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Júlia Laki (<http://mezosfera.org/author/julialaki/>), Apr, 2
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Natural, Artistic, and Political Ecologies of E

Interview with Maja and Reuben Fowkes

Art historians and curators [Maja and Reuben Fowkes](http://www.translocal.org) (<http://www.translocal.org>) are engaged in pioneering research into the interconnections focus on the East-Central European context. In 2013, they est (<http://www.translocal.org>) in Budapest, which serves as a r framework for research, curatorial, and educational activities interview with Maja and Reuben on the occasion of the recent First, the [River Ecologies](http://translocal.org/riverschool/) (<http://translocal.org/riverschool/> Translocal Institute), is a selection of essays, interviews, lectur Translocal's *River School* project (2013–15) that brought tog a discussion around creating more sustainable lifestyles and le on the banks of the river Danube. Second, [The Green Bloc: N under Socialism](http://www.ceupress.com/books/html/G) (<http://www.ceupress.com/books/html/G> Press) is the extension of Maja Fowkes' PhD dissertation at Un proposes a history of East-Central European art practices dea 1968. When read together, the two books show how environ essentially global one, has important regional dimensions anc sketch out some major shifts in the availability of information c the corresponding civil and artistic engagements with ecologic how a concern for the environment inherently involves a politi hand with a critical view on the institutional structures of art.



OHO group / Šempas Family, 1977, Šempas, Slovenia. Source: <https://www.ohogroup.com/>

Júlia Laki: *It would be good to start with some clarification: how ecological and environmental art, art using natural materials, in both books and the differences in their meanings seem to be*

Reuben Fowkes: This question gives us the chance to differentiate “ecological or environmental art,” the latter being terms we do not put these terms in an art historical context: classical environmental art to environmental problems, to try and solve or remedy them. In the 1970s, the concept became much broader, as ecology itself is broader. It seems to be something that touches on so many aspects of ecology on many levels of society and politics. Artistic engagements do not use “environmental art” in order to have something to say about ecology in the natural world.

Maja Fowkes: It is also clear that art dealing with ecological issues often use natural materials. Land art is also a very specific art historical category that was assigned to works of art differently in the Eastern Bloc and North America.

started to think about pollution and other issues that societies (also a special moment because, as a result of the Space Race, for the first time from outer space; the planet became something in distance. It was very clear that there were no borders, making the issues they were dealing with were cosmopolitan or planetary issues anymore.

I was careful to avoid simply adopting concepts from “Western” culture; this was precisely the aim of the book. I do not compare Eastern and Western kind of paradigms that were established elsewhere. Instead, I focus on the region, and what I found is that although it was a very specific context of politics, the artists engaged with the same issues here, without necessarily borrowing upon them from elsewhere. It also has to be said that these countries were not completely cut off, there were fluid exchanges between them, and I had to take a comparative approach within the region. In some countries, these issues, and some of them developed their own environmental movements. By the late '80s, environmental degradation became a major concern, and environmental activism spread rapidly, and in the end, it helped bring about a transformation. But also in the '60s and early '70s, such a delicate spaces and ways.



Petr Štembera: Grafting, 1975. Source: lookinginto.tumblr.com

JL: *Do you see The Green Bloc as a "correction" of existing avant-garde art? There are accounts of artistic engagement with nature (such as János Sturcz's (<http://www.mke.hu/node/29195>, <http://www.amazon.com/Art-Nature-Italian-English-Editing>), which you cite throughout the book. Yet, it feels like they conceptualize nature in a limited way, not exploring the wider web of ecological issues.*

MF: I wouldn't say that the book is a correction. Rather, I was looking at readings of the region's art history. The intention was to look at well-known artists, and find elements that have been overlooked and related to environmental issues, to which art history is no exception. Things that were rarely addressed properly, so that is the gap I was trying to fill by introducing environmental theory and history into my reading, while also connecting it to politics and existing art histories.

RF: From a historiographical point of view, it's interesting that at the same time, as this awareness, people look for different things in the same past, at the same time. Such as when people look for political aspects, or gender issues, or contemporary concern, and take the old narratives and discover new ones.

JL: *I felt that one of the most important aspects you wanted to explore was the relationship between the politics of nature and human politics, as seen in all the analyzed works. You also mentioned that this community was not tolerated by the authorities.*

MF: Art historians tend to say that whenever artists left the city for the countryside, it was motivated by trying to avoid political confrontation, which we would like to dispute. Artistic engagement with the environment was not avoidance; they were genuinely interested in the issue. However, we wanted to show that every aspect of life under socialism, and we wanted to show that in these terms. In Croatia, artists could go onto the streets and protest, but ecology was in a way tolerated, as it was not seen as a threat.

RF: It is ironic in terms of the socialist system and its attitude to opposition, they saw it as not so threatening as other forms of opposition, they turned their interest into ecology than, for instance, nationalism, or religion. Ecology turned out to be the Achilles heel of socialist dictators, leading to an ecological breakdown of the whole system. With Chernobyl, ecology emerged as the force that motivated people to build civil resistance.



Cecylia Malik: 6 Rivers, 2011-12. Source: translocal.org

JL: *Do you see this revolutionary, political potential in the art encountered through the River School and documented in the*

MF: I'm not sure I would define these artists as activists on the look at the section of the book on lifestyles and biosphere resp explaining their own stance on some of the issues, and show h lifestyles, they try to act in accordance with their environment consciousness. We wanted to look at these practices and show current crisis. It is indeed very hard to get the message across that ecology is political. In some periods of history this become forgotten due to all the other issues that artists and citizens ha the region is seen through the lens of politics; it is always expe sometimes even becomes a cliché. At the same time, this politi centered; thus there are rarely other kinds of politics included

RF: What artists sometimes do is make visible the ecological r social and political problems that people or communities are s time, clearly shows the political nature of ecology. It poses a r and models of living and working and economics. Once you s ecological critique of all those, then it very quickly becomes a system that everything is built on.

JL: *Can you talk a little bit about how the project (both the Riv book) was structured?*

MF: It was very fluid, a bit like the river itself, and it took us to elements, however, that structured it; conferences, workshops organized in Hungary and Romania, as well as an exhibition Bucharest. In each section, we worked with several participants. In the end, it came to the finale of the project, which was to edit a book and reorganize the material again and reorganize it according to thematic sections and the development.



River School Bucharest: Tour of the Văcărești Bucharest Delta

RF: We wanted to draw out the themes that ran through the different projects.

MF: One of the issues that emerged as very important to us is being on location, doing artistic or curatorial research in nature. The focus of our work, we should also consider what our research is about in the natural world.

RF: We really wanted to put the materiality of the river at the center, away from the tendency of turning it into an abstract notion. To go out there and see what happens to this whole discourse within its context.

JL: *How do you translate this experience into a book format?*

MF: First of all, we tried to emphasize that the river is not just about human existence, which we wanted to point out with the exhibition, but also through the many other species that feature in the project. We tried to put together as many different points of view as possible, from an

history to art and science, to really show that there are other environments that are equally valid. Environmental history, which is a branch of history, although still in its developing phase, plays anthropocentric perspectives on the natural world. However, the Danube region is still under-researched; it is all in little bits and pieces and there is not an environmental history of the Danube.

RF: Even though there are so many books on the Danube.

MF: Yet every book is about cultural or economic history, or is very human-centered.

RF: They also usually employ a perspective from upstream, which was during our research. The view on the Danube is always defined by seeing the Lower Danube as some kind of exotic, wild, untouched landscape. The Danube is also German. Thus, there are plenty of colonialist attitudes when you start thinking about the materiality and ecology of the Danube. A shift away from this Upper Danube perspective. In other words, ecological terms also challenge a dominant, colonialist logic.



Like a Bird, exhibition at Trafó Gallery. Photo: ArtDetektor

JL: *Do you feel that this project has created a network between participants in it?*

MF: We hope so. There was definitely a lot of dialogue going on and the closing event at the Central European University was a highlight of the conferences we have organized thus far, because there were artists, scientists, and activists together and creating a new perspective. I also think that something is getting closer to the point where scientists and artists can work together as a very common phenomenon in many other places, but currently it needs more support. One of the intentions of the project was to aid this process through various forms of intellectual and experiential exchange that challenge the boundaries between science and the arts.

The interview was conducted in September 2015 in English, and in Hungarian on tranzitblog.hu in October 2015 in Hungarian.

About the author

Júlia Laki holds a Master's degree in Gender Studies; she currently works as a curator and editor while co-managing a small olive oil company based in Hungary.

Notes:

1. The first workshop of the River School took place at White House Gallery in Budapest in 2013 and the project continued until April 2015, when the book was published. For details of the program, see: www.translocal.org/riverschool/ 
2. Like a Bird: Avian Ecologies in Contemporary Art, curated by Júlia Laki, Gallery Budapest, December 13, 2013 to January 26, 2014. 

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