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LIKE RIVERS IN A DELTA, THE LINES ON OUR PALMS REVEAL OUR DESTINY

On “The Way of Water” art parcours at Tangente festival.

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Arriving at Sankt Pölten train station in Austria is a reminder that the outskirts of the global capital are more than the role big-city syndrome often forces them into the cultural periphery. Provincial European cities, populated by the elderly, migrants, and youth whose current outlook does not yet indicate whether their

future will be liberatory, "central," or decadent, create a complex interplay of cultures and uncertainties. Sankt Pölten, quietly existing close to the banks of rivers Mühlbach and Traisen, encourages the visitor to think about how water, despite the political project of resource centralization, as well as social marginalization of the peripheries, connects the margins through a network of resources and stories.

My visit was triggered by the 20 km long public art parcours, "The Way of Water", co-curated by Joanna Warsza & Lorena Moreno Vera as part of the Festival Tangente St. Pölten. It opened on the first of May on the banks of Mühlbach, one of the two local rivers. It offers an orchestrated encounter of aquatic and organic matter, running until October. The Festival kicked off with a shamanic chant by Dr. Erena Rangimarie Rere Omaki Ransfield Rhöse, a Māori activist and healer. The buzz was that the activist and healer had already contributed, on a spiritual level, to New Zealand's Whanganui River being granted legal personhood status in 2017. Tacitly, another healing attempt was to take place.



fig. 1

“The Way of Water” features twenty-four artistic interventions, many of which are newly commissioned and which are strategically positioned around the rivers Traisen and Mühlbach. These predominantly humanized artworks, gather around them a temporary group of able bodies to introduce post-collectivity [1] in the public space where otherwise lowbrow graffiti reigns supreme. The Traisen and Mühlbach are only somewhat regulated rivers; conflicts and crises are not extreme but they are just one natural disaster away. The parcours was effortlessly and serenely welcomed with a “Riverbed Species Seaweed” (2024) ceremonial banquet featuring food and ceramics inspired by algae, and generously prepared by Filip Van Dingen and H el ene Meyer of the Institute of Algae Diplomacy. This event raised awareness about legal and political issues surrounding seaweed, which plays a crucial role in ecosystems where fish are absent.

A counter-anthropocentric undertaking is envisioned by Christina Gruber, a freshwater ecologist, who allows the fish of these rivers to speak from the primary perspective. She highlights the often-overlooked struggles of Danube salmon in her project, “The Danube Salmon’s Wedding”, [2] documenting the river’s soundscape (i.e. the sounds produced by fish in the river’s waters). Gruber also created the "Fishy Podcast," available through a site-specific installation. It is worth considering whether the inhabitants of St. P olten might experience low water levels, similar to the Danube salmon in the Traisen River. These salmon struggle to jump over multiple barriers - a crucial behavior to their survival - as they strive to reach the abundant and fast-flowing waters of the Danube. Flow as a state of optimal experience characterized by deep immersion and enjoyment in activities that lead to a richer and more satisfying life [3] is not a privilege enjoyed by many.



fig. 2

The artist Jimena Croccheri joined forces with water, involving a literal touch of nature in the display of her canvases painted with natural pigments from South America. They are folded, laid bare, and assembled in various positions along the tiny Mühlbach river. These canvases are publicly exposed to the weather and the uncontrollable forces majeures in the form of natural elements including water, air, and earth, all of which make the works vulnerable to entropy. In the essay "The Elemental Turn," featured in the parcours catalog, Elke Krasny also advocates for the inherent rights of elements like water, emphasizing their vital role in a complex network of relationships. Croccheri's folded canvas entitled "Letting the Water Make its New Form" (2024) stand in solidarity with other frail entities along the river, including the bodies highlighted by two participating hydrofeminist groups. The Neonpink Kollektiv brings awareness to the historical washing stations along the Mühlbach, evoking the depersonalized washerwomen and their household duties and related material struggles at the intersection of class, gender, and labor. This interconnectedness is manifested in the manual routines of soaking, wringing, squeezing, dipping, gossiping, and complaining about, let's presume, domestic violence. While The Neonpink Kollektiv indicates somewhat limited relational and productive power through performance, it echoes the hyper-utopian idea that we are all bodies of water connected to the watery planet in a fluid continuum.



fig. 3

The second hydrofeminist collective, The River Sisters, represented by Cecylia Malik in her installation based performance “Raising Rivers” (2024) pays tribute to the water and calls for action and cross-river solidarity, invoking across eighty boards the names of rivers under various forms of threat from pollution, to over-extraction of water, mining, climate-induced extreme weather, invasive species, and more. However, only calling out the name of a river is one thing; demanding the prohibition of, for example, Rio Tinto's extractive mining projects and metal processing in the Jadar Valley in Serbia [4] and elsewhere, due to the extremely serious threat they pose to biodiversity, is another. Malik insists that treating rivers as living beings and advocating for their legal personhood represents a paradigm shift that emancipates the aquatic ecosystem.

Lewis Hyde, a noted scholar, poet, and essayist renowned for his works on creativity, property, and the very concept of the commons joined the proceedings, from a distance. In the alluring video, “Reading Lewis Hyde” (2024), by Lisa Tan, screened in one of Solektiv's [5] spaces in the Sonnenpark near the river, a parallel narrative emerges. The video begins with Hyde and the artist holding hands in a detailed palmistry session. “Like rivers in a delta, the

lines on our palms reveal our destiny,” says Tan at one point. Indeed, humans must flow inter-contextually to embody their full subjectivity. That is, of course, if they are allowed to. Certainly, over time, both lines on the palm and rivers in a delta transform and diverge: the Nile, Mississippi, Rio Grande, Volga, and, more importantly, Lethe, the mythic underworld river of forgetfulness. As Hyde suggests, “forgetting is the prerequisite of a new life, as waters of forgetfulness carry things away, allowing one to be reborn.” In this context of long history, thinking of rivers expresses the commoning of the commons, as rivers represent both the physical embodiment of shared resources and the flow of collective memory and renewal beyond modernity and capitalism. The reclamation of communal and cooperative ways of living, highlighting how feminist and commons-based approaches can help restore a sense of wonder and connection to the world, is explored in the installation “Hondo” by Rita Fisher, renowned for her abstract paintings. Here, the artist appears to follow Silvia Federici’s [6] thoughts about the re-enchantment of the world, that it is not about a regressive return to irrational or esoteric beliefs, but, rather, a transformative process grounded in real-world struggles. By upcycling plastic debris found in the river, Fisher strips the flotsam of its previous abject status and mixes the transformed materials with her own molded and sculpted objects. This re-enchanting act, both poetic and political, manifested in a large-scale installation on the site of the former Segl-Mil, offers a way of making, if not new possibilities for community and environmental justice, then at least beautiful vistas for passers-by.



fig. 4

Sophie Utikal's "4 Mothers (Growing the Parts that Will Make Us Change Faster)" addresses bodies waiting to be (re)born in a speculative narrative that seeks to transcend the human condition and propose the creation of a new post-human species. Utikal's artistic vision is realized through eighteen large-scale textile pieces hanging from a bridge. The artist, who became a mother during the creation of these artworks, also drew inspiration from the unique symbiosis of breastfeeding, and around the release of a humanely produced liquid. By re-envisioning the relationship between the human and non-human, she aims to resolve the contradiction between hierarchy and intelligence, [7] and argues for the potential for post-collectivity, a concept that involves creating new organs to help humanity work more effectively, and expanding the limits of our imagination, ultimately changing our fate and ways of cohabitation.



fig. 5

A bit further down the banks of the Traisen, the columns of the foundation of the Lower Austrian Government's edifices emerge from a small human-made pond. The pond can be accessed by putting on long fishing boots (provided by the Festival) and entering the turbid water, then touching, embracing, and sniffing the pillars of the building, which emit an unusual smell. The columns have nano-embedded particles replicating the smell of men sweating in fear. It is the smell of the non-deodorized body, an index of systemic oppression, here activated by the presence of spectators' bodies. This is "Fear of Smell // Smell of Fear_12_24" by Sissel Tolaas, a chemist and smell activist, who virtuosically succeeds in her goal to expand the boundaries of our perception by activating another sense. No matter how familiar it becomes in today's society, the smell of fear remains unsettling.



fig. 6

Edgar Calea and his relatives, all descendants of the Mayans, traveled all the way from Guatemala to perform a ceremonial offering called “Saqb'ach (Rain with Hail)” (2024) on the Traisen River, as a propitiation for ensuring the abundance of rain cycles. Water from the river is frozen into 13 round ice sculptures, each inscribed with a glyph in the shape of the nahual imox, one of the twenty-day signs in Mayan cosmology that each represents a specific energy and spiritual essence. Imox is specifically associated with water, the unpredictable, and the unconventional. It is linked to the power of the subconscious, creativity, and emotions. Dressed in their traditional vibrant fabrics, Edgar Calea and company perform the “return” of the encrypted ice sculptures to the river, allowing the water to decide about their course. As they melt, the sculptures dissolve into the water.



fig. 7

In the routines of extraction, humans capitalize on water, industrialize it, and politicize it. "The Way of Water" seeks to re-engage with the historicized reality of industrialization by sparking dialogue by means of biodigital convergence. On the organic-aquatic-techno axis stands Paola Torres Núñez del Prado's [8] "Awasqa Kayku", a 15-meter-long textile painting with an embedded code and a score. It intertwines ancient epistemologies with present techno-developmental fetishism, physically and digitally via augmented reality. This work is prominently displayed on the Glanzstoff Water Tower, a significant historical and industrial landmark. Translated from Quechua as "to be woven" or "to be a pattern", "Awasqa Kayku" reflects the essential role of the water tower in producing rayon and textiles; here technology represents a glitch in the natural order. If this artwork did not have a digital layer, it would still be captivating, offering decorative large-scale visuals that represent an organic and aquatic flow.



fig. 8

During the Tangente St. Pölten Festival, the rivers take on diverse roles: for example, as an instrument in “White Cycles” (2024) by Roberto Lazo Valenzuela, or as in “Two Friends” (2010-2024), serving as a floating counter-memorial to a submerged Nazi labor camp (by Eva Grubinger & Werner Feiersinger), and even as a makeshift “Traisma swimming pool” (2024) with accouterments provided by Rainer Prohaska from his collection of second-hand materials. This shapeshifting interplay between organic add-ons and aquatic perspectives enriches the experience. Achieving curatorial flow requires finding a delicate balance between the challenge that the elusive character of water imposes and the skill to find new ways to touch it, feel it, see it, and

conceptually morph it.

Yet, as if riding on the wave of the trending elemental turn, “The Way of Water” shares its title with various popular media products, such as the Avatar sequel, or monthly magazine covers. The Festival embraces water’s versatile nature while very discreetly critiquing hydro-capitalism. The layout of the art trail poses questions regarding curatorial practices that seek interconnectedness yet challenge the audience in a parcours that requires some bodily fitness to be experienced in full. In truth, the establishment of a dialogue between nature and society shifted, more than twice, towards indigenous ritual-based practices of the First Nations and Latin American perspectives re-inforcing rather than challenging Eurocentric and anthropocentric rationalisms prevalent today. The undercurrents of “The Way of Water” were not easy to tame, no matter how diligently humans strive to master, domesticate, decorate, or control them. Waters inevitably find their own course, even when they evaporate.

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FOOTNOTES

[1] Jelewska, Agnieszka, Michał Krawczak, and Julian Reid. *New Ways of Gathering and Practicing in Times of Crises*. Postcollectivity, 2024.

[2] The original title in German is “Huchenhochzeit”, 2024.

[3] Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly. *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. New York: Harper & Row, 1990.

[4] <https://action.wemove.eu/sign/2023-03-stop-rio-tinto-EN/>

[5] “Solektiv” is a creative biotope that uniquely combines art and ecology. In the Sun Park of St. Pölten, we organize festivals, concerts, exhibitions, and workshops. For our approach to sustainable co-creation, we were awarded the Outstanding Artist Award by the Austrian Ministry of Culture in 2021 <https://www.solektiv.at>

[6] Federici, Silvia. *Re-enchanting the World: Feminism and the Politics of the Commons*. Oakland: PM Press, 2018.

[7] Butler, Octavia E. *Lilith's Brood (Xenogenesis Series)*. New York: Warner Books, 1987-1989.

[8] Núñez del Prado's has expertise in art and technology. She received the Honorary Mention at Prix Ars Electronica 2021, and was Google Artists + Machine Intelligence’s Residence Grant recipient 2019 among other honors.

IMAGE CREDITS

Cover: Lisa Tan, Reading Lewis Hyde (2024). Video installation. Image courtesy of Tangente St. Pölten. Photo: Peter Rauchecker.

fig. 1: Filip Van Dingenen & Hélène Meyer, *The Riverbed Species Seaweed Banquet* (2024). Ceramic sculptures

with seaweed glaze displayed on wooden structure. Image courtesy of Tangente St. Pölten. Photo: Simon Veres.

fig. 2: Jimena Croceri, Letting the Water Make Its New Form (2024). Natural dye paintings produced in collaboration with the river and the weather. Image courtesy of Tangente St. Pölten. Photo: eSel.at.

fig. 3: Cecylia Malik, Bodies of Water, Projekt Rising Rivers © Simon Veres @simonveres_aeph.

fig. 4: Rita Fischer, Hondo (2024). Installation with collected materials from the rivers of St. Pölten. Image courtesy of Tangente St. Pölten. Photo: Simon Veres.

fig. 5: Sophie Utikal, 4 Mothers (Growing the Parts that Will Make Us Change Faster) (2024). Embroidered textile works. Image courtesy of Tangente St. Pölten. Photo: Peter Rauchecker.

fig. 6: Sissel Tolaas, Fear of Smell / Smell of Fear _12_24 (2024). Installation with smells of twelve anxious men on the pillars under the Lower Austria Landtag. Image courtesy Tangente St. Pölten. Photo: Peter Rauchecker.

fig. 7: Edgar Calel, Saqb'äch (Rain with Hail) (2024). Performance with ice offerings activated every twenty days. Image courtesy of Tangente St. Pölten. Photo: Simon Veres.

fig. 8: Paola Torres Núñez del Prado, Awasqa Kayku (2024). Codified textile painting. Photo: Maja Ćirić.

