

NOTES FROM THE FIELD

Designing an art-based restorative response for river Zenne

*Brunilda Pali, Maria Lucia Cruz Correia, Marine Calmet and Vinny Jones**

1 Introduction

We cannot protect something we do not love, we cannot love what we do not know, and we cannot know what we do not see. Or touch. Or hear (Louv, 2012: 104).

In a previous contribution to the Notes from the Field, we had described our collaboration in the artistic project *Voice of nature: the trial* (Cruz Correia, 2021). That project was the first of a series of ongoing collaborations through which we have placed the ethos and praxis of restorative justice at the centre of art-based interventions that imagine novel responses to ecocide.

More specifically, from the court project, our collaboration developed in 2020 into a 'Kinstitute', a utopian public service acting as kin to more-than-humans. The Kinstitute aims to conduct long-term projects dedicated to environmental and climate justice, ecocide and the possibilities of proposing justice through artistic, juridical and restorative justice practices. We draw our thinking about kinship from Donna Haraway's (2016) concept of feminist kin-making and her ethical plea to attend to accountabilities and obligations to care across generations. The Kinstitute's work is based largely on six research pillars: (1) ecocide; (2) rights of Nature; (3) the guardian of nature; (4) restorative justice; (5) ecological grief; and (6) artistic and sensorial practices. Rather than being a real place, the Kinstitute is ongoing and has an open readiness to engage in collective thinking and acting around environmental harms.

In what follows we will elaborate on the project *Natural Contract Lab*,¹ which has so far been a central part of the work of the Kinstitute and that aims to respond to harms done to rivers in Belgium, Portugal and Switzerland. In this article, we focus mainly on the practice developed on the Zenne river in Belgium.

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1 See <http://mluciacruzcorreia.com/works/walking-with-the-river-zenne>.

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2 Natural Contract Lab: 'Walking-with' Zenne

Natural Contract Lab designs a sustained protocol of repair for bodies of water under deep ecological transformation. The artistic format explored in the course of this project is hybrid and dynamic, as it unfolds as a different response to each place, situated as a social encounter, an event or a collective laboratory. The team that calls itself the 'Body of Repair' is led by artist Maria Lucia Cruz Correia and constituted by environmental jurist Marine Calmet, restorative justice scholar Brunilda Pali, scenographer Vinny Jones, climate grief expert Evanne Nowak, architect Lode Vranken, videographer Mark Požlep and sound researcher Margarida Mendes. The Body of Repair is a transdisciplinary collective that questions the state of environmental justice through practices of walking, rituals of care, sensorial exercises, restorative processes, Rights of Nature pleas, landscape grieving and guardian of Nature contracting.

The practice we developed on the river Zenne (Belgium), which we call *Walking-with-Zenne*, started at the beginning of 2021 and is ongoing. The river Zenne flows through the three regions of Belgium (Wallonia, Brussels Capital Region and Flanders) and passes through the city of Brussels and about 30 villages. Starting from its source in Soignies, it flows into the river Dijle in Heffen, from where it reaches the river Schelde and the North Sea. However, it is not possible to follow Zenne's entire course because it often flows underground or along so-called 'private property'. The river Zenne has been substantially polluted, diverted, harmed and forgotten throughout the centuries. It was long used mainly as an open sewer for the excrements and wastewater of thousands of families and for the chemicals of the adjacent factories. From around 1867 to the 1970s, Zenne was subjected to major urban interventions, which led to its canalisation, tubing, diversion and vaulting (Holst, 2015).

Moved by the ecocidal history of the river and the silence about its impacts, at the first stage of the study, we designed a sustained protocol of repair that unfolds through a series of artistic 'walking-with' practices supported by our six research pillars. The sustained protocol of repair is essentially a step-by-step long-term process intended mainly as a roadmap of intentions and possibilities. The sustained protocol of repair for Zenne that we envisioned and designed could take place ideally in six steps: (1) mapping river relationality; (2) documenting harms to Zenne and her relations; (3) documenting existing repair and resistance attempts and processes; (4) engaging community in repair processes and elaborating commitments; (5) concentrating and sustaining further repair processes; and (6) expanding ripples of repair to include larger community.

In what follows, we will describe more concretely the practice of 'walking-with' Zenne that we have developed, where we illustrate more concretely the ideas described in some of these steps.

3 Walking-with Zenne

Given that none of us are native to the Zenne river, we had to carefully think about what modes of embodiment, attention and imagination we would need in order to know Zenne and create with it an ethical relationality (Myers, 2016: 3). The use of embodied sensory practices aiming at actively changing the perspective of the audience/participants from looking at to 'being-with' the river was quite important. This led to the group discovering that it wanted to pursue this study by 'walking-with' Zenne. The act of walking engages all the senses and creates an attitude of respect that 'folds body, self, other humans and non-humans, time-space and place together' (Edensor, 2010: 78). 'Walking-with' is for us also a methodology for thinking ethically and politically because it is in this process of thinking and 'walking-with' water that we can 'open up questions about human and nonhuman entanglements' (Springgay & Truman, 2019: 1; also Alaimo, 2010). It is through 'walking-with' that we co-design our practices with the communities in, along and around the river, through which we map the sociopolitical impact of ecocide in relation to the hydro-commons of Zenne and through which we engage in meaningful and sustained processes of collective healing and repair. We give each walk a specific dramaturgy, choreographing the experience through the scoring of sensory practices at specific moments along the walk, combining with the restorative circle work.

During 2021, besides participation in several art festivals, we engaged in a total of five walks with Zenne (each time walking a different segment of the river), each time together with six/seven 'guest' participants in addition to the active team of five/six members. Currently, we plan to continue the 'walking-with' practices along Zenne by designing bimonthly walks in different segments and with different communities along the river until we have walked the whole river course from source to end, including an uninterrupted walk with the communities.

Our practice is augmented by 'props' that we carry with us as we walk. Designed around the theme of mapping the river by engaging with practices of observing, listening and collecting, the props were designed and made by artist/architect Lode Vranken, with the aim of being portable objects that could function both as a symbolic and as a practical tool through which, and when combined with sensory practices, we could activate specific ways of being with the river. The props are simple wooden objects that have a distinct aesthetics, creating a strong image when carried by a group of people walking along the river. From within the group, they may be seen as generative of a sense of identity for our temporary community, while creating a curious image for the outside eye. They are designed with the idea of being ergonomic; however, they are also somehow contrastingly awkward to carry and necessitate a certain concentration while walking the river parcours. These props necessitate a moment of collective work and activate the idea of sharing the load, as the objects are passed around the group. Simultaneously, the props embody a sense of physical care and appeal to humour. Through them we harness the ability of the artistic practice to take the act of walking to another level, opening up for ways of being, and being with, that might be difficult to quickly achieve in everyday life. The props include chairs constructed with the

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purpose of collecting and sitting, a collecting basket, a water collecting object, a listening antenna and a periscope.

Figure 1 *Natural Contract Lab, Maria Lucia Cruz Correia, 2021 © Mark Požlep*



The call for group assembly for each walk is open, and its participants are always different. Hence, our walks include both participants we do not know and members of the river community who accept to be our witnesses and tell stories either about the ecocide or about resistance and repair attempts. They usually live close to the river and have a strong affinity and bond with its waters. After welcoming our temporary community for the day, we briefly introduce ourselves, the project and our props, which we then share with everyone. We start our walk by collecting water from the river, asking its permission to let us ‘walk-with’ it, water that we release at the end back to the river. This water carries the energy of our journey. We also use the water as a ‘talking piece’, or as an object to anchor the circles and try to remain connected to the river while sharing our stories, thoughts and feelings. Starting the walk this way also conveys to the participants that we are present with Zenne with purpose and respect and sets the tone for the walk.

Sometime after the departure of the walk, we introduce an Observation Practice to create focus and concentration, aiming to take participants out of everyday lives and into the practice of ‘walking-with’ the river. The idea of reciprocity is introduced in the practice: looking is not a one-way road – when we observe the natural world, it observes us back. We are both looking at and being looked at. We are a part of the world and may not simply be constituted as outside observers. This, and other practices we have developed during the walks, activate a specific sensory focus, ways of looking and listening and feeling the river and its surroundings, aimed at opening up a reciprocal relationship with the river and at being more aware of the ways in which we can affect and be affected by it. A large part of attention goes to the ‘affective tonality’ (Gendron-Blaise, Gil, & Mason, 2016) of the walks and to how our ‘attention would be distributed’ (Ahmed, 2008: 30) during them.

After some time, we sit together in the first restorative circle. This first circle is usually facilitated by restorative justice expert Brunilda Pali and is dedicated to

creating a bond among the group, creating community with the surrounding environment and the river. We use the 'talking piece' to regulate the circle and ask the participants to share stories about their relation with the river or with other significant water bodies. Besides the intention of 'creating community', our restorative circle practices also attune to a collective thinking in the 'presence of others' (Stengers, 2005: 996). To think in the presence of others and with others creates a space for humbleness, hesitation, resistance and extended imagination that produces new modes of relating.

After two or three rounds of questions, we introduce the case of the ecocide, which we call the Plea for the Rights of Nature, introduced by the environmental lawyer Marine Calmet. When Zenne is called as first-hand witness to ecocide, we usually introduce one of the props, which is a listening antenna. Underlying the idea that a river is a body with integral rights, we place the antenna in the circle. We connect a hydrophone (underwater microphone) to the antenna so that the 'voice' of the river can be presented in the circle and listen collectively to the river. This is a moment where the river can 'speak for itself'. After one or two rounds of questions, we conclude the first circle. Following this step of the walk, we engage in individual listening to the underwater sound and engage in a listening practice before starting to walk again, this time in silence to give the focus to listening to the river.

During the walk we engage with an ongoing practice of 'mapping and collecting'. These mapping tools aim to collect what we observe and to collect and remove harms that we encounter. When walkers encounter something that they feel is important to collect, be it an object or observation or the contact of a person or group connected to the river, they are asked to place it in the (collecting) chair. When walkers see a harm that can be removed, such as rubbish or invasive plants, we ask them to place it in the collecting basket as a gesture of care. Both objects cannot be operated by one person alone, as it is difficult to both carry and fill them while walking. The objects require that we work together. What is essential to highlight here is that through the props and the sensory practices, participants are immersed in the doing of things, observing, listening, etc. and in the doing of these things with a particular attention and context. After we have walked for some time, the second circle is organised, and it is focused on grieving the river and is led by Evanne Nowak, who has a research background in climate apathy and currently facilitates climate grieving processes.

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Figure 2 *Natural Contract Lab, Maria Lucia Cruz Correia, 2021 © Mark Požlep*



After the grieving stage, which gets participants to dig further into their own memories and emotions, but also to realise both the affinity with and the difference between their own perspectives and those of others in the temporary community, we continue to walk further, until we reach the end of the walk, and sit together for the last circle, which is dedicated to the co-creation of a guardian of Nature contract. This is based on our firm assumption that ‘we are no more predisposed towards being destroyers of Nature than we are toward being stewards’ (Loring, 2020: 20). To be a guardian means to uphold a view of people as part of Nature, neither separate from nor above it. A guardian should be able to articulate a relational jurisprudence and formulate arguments to defend laws for equitable, reciprocal and balanced relationships with non-humans. As an outcome of this agreement, participants take the responsibility as guardians of the river and together we sketch a proposal that envisions the protection of the vital cycle of the Zenne river. The contract also works as a process to clarify expectations about who will take what role, when and in what manner. As mentioned previously, while we turn our attention to accountability, we also shift the idea of accountability from being responsible for to a response-ability-with (Thiele, 2014), where to be accountable is eventually about ‘making commitments and connections’ (Barad, 2007: 329), so that we can enhance our collective abilities to respond to harms and imagine new ways of co-existence (Pali & Aertsen, 2021).

4 Conclusion

In conducting durational projects with others (artists, community members, but also more-than-human beings and entities), whereby the intent of the inquiry is to ‘create a different world, and to ask what kinds of futures are imaginable’, we need to think about and do research differently (Springgay & Truman, 2018: 204). Our research-led artistic practice is an example of the important role that imaginative

processes can have in responding to environmental harms. Imagination-led tools and artistic practices have demonstrated that they can open a terrain where we co-cultivate our right, duty and power to imagine different modes of living together with the earth and plural forms of life that inhabit it (see Pali, 2020).

What we have seen emerging from the walks is not only a revived sense of care for the river and the other-than-human inhabitants of its ecosystem but a sense of reciprocal care that grows as we collectively open ourselves to the river and witness a sensation of replenishment emerging, that is for many of us a form of healing that comes from 'walking-with' and 'being-with' a river. As Robin Wall Kimmerer writes in *Braiding Sweetgrass* (2013: 339) 'As we work to heal the earth, the earth heals us'.

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