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To cite this article: Maja Fowkes & Reuben Fowkes (2016): The Primeval Cosmic River and Its Ecological Realities: On the Curatorial Project Danube River School, GeoHumanities, DOI: 10.1080/2373566X.2016.1234350

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/2373566X.2016.1234350>



Published online: 03 Nov 2016.



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The Primeval Cosmic River and Its Ecological Realities: On the Curatorial Project Danube River School

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As the longest river in the heart of the European continent, the Danube has been a recurrent topic for artists, writers, poets, filmmakers, and theorists, and whether their accounts linger in the national realm of one of the ten countries through which the river passes, or follow its transnational flow, Anthropocentric undercurrents can regularly be traced in their narratives. Uncovering the environmental history of the Danube, featuring river-centered artistic practices, and investigating the potential for an integrated ecological future of the river were at the core of the interdisciplinary curatorial project the River School, organized by the Translocal Institute between 2013 and 2015. This article investigates ecological challenges to the traditional cultural approaches to the Danube, which reflect the social and political logic that turns the river into a marker of geopolitical struggles, a route for conquest, and a delimiter of national territory, as well as a site for the expression of cultural supremacy. Focusing on the insights provided by the work of contemporary artists, also explored are the potential of the experiential aspect of river research and multispecies perspectives, specific moments in the river's environmental past and their place in social and political upheavals, and the emergence of ecologically attuned approaches in policy, behaviors, and cultural production. **Key Words: Anthropocene, art, Danube, ecology, environmental humanities.**

As the longest river in the heart of the European continent, the Danube has been a recurrent topic for artists, writers, poets, filmmakers, and theorists, and whether their accounts linger in the national realm of one of the ten countries through which the river passes or follow its transnational flow, Anthropocentric undercurrents can regularly be traced in their narratives. In one of the earliest artistic depictions of the river, on the *Trajan Column* from 113 AD, the Danube is portrayed as a strong and wise old man, a divine figure who is respected for his force. The personification of the river in this case still resembles the Indo-European root of the Danube's name, which in modern central European languages meanders through variations of Donau, Dunaj, Duna, Dunav, and Dunărea and originally bore the meaning of primeval cosmic river. Elevating it into cosmic realms and extending its existence into primordial time posits the river as interconnected with planetary processes that reach beyond human history and concerns. Such an integrated vision of the Danube has, however, faded away in more recent centuries, as the river became transfixed by technocratic schemes to channel and exploit its flows and got caught up in ideological projections.

Uncovering its environmental history, featuring river-centered practices, and investigating the potential for a shared ecological future of the river were at the core of the interdisciplinary

curatorial project River School organized by the Translocal Institute, Budapest between 2013 and 2015. It was programmed by the authors of this text to create opportunities for fluvial encounters by experimenting with creative methodologies that purposely evaded the tendency to objectify and instrumentalize the river's flows. Drawing on radical educational theorist Illich's (2012) call to "deschool society," the River School curriculum consisted of study days, multi-focal conferences, floating workshops, and migrating exhibitions, taking place in and out of academia and the institutional art system. Furthermore, river excursions along the Danube were used as an opportunity to put into practice ideas of "sensuous scholarship," which by reawakening the scholar's body seeks to avoid the "epistemological and political pitfalls of Cartesianism" (Stoller 1997, xii). Relying on contributions from many experts, including environmentalists, river historians, anthropologists, scientists, writers, theorists, and artists, it primarily focused on the lower parts of the Danube on its Eastern European side, which also entailed discussion of issues around cultural supremacy intricately interwoven into Anthropocentric attitudes toward the river.

Challenging traditional cultural approaches to the Danube, which reflect the social and political logic that turns the river into a marker of geopolitical struggles, this article traces instances of instrumentalization of the river as an accessory of imperialist aggrandizement, as a component of the nationalist imaginary and a subject of modernist rationality. Equally, anthropogenic changes to the river's course, as evident from environmental history's revealing of the connection between Enlightenment schemes to master the unruly waterway and the rise of industrialization, are considered here to indicate a parallel account of its physical transformation. Countering these realities with perspectives that situate the river in longer geological time frames, acknowledging its agency, and probing the potential of fluviocentric access to its stream in awareness of the unprecedented human impact on the planet epitomized by climate change has engendered more ecological approaches that are manifest both in scholarship and contemporary art. These are examined here in relation to the cosmopolitical call to include nonhuman constituencies in negotiations for an equitable coexistence with the river, also taking into account artistic visions and practices that turn political ecology into proposals for our interdependent future.

The perfect circle of a wrought iron fence, further reinforced by an outer concentric stone balustrade, was constructed on the grounds of Donaueschingen Castle in southern Germany to enclose a natural spring that rises there. This geometric cordoning actually served to take symbolic possession of the alleged source of the Danube. Nearby, in the soft hills of the Black Forest, the unremarkable confluence of Breg and Brigach is another marker of the river's beginning. This is the point where a bureaucratic compromise was established to settle long-standing disputes over its ultimate origin. Some 2,800 kilometers downstream, the grand river reaches its delta, which through an intricate system of channels and lakes spills into Romania, Moldova, and Ukraine, before it arrives at the Black Sea. The three major channels of Chilia in the north, Sulina in the middle, and Sfântu Gheorghe in the south are also sites of dispute as to which of them represents the true path of the Danube. Evidently, disagreements over its source are matched by uncertainty over its end, so that despite the positivist wish to map and codify the river, there is no definitive answer as to its length. Needless to say, the complexity of Danube geography is only amplified in the territories that lie in between.

A particular point of contestation is to be found around the moment when the river reaches the lands of Eastern Europe. This is palpable in the contents pages of Danube travelogues, where

chapters for the sections downstream from Vienna are suggestively entitled “East of Vienna, the Orient Begins,” “the Edge of Civilization,” or “Into the Balkans” for the instant the river enters Slovakia. The underlying rationale of this one-sided view of the river is summed up by the author of a recent cultural history, who asserts that “the Danube’s familiar cultural legacy has been a Germanic one, confined to the upper and middle courses of the river” (Beattie 2010, xi). “At the Gates of Asia” is also how Magris (1989) began the Hungarian part of his epic literary journey down the Danube, exchanging the exoticism of the then still-standing Iron Curtain for the mysteriousness of the Orient. A phantasmagorical vision infused with national myths emerges from his description of the “mud of Pannonia,” flatlands that are “pasty with soil, with sodden leaves, and the blood-filled footprints, which have been left in the course of centuries by migrations and the clash of conflicting civilisations” (Magris 1989, 241).

The exoticism attached to the river after it leaves the assumedly civilized lands of the Upper Danube is, however, no obstacle to an expansive notion of the *Donauraum* as the natural sphere of German-speaking cultural and political influence. It comes as no surprise that for the field of Danube studies, concentrating on international relations and economics with no actual river in sight, the “language of the Danube is German,” despite the fact that for eight of the ten countries it flows through this is not the case. In this respect, Budapest-based author Nick Thorpe, who made his journey upstream “like the sturgeon” from the Black Sea to the Black Forest, was exceptional in attempting to “represent the lives and the views of the people who live from and beside the river” (Thorpe 2013, xv). Without falling into the trap of “romanticising the East,” his *The Danube* (Thorpe 2013) nevertheless effectively counters the downstream perspective by testifying that “Europe was populated and civilised from the East” (Thorpe 2013, xv). Indeed, as the River School project as a whole revealed, there is a close correlation between undoing the cultural bias weighted toward the upper sections of the Danube and the creation of more river-centered narratives.

The tumultuous struggle between the structures of imperial rule and the rise of nation states in the nineteenth century also made calls on the Danube as a marker of territory and font of national identity. One such projection of national imaginary is vividly displayed in the sculptural composition of the *Danube Fountain* that has stood in the center of Budapest since its erection in 1883 at the height of national revival. Here, the statue of the Danube was placed at the top of the structure, and three figures representing the tributaries of the rivers Sava, Drava, and Tisza are seated two levels below. In that sense, the fountain embodies the Hungarian claim on the Danube, which derives from the position of the river in the historical lands of the pre-World War I Hungary as a primary axis bordered by the three tributaries. Not to be overlooked is the fact that the personification of the Danube is rendered as male, whereas the three subordinate rivers are represented as female. Despite the classical treatment of this historicist monument and its antique appeal, it is the hierarchy and control portrayed between the male and female characters that take central stage. As in the case of upstream imperialism, the entanglement of power relations contained in the sculpture could equally translate into the domineering relationship to the river itself and subjugation of the natural world.

Much of the oeuvre of Hungarian artist Szabolcs Kiszpál (b. 1967) has been devoted to challenging national myths and exposing their influence on current political discourse. In his work *Greater Hungaries* (Kiszpál 2013; Figure 1), developed in the context of the River School, the artist investigated the overlaps between the mythical Turul bird, which plays an essential part in the legend of Hungarian conquest of the Pannonian plains, and specimens of Saker falcons



FIGURE 1 Szabolcs Kisspál, *Greater Hungaries*, 2013. Installation view, *Like a Bird: Avian Ecologies in Contemporary Art*, Trafó House of Contemporary Arts, Budapest. Photo by Miklós Surányi. Used with permission. (Color figure available online.)

that were identified as its biological equivalent. By plotting the flight paths of several Saker falcons on maps of the European continent based on data collected from electronic tags placed on individual members of the endangered species as part of European Union conservation program, Kisspál connected the vast distances into a singular territory. In the original myth, the Turul bird led the Magyar tribes into the Carpathian basin to show them the land of their future country, where they have made their home since the tenth century. Following real falcons, on the other hand, gives rise to a confusion of overlapping terrains that bear little resemblance to the lands laid out by their mythical forebear.

It is with distinct irony that Kisspál (2015) used the actual flight patterns of birds to “show us the possible territory of Greater Hungary” (77), a much mourned historical formation that a century ago spread over lands now belonging to Romania, Ukraine, Slovakia, Croatia, and Serbia. By coloring these vast avian dominions with red and white stripes, the artist referred to the medieval Hungarian coat of arms of the Árpád dynasty, which is much beloved by nationalists. Interestingly, the four silvery stripes that interchange with four red ones on the heraldic insignia are also claimed to symbolize the four rivers of Hungary: Danube, Tisza, Sava, and Drava. However, whereas Drava now marks the border with Croatia, the Sava no longer enters Hungarian territory, rendering the nationalist pretensions to restore “greater Hungary” an ideological fantasy. Extending political geography beyond the relations of people, state, and territory to nonhuman actors, the artist demonstrated the tension between a living bird species and the symbolic role they are assigned in the nationalist imaginary. At the same time, the

political commentary that runs through *Greater Hungaries* uncovered the ideological distortions at play in the nationalist attribution of metaphorical functions to the phenomena of the natural world from animals to rivers.

Criticality toward national myths and their territorial pretensions lies behind a number of contemporary projects that also atone for the excesses of twentieth-century history. The experimental film *Ister* (Ross and Barison 2004), which was set on a boat journey from the Black Sea to the Black Forest, could be taken as a case in point. Here footage of the Danube provided grand scenery for interviews with several theorists invited to offer an extended contemplation on Heidegger's wartime lecture series devoted to romantic poet Friedrich Hölderlin's ode to the river (Heidegger 1996). In the prologue, French philosopher Bernard Stiegler cuts to the core of the Promethean mentality of domination over nature, countering Prometheus, "the master of fire, technics and knowledge," with his lesser known brother Epimetheus, the forgetful god who was given the task of assigning qualities to mortals—both animals and humans. This distribution of qualities represents, according to Stiegler, "the ecological balance of nature" (Ross and Barison 2004). These alternate streams of ecological prudence and ethos of technological domination were, however, only sporadically present in the film, which mainly considers the human tragedies brought by recent conflicts that touched the river's banks, as well as the dark memories that swirl around the Danube's wartime sites and the barbarity of the fascist ideology that originated upstream.

Social and historical concerns were also central to the Vienna-based TBA21 large-scale art project *Küba: Journey against the Current*, which was staged around a work by Turkish artist Kutlug Ataman. *Küba* consisted of forty television sets featuring life in a neighborhood of Istanbul known as Cuba for its unruliness, and was installed on a barge that made its way from the Black Sea to Vienna, stopping in each country along its route, where local artists were invited to respond to the exhibition. These artistic contributions also dealt mainly with issues of migration, history and memory, identity, and self-representation. Although the whole initiative was brought about in reaction to the floods of 2006 that dramatically affected downstream populations, which was also framed as an opportunity to "remind ourselves of our common humanity" (Von Habsburg 2010, 11), the artistic reflections and explorations remained mostly immersed in social and political considerations and neglected to examine the underlying causes of the flooding in climate change and the effects of accelerating human interventions on the river.

Both in the film *Ister* and the art project *Küba*, it seems that dualism between nature and society that is programmed into modernist rationality was not directly challenged, as the divide between social and natural history remained deeply engrained in their approach. Only a few years later with the ascent of the ideas crystallized around the notion of Anthropocene, a proposed term to supersede the Holocene epoch to acknowledge the extent to which humanity has become a decisive geological force (Schwägerl 2014), has the binary between Earth processes and human actions been rendered untenable. Following the premise that nature is "pervaded by the social" and societies are in turn "pervaded by nature," historians of science Bonneuil and Fressoz (2016) envisioned the decompartmentalization of "so-called social and so-called natural sciences" to bring about a "joint history of the Earth and human societies" (36–37). In that sense, the fresh dialogue engendered by environmental humanities, with the potential to reassemble the natural history of the river together with the sociopolitical history of the population living along the Danube banks to reveal their underlying reciprocity, was a departure point for the educational journey of the River School.

Slovak artist Ilona Németh (b. 1963), in her 2014 film *The Ship*, addressed another crucial aspect of the social history of the river by examining the socialist version of the ethos of industrial mastery and raising questions about both personal and systemic responsibility for its ecological legacy. Black-and-white footage from a 1961 communist educational film about river navigation for future captains shows the moment of a tricky maneuver in which a ship tugging barges carries out a U-turn in the middle of the river. These clips are combined with excerpts from an in-depth interview the artist made with her uncle, who was once an active participant in the political system of post-1968 normalization-era Czechoslovakia, concentrating on the instance when he reminisces about personal responsibility in an undemocratic system. The reversing in the direction of the ships is matched in Németh's film with reflections on political morality and individual ethics, demonstrating the enormity of the task of bringing about radical change in rigid social orders. As the artist explained, the turning of the boats could be seen as a "metaphor for the history of socialism," as well as pointing to the "wider issues of responsibility relevant to the current situation," ecological ones included (Németh 2015, 89).

Although in the modern era the river was made subservient to ideological and economic domination, for most of its geological history the Danube existed without human impact. The dynamic changes to its course in previous epochs were the result of the slow but dramatic transformations of the Earth's crust and long-term climatic cycles. Reflecting on the nonhuman dramas of the planet's "deep history," earth science historian Rudwick (2014) described the Earth as "a highly dynamic system, and its history as not only unimaginably lengthy, but also amazingly eventful" (261). Undoubtedly the history of the "primeval cosmic river" was just as colorful and traces in its alluvial deposits and pebbles scattered on the river bed contain subtle evidence of the unrecorded episodes of its long past. Similarly dynamic and unpredictable was the history of the Danube for the majority of its coexistence with humans, with riverside communities learning to respect and adapt to its variable flows, as well as to reconcile the many conflicting uses to which its waters and floodplains could be put, from fishing to tree milling, hunting, and grazing. Although having to "make compromises with each other in their dealings with the Danube" was a necessity, as environmental historian Schmid (2015) shared with the River School attendees, "a balance had always to be found between mutually contradictory interests" (86). The outcome of such social negotiations was the evasion of total control over the river's course.

It was only in the eighteenth century that the development of concerted attempts to straighten the river's course for navigation and tame its energies for power took hold. In the true spirit of Enlightenment this started with disciplining, cleansing, and cultivating the river for the apparent sake of navigation and flood control; as a consequence, over the coming decades the Danube was "regulated all the way from its source in the Black Forest to its mouth in the Black Sea, almost without interruption" (Schmid 2015, 86). As a result of these gargantuan processes, "extensive stretches of marshland have disappeared, regularly flooded meadows have been cut off from the main course of the flow, the settlements and industrial areas of the rapidly expanding towns and cities had spread out over the former floodplains" (Schmid 2015, 87), regardless of the impact on its ecosystems. Furthermore, technological infrastructures, such as harbors, bridges, and foremost numerous dams that interrupted its natural flows, started to dominate the river landscape. Occasionally construction projects and threats of ecological pollution and environmental degradation have erupted into social movements and activist protests.

The socialist megaproject of building a system of dams on the Danube between Hungary and Czechoslovakia could be taken as a case in point. It was initiated in the 1970s, with the intention to improve navigability, increase flood protection levels, and also use the hydropower of the river for energy production. This major bilateral project had wide-reaching ramifications for the social, political, and environmental spheres of the countries concerned and was hit by regular delays, so that in the end only the Slovak side was completed. According to German artist Axel Braun (b. 1983), who extensively researched the controversy for his work *Some Kind of Opposition* (2014–2016), the ill-fated dam project only started to move forward when Hungary's upstream neighbor Austria offered a loan to build the Nagymaros part, after the “environmental movement in Austria successfully blocked plans for another hydropower plant [on the Danube] at Hainburg” (Braun 2015, 96). The disadvantageous conditions offered to the cash-strapped socialist neighbor included the stipulation that 70 percent of the building work was to be carried out by Austrian contractors and that the loan should be repaid in peak-time electricity.

Despite the strict control of public opinion in socialist states, serious civic discontent with the dam-building plan arose from fears over the large-scale and unpredictable effects on the river and its surroundings. It also attracted a strong response from those activists for whom environmental concern merged with patriotic feelings because they saw the project as a “symbol of the state socialist system's disregard for the aesthetic and historical importance of the landscape” (Harper 2006, 30). The loudest criticism in Hungary was expressed through the civil initiative Danube Circle, which voiced ecological concerns and formulated environmental demands in congruence with a social and political agenda directed toward opposition to the socialist regime. The series of petitions and demonstrations they organized from the mid-1980s culminated in mass protests in front of Parliament that put pressure on the government to ultimately withdraw from the scheme. Indeed, the emergence of more ecologically attuned attitudes to the Danube overlaps with political and social history in revealing ways in Eastern Europe, where since the 1980s environmental concerns were a significant factor in the social and political dynamics of the fall of communism.

One of the signatories of the founding document of the Danube Circle in 1984 was artist Ilona Németh, who at the time was studying in Budapest but lived in a small town on the banks of the river in Slovakia, belonging to the Hungarian minority there. She attended the meetings in Budapest and was involved in making samizdat publications about the dam project, and as she regularly traveled back and forth, could share the information about their activities back in Slovakia. In effect, she acted as a kind of eco-messenger at the time when closed borders between socialist countries obstructed the free flow of communication and exchange (Fowkes 2015). While in Hungary protests grew during the 1980s, with large petitions signed against it and with thousands of determined citizens demonstrating, which in effect slowed down the project until it came off the agenda, in Slovakia the building continued. By the end of communism in autumn of 1989 the construction was almost complete. Nevertheless, on 16 December there was a mass public meeting against the dam in Slovakia and it turned out that “the first issue after the collapse of the political system was the Gabčíkovo-Nagymaros dam” (Németh 2015, 91).

The protests and civil actions continued over the next couple of years, and one that took place on 25 June 1991 was conceived as an artistic manifestation of the discontent, with Németh involved as co-organizer. Her own contribution entitled *Nature Effect* (Figure 2) consisted of a



FIGURE 2 Ilona Németh, *Nature Effect*, 1991. Courtesy of the artist.
(Color figure available online.)

large-scale action painting carried out on the inner side of the colossal concrete walls built for the water intake channel of the dam, which was about to be turned into a reservoir. The artist depicted a series of magnified willow trees that were native to the habitat, ordering them in a row as they typically stood along the river banks. Equally important for the artist was that the trees formed a valuable part of traditional lifestyles of the local population, who used their malleable branches to make baskets and fences. Pointing to the prospect of the loss of local knowledge that would disappear together with species following the destruction of their habitat, Németh expressed solidarity for other organisms affected by the dam construction, as well as for the local population, demonstrating the inseparability of natural and social issues.

On the same occasion, a Slovak artist of Hungarian origin, József R. Juhász (b. 1963) made a performance entitled *Dunasaurus*. Wearing a full diving suit and carrying a living fish in a plastic bag that was attached to the top of a wooden stick, the artist emerged out of an oxbow, which was a side arm of the Danube that was a consequence of building works cut off from the rest of the river. Juhász walked toward the police officer who was guarding the building site of the dam and informed him about the “fish’s request” to join its friends separated from each other in the process (Juhász 2015, 92–93). The permission from the policeman was not granted, and the artist released the fish back into the oxbow. In this action, the performer’s strategic alliance with the fish before the insensitive eyes of the authorities vividly demonstrated the indifference of state apparatuses toward grassroots initiatives. At the same time, Juhász put forward the largely overlooked issue of the rights of nature, commenting on the fatal consequences of such megalomaniac projects for species whose habitat has been severely affected.

Giving equal prominence to artistic projects into the interwoven histories of environmental and social protests was an underlying principle of the River School, based on the understanding

that contemporary art does not exist merely to illustrate scientific research into the environment, but also make a particular contribution to formation and activation of such knowledge. In that sense, artists Ilona Németh, József R. Juhász, and Axel Braun delivered singular accounts of their involvement with the watershed moments in environmental and political histories of the region. Németh and Juhász both took part in the historical events at the height of dam controversy, relying on their personal multiethnic experience to lift the issues above not only national perspectives, but also to include the voices of other affected species in the process. Braun, an artist belonging to the younger generation, situated the dam-building project within the scientific-rationalist attitude of technological elites that is characteristic of the Anthropocene era, both in its socialist and capitalist guises (Braun 2012).

An entry point into the current uses of the river was offered by Slovak writer Michal Hvorecky (b. 1976), who in his novel *Danube in America* dealt with the recent phenomenon of the river cruise ships that nowadays plough their way up and down the Danube (Hvorecky 2012). The passengers on *MS America* are mostly elderly and wealthy Americans, for some of whom, as the author wittingly conjured up, “Baroque was an Italian political dictatorship that govern the Europe before the Gothic era”; nevertheless, because these “people who wish to explore the European Rivers in the first class need a lot of money,” they also expect that “they will be attended to accordingly” (Hvorecky 2015, 105). The superior service is usually provided by Eastern European employees, who are not only obliged to do their best for the expectant guests, but also have to answer to the U.S. management of the cruisers. As the author revealed, there was only one way to get approval because “among the ten levels of satisfaction, the system only accepted the highest one, i.e. ‘excellent’” (Hvorecky 2015, 106). The tale of inequality and exploitative labor conditions that Hvorecky amusingly yet bitterly portrayed was inspired from his firsthand experience as a member of the cruise ship staff.

This is also a tale about the river turned into a flowing factory not only for energy and transport, but also for tourism and recreation; in short, a river governed by the logic of extractivism. As Klein (2014) persuasively described it, the extractivist mentality is “non-reciprocal, dominance based relationship with the Earth, one purely of taking,” and involves “the reduction of life into objects for the use of others” and turning “living complex ecosystems into natural resources,” which also often entails “the reduction of human beings into labour to be brutally extracted” (169). The interconnectedness of social inequalities with the attitude toward the natural world is subtly suggested by this novel. Even the itinerary of these trips could be taken as an indicator of the privileging mindset as it includes breaks in the panoramic cities that dot the Danube along its course, from Passau, Linz, Melk, and Vienna in Austria to Bratislava, Budapest, Novi Sad, and Belgrade on its Eastern European side. There are also twenty national parks and nature reserves connected to the river, but these green stretches seem to only provide scenery for the time spent on the boat between urban destinations. In a way, as the title suggests, the passengers never leave America.

Attempts at promoting a more integrated coexistence with the river and breaking down the divide between the natural world and urban culture is the program of the recent civic initiative Valyo, which combines the Hungarian words for city (*város*) and river (*folyó*). This grassroots movement proclaiming “Don’t deny the Danube” as their motto, aims to reconnect Budapest citizens with the river that flows mostly unnoticed and largely inaccessible through their midst, separated by the steady flow of traffic on both sides of its banks. By staging various events and festivals, from a stone-skipping championship, and yoga classes held by the oldest bridge

connecting the Buda and Pest sides of the river, to inviting the public for free rides on the water, as well as producing public art projects, the group has tried a range of tactics to activate citizens and “mark the Danube on their mental map” (Valyo 2015, 50–51). Although the membership of the Valyo collective draws on a wide constituency, from architects to biologists, it is noticeable that their primary strategy for engagement is a cultural one.

Learning from relevant practices that are concerned with rivers other than the Danube was also on the agenda of the River School, and in particular the actions and projects developed by Polish artist and activist Cecylia Malik (b. 1975) in her native town of Cracow. Her approach combines care for the natural environment, staging creative encounters that heighten awareness of the biodiversity in the city, and direct actions to stand up for natural entities in the face of the interests of developers and city officials. In her attempt to “make friends with the river” the artists took the initiative to organize *Critical Water Mass* (2013) adapting the idea of the “critical mass,” in which cyclists take over the city streets through an act of collective disobedience, for the river that flows through the center of Cracow. Encouraging local people to make their own rafts or simply “take pontoons and canoes and float on the river together,” she challenged presumptions that the Vistula is dangerous and unhygienic, as well as breaking the social code of not swimming in its waters (Malik 2015, 125). First envisioned as a one-off summer event, it has now grown into an annual grassroots festival of celebrating the river in the city.

Although many of her projects are community based, either taking place in public spaces or, for instance, turning her solo exhibition in the leading city gallery into a collective workshop of weaving plaits for use in a protest action in defense of a mountain river (Niedośpiał and Rostkowska 2013), *Six Rivers* (2011–2012) had a more individual character (Figure 3). Realizing that there is a general lack of awareness that along with the Vistula, Poland’s largest river, there are five other rivers that flow mostly unseen through the urban conglomeration of Cracow, the artist set out to paddle down all six waterways in a self-made boat built from found materials. Photo documentation and film footage of each river journey taking place within the city boundaries alternate between rubbish-filled vistas of neglect and environmental degradation and spots of flourishing biodiversity a stone’s throw from concrete sprawl. The finished work premiered in a public screening of the film under a city bridge best accessible by boat, and in this act the artist brought back the individual experience to the realm of the social, as an invitation to fully acknowledge the fluvial realities of the city.

Precisely calling for “a view from under the bridge” as a way to achieve a more river-centered approach was a point made by environmental historian Peter Coates, whose contribution to the River School was concerned with deconstructing modernist scholarship and Western cultural attitude to rivers, characteristically expressed through apocalyptic “before” and “after” scenarios. Namely, instead of perceiving human impact as resulting in “non-rivers, lost rivers, dead rivers or silenced rivers,” Coates delineated another stance, which emphasized “change rather than destruction, and the production of new and different rivers” (Coates 2015, 28). Furthermore, by acknowledging the agency of the river, understood as “a capacity to share outcomes” rather than implying intentionality, the balance is shifted toward the question of what rivers have done to us, as well as the limits they place on “our unbounded technological prowess” (Coates 2015, 33).

The sense of proximity to the river, which has become increasingly hard to attain as a result of its industrialization, is distinctly perceptible when one leafs through Fermor’s (2004) *Between the Woods and the Water*, a legendary account of a journey he made on foot from Holland to



FIGURE 3 Cecylia Malik, *6 Rivers*, 2011–2012. Photo by Cecylia Malik and Piotr Dziurdzia. Used with permission. (Color figure available online.)

Constantinople in 1934, spending much time along the banks of the Danube. “I was alone again with nothing but the swallows curvetting through the shadows or the occasional blue-green flash of a kingfisher to ruffle the stillness of leaves and water” (66) is just one of numerous episodes in which we are made aware of the experiential openness to the natural environment of the young wayfarer. Furthermore, his description of storks flying over the Danube, where they “would take to the air and cross the river into Slovakia, sunlight caught the upper side of their wings; then they tilted and wheeled back into Hungary with hardly a feather moving” (Fermor 2004, 19), indicates the primacy of ecological realities over transient political boundaries.

Sensitivity for the natural world and indifference to cultural prejudices toward the lower Danube came to the fore here, as the author depicted an integral ecological picture of the river indivisible from its landscape, its species, and its people. Reading it today, under the burden of climate change and increased disappearance of biodiversity, this chronicle offers a vivid testimony of the abundance of the natural world in the not so distant past. This is amplified by the fact that the Danube’s own mighty sturgeon that used to swim up all the way to Budapest and Vienna before the Iron Gate dam blocked its migratory path and prior to reckless overfishing, is now on the brink of extinction. What is more, delving into his travelogue in light of the current pace of contemporary life, recently pronounced to be the “Great Acceleration” (Steffen et al. 2015), it seems that his achievement in conveying such an interdependent view of the relationship of humans and nature was greatly aided by the fact that the writer experienced it in the most elementary way by walking. The measured gait of Fermor’s historical narration was also an influential source in conceptualizing the activities of the River School to include ample opportunities for unhurried encounters with the material reality of the Danube.

It is well known that the Danube flows through the four capital cities of Vienna, Bratislava, Budapest, and Belgrade; however the Romanian communist dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu attempted to add a fifth one by building a canal from the river to Bucharest. Begun in 1986, the Danube-Bucharest Canal was supposed to have five locks and four hydroelectric plants. A significant part of the project was completed before it came to an end together with the dictator in 1989. Ironically, such colossal interventions into geological matter and actual reroutings of the river for ideological purposes sometimes even exceed the artistic imagination. Another such site of large-scale intrusion into the landscape during the communist period is an artificial basin stretching over 190 ha on the outskirts of Bucharest that today is a *de facto* nature reserve in the city and has become known as the Bucharest Delta.

This accidental wilderness with its own incidental community of Roma fishermen that live there was the destination for one of the River School field trips that revealed to a group of artists, curators, and curious citizens a site of unmanaged nature flourishing on the margins of the postcommunist metropolis. To some extent, the Bucharest Delta could be indicative of the transformative potential of impromptu rewilding, alongside current planned attempts to restart natural processes in Anthropocene landscapes (Monbiot 2013). Furthermore, comparisons could be made with anthropologist Anna Tsing’s (2015) work on unexpected flourishing and coexistence of species in disturbed, daunting, and damaged natural environments. As she insists, such altered landscapes are not just “backdrops for historical action” because they are “themselves active” and in fact “disturbance realigns possibilities for transformative encounter” (Tsing 2015, 152). Whereas Tsing refers to human-modified ecosystems that thrive in ruins left by capitalist exploitation, the collaborative survival that Bucharest Delta is displaying on the edges of the Romanian capital is a monument to natural restoration arising from communist wreckage.

The profound observation that the Anthropocene “is primarily a sensorial phenomenon” emerges from the “experience of living in an increasingly diminished and toxic world” (Davis and Turpin 2015, 3). This sense of the momentousness of the unprecedented changes to the planetary system that is not only apprehended intellectually but also emotionally has nowadays become a constituent part of our appreciation of nature. Even in places such as the Danube Delta, exceptional for its ecological diversity, where when passing through its intricate network of channels and lakes one experiences “the wilderness as alive, full of action and completely independent from us” (Biemann 2015, 39), the feeling of precariousness is never far from our mind. In other words, the reassuring sensation of the resilience of the natural world can offer only a partial respite from a wider awareness of a drastic global deterioration in the ecological balance.

Visiting the Delta as part of River School was an opportunity for experimental approaches to curatorial and artistic research, relying on immersion in, openness to, and intercommunication with the actuality of that particular bioregion. The management and control of the upper reaches of the Danube appears less heavy-handed in the dispersed waterways on the edge of the Black Sea, and as Europe’s largest wetland habitat, the Delta is an intercontinental staging post for countless migratory birds. Its criss-crossed landscape of mosaic forests was shaped over centuries through interaction with human communities that largely succeeded in coexisting with the exuberance of amphibians, fish, insects, and other species whose lives were equally influenced by environmental and social forces. The interconnected histories of the Delta suggest the viability of the cosmopolitical proposition to expand the notion of politics to include human and nonhuman actors. Experiencing the volubility of the chorus of frogs emanating from the reeds on the edges of the water, as heard by the participants of River School excursion, led Swiss artist Urusla Biemann (2015) to comment that “the politics of the moment consists in including all these voices” (38). In this light, Sloterdijk’s (2015) call for a “new constitutional debate” involving “citizens of Earth in human and non-human forms” (338–39) appears not only urgent but also attainable.

The implications for a political ecology that arises from the cosmopolitical plea for a planetary jurisprudence in the wake of understanding of the scale of anthropogenic changes to the environment have also been conceptualized in contemporary art. In their series *Urban Wildlife* (2012–2014), Romanian artists Anca Benera (b. 1977) and Arnold Estefan (b. 1978) addressed the phenomena of synanthropization, or the “adaption of wild populations to human created conditions” by showing the appropriation of objects in the built environment as nesting sites for birds (Benera and Estefan 2015, 56–59). The artists juxtapose their drawings of found images of birds nesting in urban fixtures from traffic lights and security cameras to post boxes and a truck tire with instructive newspaper headlines announcing environmental policies or wittily referring to the birds’ unusual choice of home. On the one hand, the drawings give voice to the cosmopolitical interests of species that, having been forced to abandon degraded natural habitats, could be regarded as nonhuman environmental refugees. On the other, they raise an ethical question that is central to political ecology in the Anthropocene, that of the expansion of the notions of interspecies solidarity and collective responsibility.

The interconnectedness of social media, politics, and climate change came to the fore in the performance of artist József R. Juhász that took place during the last great Danube flood in June 2013 (Figure 4). Wearing a black tie and holding an umbrella, the artist stood on the overflowed embankment of the river in the center of Budapest, not far from the Hungarian Parliament. This



FIGURE 4 József R. Juhász, *Human Flood Level Indicator*, 2013. Photo by Endre Koronczí. Used with permission. (Color figure available online.)

unannounced performance was repeated several times during the day and night of 6 and 7 June when the flood wave was at its peak, strikingly showing the changes in the water level on his own body. His action provoked speculation of passers-by as to the purpose of the spectacle, discussion that soon took on a viral form as images of Juhász in the Danube started to appear on social networks. One of the comments read *Human Flood Level Indicator*, which then became the title of the work. The image of the dressed-up figure solemnly standing exposed to the rising river, poignantly holding an umbrella to the dry skies, brought unavoidable associations of how interlocked extreme weather conditions are with climate change, in an act of personification of the “total inertia” of climate indifference (Latour 2015, 146). The choice of a site close to the Hungarian Parliament also carried a political charge regarding the unwillingness of public institutions to address the underlying causes of increasingly frequent and more extreme river flooding.

The Danube in the Anthropocene appears to have come full circle, as it tests the boundaries of human technological mastery, and appears again as a cosmic, primeval force that exceeds the limits of scientific rationality. As the River School has shown, today’s narratives of the Danube are more likely to decipher the river as a symbol of European unity and a weaver of multicultural histories than use it to stamp ethnic, national, or imperial identities on the territories through which it flows. In the light of the Anthropocene, the modernist divide between human culture and the natural world appears increasingly anachronistic, as do histories of the river that either omit mention of its ecological reality or chronicle the river’s progressive subjugation. The River School utilized the promising research possibilities opened up by current efforts to reunify the natural sciences and humanities, and emphasized in particular the relevance of artistic approaches in contributing to our understanding of the Danube. The principle of learning with the river, foremost through excursions that allowed for a range of noninstitutionalized encounters with its ecological reality, engendered a more affirmative understanding of the Danube’s fluvial agency. With the expanded notion of cosmopolitics in the wake of the global climate emergency and unprecedented rate of species extinction, the political ecology of the river can no longer be confined to its banks, but attends to planetary processes and calls for fresh social and cultural alliances.

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