

## Swimming Upstream. The Way of the Water, Tangente St. Pölten

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by [Xavier Robles de Medina](#)



Cecylia Malik, *Rising Rivers*, 2024. Plywood hand-painted signs with river names. Image courtesy of Tangente St. Pölten. Photography: Simon Veres

I almost didn't make it to St. Pölten for *The Way of the Water*. The change of season, the full moon, or the general precarity of being an artist these days — all might have contributed to my week of insomnia in late April. On the eve of the 29th, I should have taken the time for some exercise, taken a bath, meditated, and drank a glass of “guten abend tee”. I should have gone to bed earlier and continued my year-long attempt at reading *The Dawn of Everything*. [1] Instead, I spent the whole day working on a funding application. I sent it out five minutes before the deadline at midnight, and spent the rest of the night in bed trying not to fidget, not to overthink, not to wake up my boyfriend — to catch at least one hour of sleep. When my alarm went off at 6 a.m., I took a deep breath, sighed, and decided not to cancel my trip to St. Pölten.

*The Way of the Water*, curated by Joanna Warsza and Lorena Moreno Vera, is an “art parcours in conversation with the River Traisen and the Mühlbach”, and forms a cornerstone of the Tangente St. Pölten cultural festival. To launch on May 1st, Labor Day, is clever not just because of the critique of capitalism woven through many of the works and curatorial decisions; the inaugural event is also very well attended. Having arrived a day earlier, I took a deep rest to be fully present for the opening. It's my first time in St. Pölten, with perfect weather serving 25°C and a completely clear sky.



Cecylia Malik activation with Dr. Erena Rangimarie Rereomaki Rhöse, *Rising Rivers*, 2024. Plywood hand-painted signs with river names. Photography: Xavier Robles de Medina

Our tour starts at Sonnenpark, near the Mühlbach, where inaugural speeches are held by the curators and organizers. Two tables have been set up, providing visitors with exhibition catalogues as well as some water to drink. During her speech, head curator Joanna Warsza specifically encourages everyone to have a glass of water — an invitation to consider the political significance of this act, she says.

“What does it mean to collaborate with water?,” asks co-curator Lorena Moreno Vera as she continues to announce the curatorial framework which stances “water is our kin, and not in our service.” I notice one of the participating artists Cecylia Malik floating about the ceremony in a blue dress. She holds up a hand painted sign that says ‘Traisen’, a kind of physical or spiritual embodiment of the river, the main host of the parcours. It’s a hint to the environmentalist and spiritual ideas flowing through the artworks we are about to discover, along the Mühlbach and the Traison.

Dr. Erena Rangimarie Rereomaki Rhöse graces us with an incredibly moving speech, prayer, and song for the rivers as she shares aspects of her personal history as a Maori woman and activist. Her role in initiating the proceedings of the next two days as a representative for the Whanganui River in New Zealand — notable for being the first in the world to be granted the same legal rights as humans — imbues the event with a depth I haven’t ever experienced quite this way during European cultural events. The following day, during another intervention, this time activating Cecylia Malik’s collaboration with the river Traisen, she made an impassioned prayer for peace. Literally standing in the river, she enunciated specifically the names of peoples killed in ongoing genocides. “You are the river, you are the earth, you are the air, this is your identity, and no one owns you,” she confirms, emphasizing our innate bond with surrounding ecosystems, and its entanglement with personal autonomy, and the right to life.



Eva Grubinger & Werner Feiersinger, *Two Friends*, 2010–2024. Rafting boats, stainless steel and sandbags. Image courtesy of Tangente St. Pölten. Photography: Simon Veres

And thus the commitment to ideas of decolonization — which has been defined, among other aims, as the repossession of indigenous peoples' rights to ancestral lands and rivers — is revealed as a central concern of *The Way of the Water*, and my belief in the restorative power of art is restored for a moment. [2]

I see many of the gestures here as spiritual incursions into a landscape scarred by the Holocaust and by centuries of industrial exploitation. The site of Eva Grubinger and Werner Feiersinger's reinstalled collaborative work *Two Friends* from 2010 is on one of the Viehofen lakes. It was created by Hungarian Jewish forced labourers during World War II for the iron industry in St. Pölten. The piece involves two black rafts supporting a steel beam with a reflective surface. What's striking is its ambivalence, or a kind of insistence on a lack of resolution. The link between these troubled waters and the insinuation of a divine from the mirrored steel is forever stifled by the crudeness, or rather earthliness of the rafts.



Lisa Tan, *Reading Lewis Hyde*, 2024. Video installation. Image courtesy of Tangente St. Pölten. Photography: Peter Rauchecker

Lisa Tan's film *Reading Lewis Hyde* (2024) seamlessly weaves together elements of theory, poetry, and spirituality, showing the artist in the literal act of reading the writer and cultural critic's palms. The film follows Tan's deep engagement with several of Hyde's works, particularly his book *A Primer for Forgetting* (2019). In a proposal and invitation to Hyde, which she penned last year and later published in the exhibition catalogue, Tan writes: "I chose the palm of a hand, marked with lines that resemble rivers, tributaries, to anticipate how a reading might generate a conversation and prompt stories about divination, rivers of forgetting and, indeed, the lifeline." Throughout the reading, a diverse array of topics arise, each tracing back to the lines etched in Hyde's hand.

There are moments of playfulness too. For instance, an installation by Roberta Lazo Valenzuela's *White Cycles* (2024) could be seen as a collection of instruments, drawing the enthusiastic participation of children. The interactive work starts on land and gently drips into the Mühlbach, offering long sticks and seeds that, when activated, produce a variety of gentle 'ploop' and 'plop' sounds with the water. When hitting the drum-like ceramic planes installed in the river, these pieces made in collaboration with local ceramicist Christine Nebosis produce a kind of 'clang' sound.



Roberta Lazo Valenzuela, *White Cycles*, 2024. Ceramic drums, bells, dancing bowls and whistles made in collaboration with Christine Nebosis, bamboo sticks, seeds. Photography: Xavier Robles de Medina

Edgar Calel's performance piece *Saqbäch* (Rain with Hail) unfolds beside his vessel-shaped sculpture made of adobe on the banks of the River Traisen, with thirteen ice discs ceremonially released into the river. I was stunned when I noticed swarms of fish gather around the slowly dissolving, calmly rotating discs — enacting a sort of ceremony that strangely mirrored the parcours. Involving family members of Calel, the performance builds on the adobe sculpture's temporality; Calel explains later during his artist talk that similarly to the melting of the ice, the adobe is also an organic material that will “melt back into the earth”, albeit at a different pace.

Christina Gruber's immersive sound installation *Huchenhochzeit* (2024) takes listeners into the Danube's underworld, evoking the mating rituals of Huchen and their historic migration up the River Traisen. Joanna, the curator, addressed in an open discussion the remarkable resilience of these freshwater fish. Despite extensive human alterations to the River Traisen, such as straightening its course and erecting barriers, the Huchen display unwavering determination to return to their native habitat. Despite the numerous obstacles they face along their journey, they persevere and perpetuate the ancient life cycle that has been part of their existence since time immemorial.

Reflecting now, two weeks after visiting *The Way of the Water*, I see the upstream journey of the Danube as a potent symbol. Through a great diversity of works by 24 artists and collectives the exhibition proposes a delicate equilibrium of activism with a tranquil, inclusive, and generative spirit. Connecting the numerous artistic, political, and spiritual tendencies showcased throughout the parcours is a movement, or rather a force that challenges prevailing currents, like the Danube flowing upstream in search for a life source. Given the state of current global politics, which is stained by violence and a lack of accountability, the artistic positions here don't seek to provide definitive answers to the existential questions we're facing. Instead, they offer a respite from capitalist exploitation and complicity. It is perhaps no coincidence, then, that on my return from St. Pölten, my insomnia was cured.

[1] *The Dawn of Everything* is a book by David Graeber and David Wengrow published in 2021.

[2] For a deeper insight in the notion of 'decolonization', see Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, 'Decolonization is not a metaphor', in *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 2012, pp. 1-40.



Edgar Calel, *Saqbäch (Rain with Hail)*, 2024. Performance with ice offerings activated every twenty days. Image courtesy of Tangente St. Pölten. Photography: Peter Raucherker

## **The Way of the Water**

01/05 – 06/10/2024

With works by Amanda Piña, Clara Laila Abid Alsstar, Cecylia Malik, Christina Gruber, Edgar Calel, Elisabeth von Samsonow, Eva Grubinger & Werner Feiersinger, Filip Van Dingenen & Hélène Meyer, Javier Téllez, Jimena Croceri, Katarina Pirak Sikku, Klara Hobza, Lisa Tan, Lisa Truttmann, Kollektiv neonpink, Paola Torres Núñez del Prado, Rainer Prohaska, Regina Hügli, Rita Fischer, Roberta Lazo Valenzuela, Sissel Tolaas, Slavs and Tatars, Sophie Utikal, and Ursula K. Le Guin.

Curated by Joanna Warsza and Lorena Moreno Vera

### **Tangente St. Pölten**

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