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GALA Lab: River School
Translocal Institute, Budapest

The River School project took place between 2013 and 2015 mostly along the Danube in both cities and wilderness areas, and was made up of a series of study days, workshops, symposia, exhibitions and excursions.

1) Navigating Ecological Times Study Day

Whitechapel Gallery, London

30 August 2013

This study day looked at the challenges of living in ecological times and the sense in which the current political, economic and environmental predicament might also offer opportunities for a sustainable transformation of global society. It considered how have artists sought to navigate the dilemmas of living and working in a world system that seems chronically out of touch with ecological realities and can they, through their practice and approach to the world, act as guides during times of crisis. Together with project curators, Drs. Maja and Reuben Fowkes, artists Tamás Kaszás, Lise Autogena and Fernando Garcia-Dory took part in a conversation which opened up many of the questions around living with rivers, engaging with the natural world and making art in the anthropocene that are the focus of the River School.

<http://translocal.org/navigate/index.html>

2) Danube Currents Symposium

Central European University, Budapest

4 October 2013

Danube Currents was an interdisciplinary overture to the river that examined its transformative power for writers, artists and activists both today and at critical, system-changing moments of the recent past. In contrast to conventional approaches that stress the geo-political significance and cultural heritage of the fluvial region, the focus of this gathering was on personal and collective interactions with the river and its environmental history, current initiatives to reconnect with the Danube through contemporary lifestyles and explorations of the currents of artistic experimentation that flow across borders. Focusing on the social and cultural aspects of the river Danube, it included presentations by Slovak writer Michal Hvorecky and Budapest-based activist Cili Lohász. This event provided a foretaste of the larger River School symposium held the following year.

<http://translocal.org/danubecurrents/index.html>

3) Like a Bird: Avian Ecologies in Contemporary Art Exhibition

Trafó House of Contemporary Arts, Budapest

13 December 2013 – 26 January 2014

transit.ro, Bucharest

9 May 2014 – 4 June 2014

The River School exhibition featured artists whose work engages with the ecological adaptability of birds to urban settings, the productive cohabitation of birds and humans in the countryside, as well as the problematic environmental implications of the over-management of species and their habitats. Controversies around conservation, the discursive relationship of art and science, alternating between complementarity and conflict, along with the general critique of the anthropocentric attitude to nature, were equally at stake here. The exhibited works also address the discrepancies between the symbolic visions of birds and the territories they inhabit in mythical and national psyches and the subtle and sensuous relation to birds in traditional and non-alienated cultures. Like a Bird presented the work of Greta Alfaro, Anca Benera and Arnold Estefan, Tamás Kaszás and Anikó Loránt, Szabolcs Kisspál, London Fieldworks, James Prosek and Andrea Roe, all of whom also contributed interviews to the River School publication that illuminate their practice and work in the show. While focusing on avian ecologies, Like a Bird provided a platform to investigate contiguous issues around the changing human relationship to the natural world, the channelling of environmental awareness, and its social and political dimensions. The exhibition itself migrated in May 2014 to Tranzit.ro Gallery in Bucharest, a slight deviation from the course of the Danube that brought in many new perspectives and responses to the artistic and theoretical investigations of the River School. The exhibition program also included 2 artist talks in Budapest (Andrea Roe and Szabolcs Kisspál) and one in Bucharest (Ursula Biemann).

<http://translocal.org/riverschool/likeabird.html>

4) River School Excursions

Bucharest Delta

9 May 2014

Danube Delta

10-12 May 2014

Szentendre

4 October 2014

At many points in the project, indoor symposia and exhibitions were complemented with outdoor excursions. In Bucharest, participants were taken on a tour of the accidental wilderness of the Bucharest Delta led by anthropologist Miruna Tircâ. An excursion to the Danube Delta was one of the core experiential moments of the River School and a unique opportunity to be immersed in the wilderness of a river bio reserve in the company of artists Ursula Biemann and Vlad Basilici. A riverboat excursion upstream with participants in the River School Symposium to Szentendre was a chance to deepen our discussions and included an alternative tour led by curator Márton Pacsika of its rich artistic and social history, and a roundtable discussion at the Art Mill in Szentendre.

<http://translocal.org/riverschool/riverschoolbucharest.html>

5) River School Symposium on Art, Ecopower and the Liberation of Energy

Central European University, Budapest

3-4 October 2014

The artistic and theoretical tributaries of the River School flowed together at the symposium on Art, Ecopower and the Liberation of Energy held at CEU Budapest in October 2014, with the participation

of artists Axel Braun, Jozsef R. Juhász, Cecylia Malik, Ilona Németh and James Prosek, environmental historians Peter Coates and Martin Schmid, scientist Ian Fairlie and writer Nick Thorpe. This was the setting for vivid discussions about the environmental history of rivers, human and river agency, as well as the social, political and artistic histories of the River Danube. While appreciating the natural strength, kinetic energy and resilience of rivers, the discussion also took into account political struggles over their use, as well as schemes to control and harness their flows.

<http://translocal.org/riverschool/artandecopower.html>

6) Paths Less Travelled: The Renewable Energy of Stroom Den Haag

Translocal Institute, Budapest

11 October 2014

Guest presentations at Translocal institute on the Dutch practice and experience of sustainable art also provided a platform for discussion of the role of autonomous art initiatives in transforming the city environment.

<http://translocal.org/paths/dutch.html>

7) River Ecologies: Contemporary Art and Environmental Histories on the Danube

Published by Translocal Institute

April 2015

The final outcome of the non-institutionalised and river-centred learning experience of the River School is the publication *River Ecologies: Contemporary Art and Environmental Humanities on the Danube*. The reference to environmental humanities in the title reflects the wide-ranging contributions of environmental historians, environmental theorists, anthropologists and scientists as well as writers and artists to the project. 'On the Danube' places this inquiry in a particular setting that transcends national, social and ethnic boundaries, turning our attention towards the materiality of the river and alluding to the many species with which we share its flows. The book brings together interviews, essays and conversations from the whole course of the River School, to provide a lasting point of reference and record of the project.