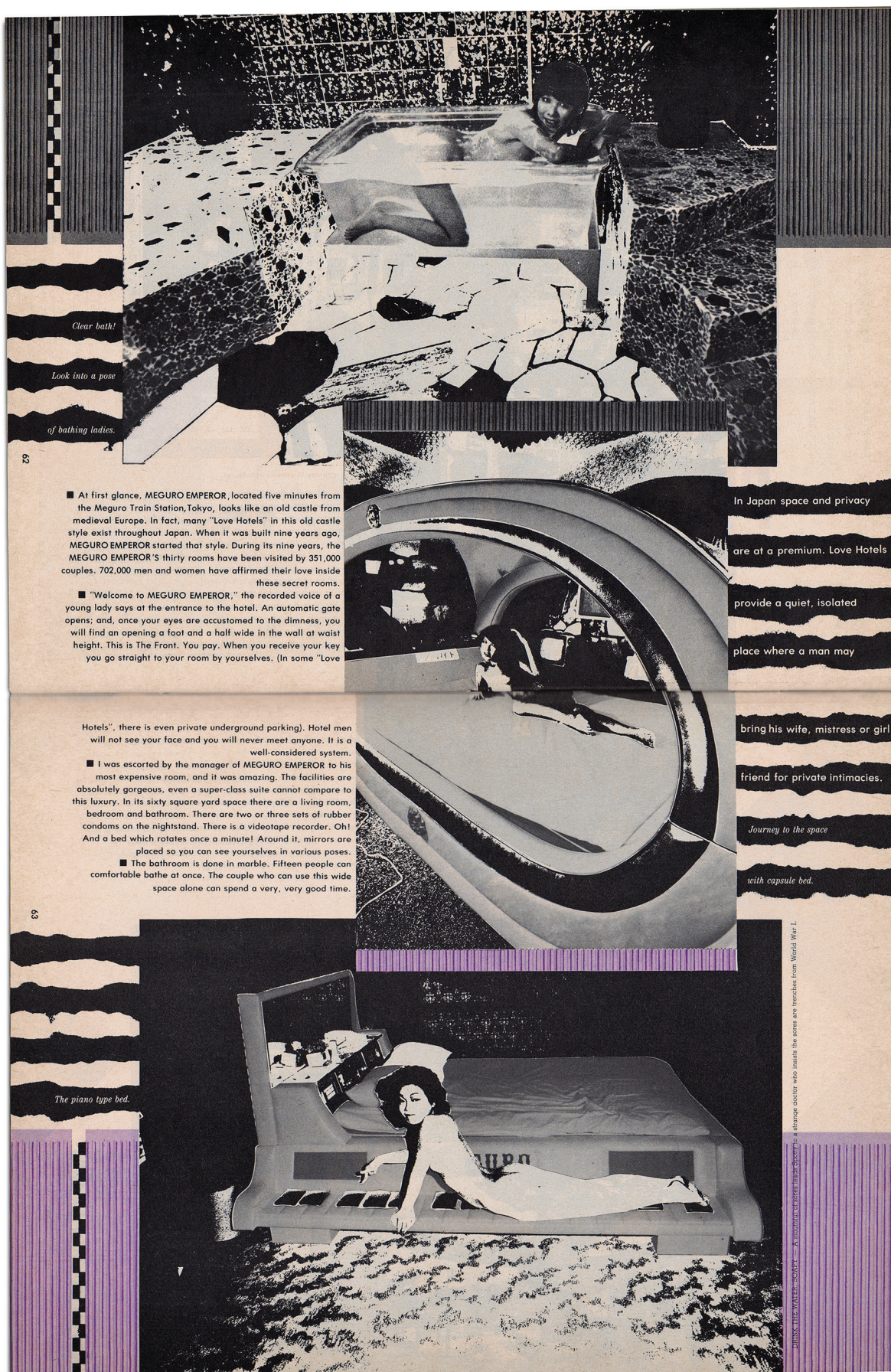
Does a retreat from the public bath echo our retreat from the public sphere, public space, and participation? Water itself seems desirous, transgressive, dissolving of personae. Water is exchanged between people by love and by plumbing. According to Ivan Illich in *H₂O and the Waters of Forgetfulness*, piped water has cut us off from water's poetic wealth. As I stew here in the H₂O, the chlorine destroys a few brain cells with each deepening breath. I am haunted by Illich and Koren's dismal opinion of the environments we continue to construct. Are we not able to add qualitatively to our world? If water is feeling, I think we can make things more wet – physically, symbolically, fantastically.

It is hard to imagine water's flow without also thinking of our inner waters of saliva, urine, and sexual fluids. The city's libidinal economy reflects our own; we reflect it. In different ways, Venice and Amsterdam are terrifically sexy cities, and they are both founded on constant motion and exchange of money and energy. They are both watery. The cities that housed the great bathhouses in history are big river cities: Istanbul, Tokyo, Paris, St. Petersburg and London. They draw in, collect, channel. In a seaside city we are pressed against a liquid volume, its vastness inspiring and awe-full. We may respond with indifference or a wide embrace. Koren's work and *WET Magazine* grew out of a sunny beach city, home to the theatre of public bathing with which we are most familiar.

In *Undesigning the Bath*, Koren defines a great bathing environment as "... a place that helps bring my fundamental sense of who I am into focus. A place that awakens me to my intrinsic earthy, sensual, and paganly reverential nature. A quietplace to enjoy one of life's finest desserts amidst elemental surroundings. A profoundly personal place, even when shared with other people, suitable for the most intimate sacraments of bathing..." He identifies the subjective qualities of superior baths as pleasure, safety, thermal stimulation, cleanliness/purity, mind-body reconciliation, timelessness, animism, and sacredness.

Lisa Heschong focuses on the quality of thermal stimulation in her book *Thermal Delight in Architecture*. She identifies the juxtaposition of contrasting thermal environments as a source of delight. Heschong deplores the creation of uniform thermal environments that are typically the goal of the mechanical engineer. She sees our efforts to maintain standardized comfort levels as part of a wrong turn taken by architectural innovations in thermal control. In another Vitruvian reference, she lists the essential considerations for thermal design as necessity, delight, affection, and sacredness. Cultivating affection for place is curbed by the neutralization of the potential thermal qualities of materials, forms and spaces.

Both Heschong and Koren identify certain qualities that have been superceded in post-industrial societies by expediency, haste, the techniques of mass production, the designer's ego that desires display and stylistic mannerism disconnected from experience. While ostentatious architectures can inspire wonder at its novel effects, the latter are short-lived compared to the subtle explorations and apprehensions afforded in a truly great bath. The qualities of great baths emerge over time: through the imprinting of the many hands that have made and transformed them, of temporality by diurnal and seasonal change, and of age, deterioration, or weathering, like rust, moss, efflorescence. Koren advises those who would make great baths to consider discovery, poetry, and nature in their work. With style, *WET Magazine* investigated bathing culture in all of its metaphoric and metabolic wealth, pointing to a human-non-human nature in a convergence of deep and superficial ecology. Just as our membranes increasingly reveal our porous relationship to our environments, *WET* frolics in its transgression of boundaries: nature/culture; sacred/profane; clean/dirty; funny/serious.



"Love Hotels," with text by Matt Groening and photographs by Kohei Yoshiyuki, Wet Magazine, November/December, 1981. IMAGE COURTESY OF LEONARD KOREN

C^P You completed a master's degree in architecture at UCLA in 1972. What attracted you to architecture? Is it interesting to you as a practice or a formal set of concerns?

L^K In 1969 I cofounded a trompe l'oeil mural painting group called The Los Angeles Fine Arts Squad. After a year and a half of painting outside, I had enough; I wanted a break from the "real world." So I applied to graduate school. As a teenager I had made an eccentric Japanese teahouse on my mother's property and in the process I fell in love with designing and building things. That's why I decided to study architecture. In school I quickly moved beyond the typical curriculum and ended up studying the rituals, psychology and aesthetics of small, intimate environments. Baths and bathrooms were obvious examples of this category. By the time I got my master's degree I realized that I had neither the interest nor temperament to practice architecture, so I became a bath artist instead.

C^P In *Undesigning the Bath* you argue that "great baths require that the creator leave his or her imprint as discreetly and unobtrusively as possible." How does one become that creator?

L^K By being very circumspect I suppose. The first item to attend to is making sure the design program is very well conceived. Then proceed slowly. Step by step. . .

C^P After graduating from architecture school you were doing photography-based projects of people bathing that had a kind of seriality. Collage, assemblage and seriality go on to form motifs of the *WET Magazine* aesthetic. What artists influenced you at that time in these projects?

L^K Before starting The Los Angeles Fine Arts Squad I worked part-time at the UCLA fine arts and ethnographic museums as an exhibition installer. One of the artworks I installed was a series of bronze, wall-mounted nude reliefs by Matisse. I was impressed by the notion of taking an idea and extending it infinitely through slight variation. At about the same time I came in contact with the work of late-18th century Japanese woodblock print artists. They often worked in series. I was particularly taken with the imagination of Katsushika Hokusai, especially his *36 Views of Mt. Fuji*. I also installed work by Joseph Cornell and Kurt Schwitters, major collage-assemblage artists. And, of course, seriality was in the artistic air in the '60s and '70s.

C^P In your 1975 photographic works *17 Beautiful Men Taking a Shower* and *23 Beautiful Women Taking a Bath*, I'm struck by the gender selection. It's as if the bathtub is symbolically associated with the feminine. The 'magazine of gourmet bathing' implies showering as a subset of bathing, making the masculine not the other half, the inverse, or mirror; or, the 'magazine of gourmet bathing' implicitly amplifies the symbolic feminine as it oozes and squirts up out of the earth.

L^K As a rule I didn't find sexual politics very interesting. I knew factions of feminist artists vociferous in their demands for gender equality, and I wished them well. But I didn't find the "feminist art" they produced to be of great interest. On the other hand, I tried not to fall prey to gender stereotypes—as far as my awareness then allowed. But you're correct, I must have unconsciously fallen into some stereotypic way of thinking when I decided it was somehow more artistically appropriate for men to shower and women to luxuriate in a tub.

C^P *WET* arguably created new-wave graphics. The magazine covers are so funny and sexy, but also surreal and iconic. What graphics, publications or artworks were inspirational?

L^K I have no clear recollection of how my graphic sensibility coalesced. I do remember pondering the erotic qualities of Crayola crayon colours when I was about seven years old. And from around the time I worked with The Los Angeles Fine Arts Squad, I remember getting into the habit of analyzing imagery to determine its level of visual energy and emotional resonance. Just prior to starting *WET*, I was enamored with the work of Guy Bourdin, especially the double-page photographs he took for Charles Jourdan shoe ads that appeared in French *Vogue*. I was also inspired by the postcards Fiorucci, an imaginative Italian clothes and gift retailer, produced. In both these cases, intense sensuality combined with a sly humour in a completely fresh way. This became my benchmark for graphic excellence at *WET*.

C^P How were *WET* covers perceived and how did you want them to be seen? Have they ever been displayed as artworks?

L^K One of the criteria for a successful *WET* cover was utter unpredictability. In other words, a *WET* cover had to be like nothing I had ever seen before. Most *WET* covers met this standard, I think. Of course, sometimes we fell short. These days *WET* covers are displayed in the context of graphic design history, but not as art. What seemed innovative about *WET* at the time now seems rather mundane. I think that's because *WET*'s avant-garde sensibility has now been completely absorbed into our collective visual culture.

C^P *WET* is full of counter-meditation propaganda extolling funny, non-sectarian liberational daily practices. How do you describe the spirituality that emerges through your artworks, events and designs?

L^K *WET* conveyed a genuine interest in the spiritual dimension of life, but *WET* also communicated a wariness of packaged, institutionalized spirituality. In any event, I believed then, and now, that spirituality must be able to accommodate humour.

C^P Some of the *WET* magazine pages read like instruction paintings, Fluxus-like imperatives to change your life through a reflective process embedded in practical actions. Each issue feels like an artwork intended to have transformational cultural effects.

L^K *WET* was more informed by the history of magazines than the history of art—at least that's what I thought at the time. I had never even heard of Fluxus then. The "imperatives" and "instructions" you're referring to had to do with a particular dogmatic attitude I thought people expected from magazines. In *WET* we pretended that we were authoritarian—but we also gave our readers a wink to know that we knew that we were actually making fun of dogmatism.

C^P Can you comment on the relationship between the east and west coast in the '70s and '80s and today?

L^K Back then Los Angeles and New York seemed like two sides of the same coin. Both places were inhabited with creators of the same intensity of drive, aspiration, and talent—but channeled through the different cultural opportunities each city offered. I do remember New Yorkers being condescending toward Los Angeles, but it was mixed together with an envy for L.A.'s weather, space, and artistic freedom. . . I've never lived in New York for more than a month, and I never did anything there other than throw parties and conduct research for projects.

C^P Which city is wetter, New York or Los Angeles?

L^K In terms of "wetness," I'd say L.A. wins hands down.

C^P Cultures of hot tub bathing and saunas that emerged in western America in the '60s and '70s were part of a broader sensual renaissance, favoring the raw over the cooked. A desire for direct experience coincided with experimental artistic activity now known as land art, environments, installation art, performance art, participatory art and happenings. Did you feel this to be the context of your work?

L^K What you suggest seems reasonable. There probably was a "sensual renaissance" in western America in the '60s and '70s. But I wasn't alive long enough then to compare it with anything else. It was my normal. Land art, performance art and happenings all seemed like natural manifestations to follow the art of the '50s.

C^P You created dozens of bath-based artworks and parties in Los Angeles and New York, using locations such as Russian-Jewish schvitzes, New York's famous Mudd Club, and friends' backyards. These projects foregrounded participation and relation. Were you setting up situations, or settings, or choreographing things more tightly? How were these events documented and disseminated, or was that not the point?

LK Prior to starting *WET*, the bathing events I staged were solely for the purpose of creating imagery that would end up in my prints. But as a way of repaying all the people who modeled for me, I threw a huge bath party at the old Russian-Jewish bathhouse you mentioned. All of the models came for free. All of my art collector and non-model artist friends paid admission. I never thought about documenting that event. My only goal was for everyone to have a great time. Indeed, the party was so much fun, and generated so much social energy, that I felt a great need to harness this energy in a tangible way. *WET* magazine was the result. Very soon into publishing, however, I realized that magazines also have a big social component. *WET* needed to constantly engage potential advertisers, the press and possible contributors in a fun and original way. So we kept on producing bathing or bathing-like events—mud bath parties, tea parties, bathing performances, *WET* awards ceremonies, swimming pool events, sailing trips and so on. As with the magazine itself, the success of a *WET* event was directly linked to its ability to arouse joy and delight. The *WET* event forms and venues kept changing. But event documentation was never part of the program—except for the press corps at the time. So as far as I know, few photographs of *WET* events exist today.

C^P You went to Japan after the years of your bath parties, and you've said that it made you lose your appetite for American public bathing: "It's like going to a really nice dinner and people don't have the tradition of using silverware so they are taking out pocket knives and pushing their face into the plate on the table...." Is Japanese bathing culture an art?

LK I don't think of bathing as an art, but in the Japanese context bathing is an artful activity. That said, the most masterful bathing environments and rituals encourage you to experience the present moment with completely fresh eyes, which is something art aspires to do.

C^P Thirty-four issues of *WET: The Magazine of Gourmet Bathing* came out between 1976 and 1981, exploring the mundanity of bathing and the full-range of rich metaphors it conjures. Perhaps *WET* provided the cultural metaphor of that moment, climaxing in the Age of Aquarius. Where do you think gourmet bathing culture is at today?

LK I still love the idea of bathing, and the unexpected amazing bathing experience every now and then, but I'm removed from the social and artistic bathing sphere. Occasionally I see ads in shelter magazines for new bathroom fixtures and furniture, so I know the iconography of luxury bathing marches on. But that's just commerce, which is not very interesting to me. My family and I live in a house without a functional tub—although a bathroom remodel is on our list of things to do. We have a flow restrictor that greatly limits the amount of precious water we can use. Nevertheless I cherish my nightly shower.

C^P Bathing itself could be considered as an environmental art: immersive, participatory, social, political and ecological. Baths tend to be surrounding and penetrating. John Lilly's flotation tanks and their evolution offer us one extreme example of this: a super-controlled bathing environment created initially to study consciousness.

LK I view the purpose of "thingness"—objects, environments, and such—as a catalyst and context for various kinds of experience. As such, I liked John Lilly's isolation-float tank because it allowed me to observe the ceaseless, monkey-like activity of my brain. Even though external stimuli are super attenuated when [one is] in the tank, there is still abundant content for consciousness to amuse itself with. In superior Japanese bathing situations, I particularly enjoy the experience of my body as a part of nature.

C^P You have written over a dozen books on topics such as bathing, aesthetics, Japanese culture, architecture, design, and gardens. What connects your diverse body of work? Liquidity? Environment?

LK Yes, as a body of work you could characterize what I've done as relating mainly to "liquidity" and "environment." But I personally characterize it as creating conceptual tools—theories, paradigms, methodologies, vocabularies, taxonomies—intended to help artists and designers in their work. My current project is a book titled *Wabi-Sabi: Further Thoughts*. It's a follow-up to my previous book *Wabi-Sabi: for Artists, Designers, Poets & Philosophers*. It should be available sometime in March 2015. ❀

Christie Pearson is a Toronto-based artist, writer, architect, community activist and interventionist whose work stems from research on global bathing cultures. She is part of *Scapegoat Journal: Landscape, Architecture, Political Economy*, THEWAVES aquatic event collective, the Urbanvessel performance collective, The WADE Collective for art in city wading pools, and LGA Architectural Partners. She teaches architecture at the University of Waterloo and Ryerson University and is currently writing *The Architecture of Bathing*.