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# Becoming a river: Liquid disasters and speculative stories

Notes and documents from  
the Summer School curated by  
Cecilia Canziani, Federico Luisetti  
and Federica Martini  
at the Istituto Svizzero di Roma,  
25 August – 1st September 2019

In 1962, J. G. Ballard imagines a “drowned world” as a result of global warming. The temperature in the Equator is 180°C, the ice caps have collapsed, and Europe is breaking into an archipelago of lagoons. A group of scientists is trying to map the surviving nature in a submerged London city. Artificial lakes, multiple waterfalls and liquid platforms occupy the urban space following the failures of “synchronization” between the rhythm of industrial modernity and that of imperfect nature.

Starting from Ballard's dystopian 1960s cli-fi novel *avant-la lettre*, the Summer School *Becoming a River* brought into question memory and present tense of water-related disasters and hosted at the Istituto Svizzero di Roma a week of aesthetic and scientific discussions and prospections on exceptional floods, inundations, the disruption of dams and artificial lakes.

**Team:** Cecilia Canziani, curator and art historian, Rome; Federico Luisetti, philosopher, Professor at the Faculty for Italian Culture and Society, University of St Gallen; Federica Martini, Head of Fine Arts at the EDHEA – The Valais School of Art; Aurélie Strumans, artist, Assistant at the MAPS – Master of Arts in Public Spheres, EDHEA; Marie Velardi, artist and researcher, Professor at the EDHEA; *with the assistance of* Ghalas Charara, Maëlle Cornut, Patricia Comby, EDHEA

**Guests:** Dayron Carrillo Morell (art historian & PhD candidate, University of Zurich), Dario Gentili (philosopher, Università Roma 3), Wilko Graf von Hardenberg (historian, Max Plank Institute for the History of Science), Aria Spinelli (curator and researcher, Radical Intention), Sergio Sarra (artist), Giulia Fiocca, Lorenzo Romiti (Stalker), Elettra Stimilli (philosopher, Scuola Normale Superiore).

**Screenings:** Ursula Biemann, Deborah Ligorio, Uriel Orlow, William Raban, Maya Schweizer, Marie Velardi and Rhino Ariefiansyah

**Participants:** Omar Adel, Francesco Alberico, Seba Ali, Simone Camerlenghi, Dona Cetoute, Caterina Giansiracusa, Anna-Tina Jedele, Lorenzo Kamerlengo, Gianmaria de Lisio, Andrea Herrera Poblete, Lucia Masu, Carlos Morado, Gioele Pomante, Rachel Nisbet, Gianluca Ragni, Eliano Serafini

Here again the rise of global water levels would have been little more than a few feet, but the huge discharging channels carried with them billions of tons of top-soil. Massive deltas formed at their mouths, extending the continental coastlines and damming up the oceans. Their effective spread shrank from two-thirds of the world's area to only slightly more than half. Driving the submerged silt before them, the new seas completely altered the shape and contours of the continents. The Mediterranean contracted into a system of inland lakes, the British Isles was linked again with northern France. The Middle West of the United States, filled by the Mississippi as it drained the Rocky Mountains, became an enormous gulf opening into the Hudson Bay, while the Caribbean Sea was transformed into a desert of silt and salt flats. Europe became a system of giant lagoons, centred on the principal low-lying cities, inundated by the silt carried southwards by the expanding rivers. During the next thirty years the pole-ward migration of populations continued. A few fortified cities defied the rising water levels and the encroaching jungles, building elaborate sea-walls around their perimeters, but one by one these were breached. Only within the former Arctic and Antarctic Circles was life tolerable. The oblique incidence of the sun's rays provided a shield against the more powerful radiation. Cities on higher ground in mountainous areas nearer the Equator had been abandoned despite their cooler temperatures because of the diminished atmospheric protection.

J. G. Ballard, *The Drowned World* (1962), London: Harper Collins, 2014, pp. 33–34.





Superstudio, *Il Monumento Continuo, Manifesto New York (in nero e azzuro)*, 1969  
 Lithograph, ink on paper, 70x100 cm, Edition 2/100  
 Photo: François Lauginie, Collection FRAC Centre-Val de Loire, Gift of the Superstudio Archives, Florence



The words that come to mind most often first came to mind on a spring morning, on my way back from a walk. The water had suddenly lowered, and for a few hours the old walls reemerged, the meadows covered with grass and sand. Erich took me by the hand and then to the window. It seemed to me that nowhere is there more water. I still see the village, the fountain with the cows queuing up to quench their thirst, the barley fields, the wheat fields with Florian, Ludwig and the others who mowed them. [...]

Behind here, above the old town, there's his tomb. It's in a small cemetery overlooking the artificial lake. A few days before putting the TNT in the houses a Montecatini foreman went to Father Alfred to tell him that they would cover the cemetery with a bitumen casting. Then Father Alfred took him by the neck, made him kneel under the altar and forced him to repeat what he had said in front of the crucifix. For the last time, Erich went around all the farms. For the last time, people, even those who had always slammed the door in his face and puffed on him, gathered in front of the church to shout that our deads could not be submerged first under the concrete and then under water. [...]

In summer I went down to take a walk and skirt the reservoir. The dam produces very little energy. It costs much less to buy it from French nuclear power plants. In just a few years, the bell tower that stands over the dead water has become a tourist attraction. At first, the holidaymakers were amazed and after a while, distracted. They take pictures with the church tower behind them, and they all make the same dumb smile. As if under the water there were not the roots of the old larches, the foundations of our houses, the square where we gathered. As if history had not existed.

Everything has regained a strange appearance of normality. On the

windowsills and balconies geraniums have returned, cotton curtains hang at the window. The houses we live in today resemble those of any other alpine village. On the streets, when the holidays are over, you feel an impalpable silence, which perhaps no longer hides anything. Even the wounds that don't heal sooner or later stop bleeding. The anger, even that of the violence inflicted, is destined, like everything else, to slip away, to surrender to something greater whose name I do not know. You would have to question the mountains to understand what it was.

Marco Balzano, *Resto qui*, Torino: Einaudi, 2018.



Deborah Ligorio, *The Submerged Town*, 2008  
 Video still, Courtesy of the artist  
 Photo: Deborah Ligorio

Bright volumes of vapour through

Lothbury glide,

Bution of

By chemicals

By original usage, a river is

flowing water in a channel with

defined banks (ultimately from

Latin ripa, “bank”).

Character

Climatic shifts are known to be

capable of effecting fill or

clearance of channels and valleys;

They can also change the channel

Habit.

Redell Olsen for Roni Horn, “Still Water (The River Thames, for Example)”, *Shark*, No. 4, Summer 2002, pp. 70–71.

## Aubade per Il Petrolio

*‘Basti sapere che è una specie di  
«summa» di tutte le mie esperienze, di  
tutte le mie memorie’*

*Pier Paolo Pasolini on writing Il Petrolio*

How was the Tiber? 18:10

You know Anthony’s lines to chiding Cleo,  
who says his wife is nagging he gets  
home: 18:15

‘Let Rome in Tiber melt...Here is my  
space?

Seems the Tiber’ 1598 flood  
was huge. Did viewers of A & C’s premier  
know the Tiber lapped a metre below  
the Santa Maria Miracolo? 18:16

Imagine Rome’s plebeians as a stressed  
mud logging team

Assessing a ruined city, sloughed by  
drear, sludgy streams. 18:21

A river in spate creates faster and  
muddier work. 23:15

If your reservoir’s cored, are you drilling  
Bajocian shales?

What car driver pictures you, logging  
in a ‘shed of pain’  
after the intact core is cut and lain  
like those fallen Imperial pillars? 23:23

Or remembers the rushed Tiber coursing  
up the street past Canova’s workshop,  
and pausing between Psyche and  
Cupid’s half-carved lips? 23:49

Now the Tiber’s flood channels are paved  
roads  
where cars’ lamella flow stalls sight-seers.  
In Rome, petrol runs freely. Can it drown  
hurt like Psyche’s at the hands of  
Sorrow? 00:04

A 2 trillion-dollar oil & mineral market is a  
good anaesthetic. 00:34

All wealth’s alchemy. Stock markets chirr  
endlessly: *sogni d’oro*. 00:44

I swim from sleep, through clear, sweet,  
fresh water  
to surface as you fin towards the deep,  
leaving grey drizzle and blast walls behind.  
In this oiled world, ripples spread like  
heartache.

My showered hair drips. Can you wash  
the smell

Of crude and drilling fluid from your skin?  
When my song is better dressed to travel  
I may ask. To clothe it, I climb the tower  
as *papageni* wake and preen  
bright green birds, yawning, soft, serene.

The sea has washed into the air  
salt swirls around me with no care

the sun is lost and bilious  
the horizon blushes, anxious

for the wayward sun, too. I wait  
then, the sun’s hull washes up, late

capsized, an ebb tide dragging it  
into the sea air, which fires it

a tender, eye aching orange.  
Buoyed upwards, the sun rains, rains  
orange

over Rome, irresponsibly.  
St Peter’s waits, uncomfortably

but grey ticks show the dawn can’t raise  
the deep sleep, slicked upon your face. 08:14

Rachel Nisbet





Marie Velardi, *Roma, il Tevere*, 2013  
 Watercolor on map, 50×69.5 cm  
 Courtesy of the artist, Photo: Vincent Locatelli





Marie Velardi, *Roma, alluvioni del Tevere*, 2013  
Watercolor on map, 50 x 69.5 cm  
Courtesy of the artist, Photo: Vincent Locatelli



Marie Velardi, *Roma centro, falda acquifera*, 2013

Watercolor on map, 50×69.5 cm

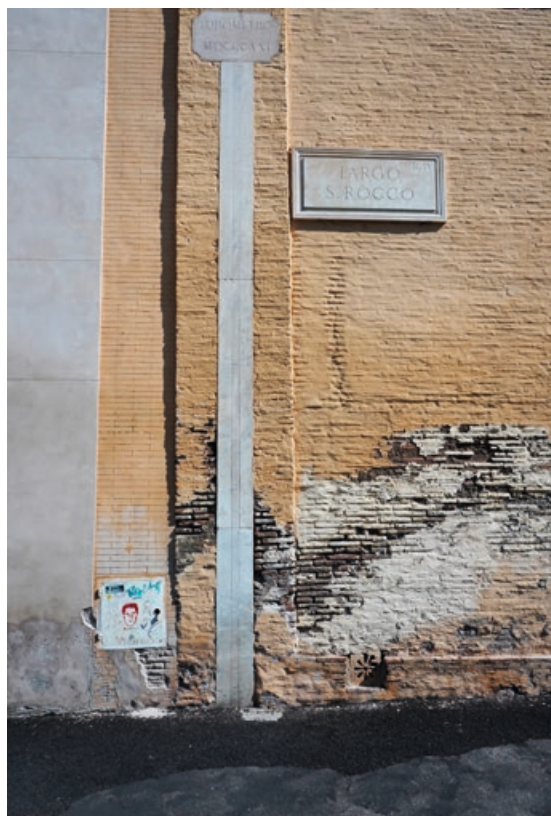
Courtesy of the artist, Photo: Vincent Locatelli





Marie Velardi, *Roma, falde acquifere*, 2013  
 Watercolor on map, 50×69.5 cm  
 Courtesy of the artist, Photo: Vincent Locatelli





Marie Velardi, *Idrometri*, 2019  
Digital photograph series, various dimensions  
Courtesy of the artist





A moment in the walk to the Lago  
Ex-Snia with Stalker  
Photo: Aurélie Strumans

Shortly after Robert Smithson completed his monumental Earthwork *Spiral Jetty* in the summer of 1970, the level of the Great Salt Lake in Utah rose several meters. *Spiral Jetty* was submerged under water and hidden from view for many years. It was only visible by airplane, as an outline beneath the waves. More than twenty years later, in fall 1993, *Spiral Jetty* at last reappeared. Initially it could be seen only during the fall and winter, but now, with the water level continuing to recede, it is often completely dry.

Philip Ursprung, *Allan Kaprow, Robert Smithson, and the Limits to Art*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013, p. 1.

## The Emergency Suitcase

Among the mute spaces and objects transformed by water above and below the visible world, human beings experimented with new expedients to recover lost objects.

Marine archaeology had undergone considerable development, as had the black market for lost things. Archaeologists and looters patrolled the submerged cities scattered along the perimeter of the island, especially where people were surprised by the storms and quickly evacuated.

Those who had left the coast in the emergency regretted having abandoned artefacts and furnishings left in the evacuated houses; the relatives of the deceased claimed the emotional objects that belonged to the dead.

Alongside the archaeologists in search of artistic finds and significant examples of that piece of history, the looters resold their discoveries in the field of antiques and private collecting. Underwater laid the ancient columns, vases, capitals, menhirs and the most impressive works and then junk and articles of all kinds, abandoned voluntarily or involuntarily by their owners.

After the coastal city was made safe by demolishing or reinforcing the unstable buildings, the area was opened to the first sporadic visits of its original inhabitants. Some governmental agencies were active in the service of displaced people eager to find lost or forgotten things.

In Marina, the inhabitants had been able to anticipate their departure, selecting what they wanted to take away. Recourse to the recovery agencies was irregular and concentrated more in areas where cyclones had hit unpredictably. Sometimes, the die-hards who had left the city at the last moment and the Advocates of the New World who had renounced all their possessions found themselves returning directly or indirectly

to their steps in search of lost things. This also happened to centenarians or almost centenarians with a fragile memory, like Aunt Lia.

There were agencies with evocative names, mostly run by women, which were linked to the water cult inscribed in the history of the island. Agencies such as The Water Lilies, Divining Wives or Sea Nannies expressed the idea of no longer being at the mercy of the elements, but of taking an active approach in support of life. According to some, the rupture of the waters with the consequent flood had inaugurated the birth of a new era. This new time in history demanded an empathic form of adaptation rather than the submission of life forms other than human. After the catastrophe and the violent transformation of the earth's geography, it was possible to return to the water where life had originated and rebuild a society mindful of its mistakes and open to transformation. Water had destroyed the geometries of buildings and the certainties of humans by flooding the frontiers. Everything had become possible, every form could assert itself in the formless liquid. The shards were the raw material of reconstruction. The fragments of the past could be assembled by experimenting with unprecedented solutions.

In this rich panorama, I turned to a group that operated beyond regional borders and shared an ethic of care and reparation of the past. The SCRIVO<sup>1</sup> were concerned with the conservation and repair of objects of subjective identity value. They published images of submerged places and an archive of the things and testimonies that they had managed to find. In their research, they included the presence of the client, depending on age, physical and psychic form. Finding a lost or abandoned object

<sup>1</sup> Besides being the name of an NGO in the story, in Italian "scrivo" also means "I write".

could mean climbing the walls of a building, as well as diving underwater and entering the submerged rooms with cylinders. If the object was found in the emergency room, precautions and organization became complicated and even dangerous. The clients were subjected to a detailed interview and asked to tell their lives before the exodus from the city, and the reasons for their wish to recover the specific object. ...

It was Chiara who dealt with my case. I met her in Portoterra in a cafe with a view of the port. She had very black eyes, straight black hair and olive skin, the typical features of the island and the people of the interior.

During the whole interview, she was never distracted for a moment. She was always attentive to my every movement and reaction and never diverted her eyes from mine. She recorded our conversation with my signed authorization while at the same time filling out a form on her portable screen. The audio recording would be part of the SCRIVO archive. Chiara told me that through their work, they wanted to record a painful piece of history that seemed to be submerged like many coastal cities on the island. She had lived for some time in the central city after her exodus from the southern coasts and had had the feeling of continuing to live in apnea. The displaced people were rebuilding a new life by watering down memories of the past. Heaviness continued to reign in the souls, just as it had in the years before the relocation. Few shared their history, which remained most frequently hidden. Their silence was a ploy that made it possible to look forward while running the risk of being overwhelmed by memories in the most unexpected moments.

Chiara had become a SCRIVO to recompose the deep fracture that had broken down the perception of her own history and reflected the stories of others.

The sound archives made it possible to create a space for the unspoken, and the recovery of objects filled the gaps in lost memories.

Chiara listened, recorded, took notes and watched me in silence in front of the expanse of rippling water.

Telling my story I had the impression that the sealed container inside my head emptied, letting the sharp and multiform objects that pressed outwards slide. ... She confided to me that listening to the stories of the coastal refugees made her think about when they and the other SCRIVO women penetrated the safety chambers still unaltered and dry. The water that flooded the spaces allowed the life cycle to reactivate and time to flow.

My request was to find Aunt Lia's emergency suitcase.

Presumably, it was still lying in the entrance of her apartment submerged and protected inside by the windows and the door with waterproof and anti-theft locks. I had begun to imagine it, to dream about it and to desire to recover it.

Lucia Masu

“Fieldwork is central to this ontological orientation because it locates the research within time, space, and the obstinacies of physical existence. Fieldwork takes place in a series of present moments. There is something absurd in trying to locate and define the qualities of a particular place based on flowing water; one can only hope to get an approximate test result, and the researcher and artist both know that even when the results are returned from the lab, the water will have already changed. However, the classical scientific method is still the most attentive form of observation we have, the most focused advertence one can grant any object under investigation. As a gesture of earnest civil concern for water quality, there is certainly some merit in this acute, focused attention. For me, the purpose of measuring and obtaining quantifiable water data was less about determining the variable degree of water pollution than it was about the care brought to learning about it. [...]

Before it was tamed by engineers, the Nile was more generous and democratic: with every high flood, it evenly spread its fertilizing mud over the entire valley. After hydraulic structures were introduced, chemical fertilizers began to be used and market dynamics were established through the political mechanisms of agricultural subsidies. The seasonal occurrence thus became a matter of the social sphere. It is in pivotal sites like these where geophysical and social processes most dramatically intertwine.

With the infrastructural intervention of the Aswan High Dam in the watercourse, the ecology of the Nile inevitably changed. The fish that migrated from Ethiopia through the Mediterranean to the Atlantic and back were interrupted by this monumental architecture. It is important to remember, however, that the hydraulic regime of the Nile was already altered a century before by the construction of a

series of barrages designed to raise the water line on the upstream side in order to feed irrigation canals without the use of pumping, but they had unintended consequences. The barrages reduced the velocity of flow, which diminished the supply of oxygen. This process facilitated the anaerobic decay of organic pollutants, infecting pools and, eventually, the land through the millions of irrigation canals. The result was an insurgency of tiny pollutants that reconfigured Egypt on a molecular level. While environmental engineers had a tremendous impact on the hydraulics of the Nile by regulating its velocity, gauge, and seasonal flows, the variations of water quality—based on its salinity, acidity, oxygen content, mineral composition, nutrient systems, organic pollutants, suspended particles, and silt—largely escaped human control. Although the hydraulic regime of the Nile was deliberately changed, the biological and chemical composition of the water was inadvertently though equally affected.

These water transformations in Egypt allow for the detection of emergent forces as various combinations of natural, technological, and social processes alter realities. Such modified water chemistry transforms soil quality, interferes with land management, drives urbanization processes, and disrupts food supply chains, infiltrating the human sphere through multiple venues and illicit channels. These components do not line up as a simple causal chain of reactions, as they constantly shift and create strange feedback loops—nor are they solely the result of specific economic policies. Each element interacts to create hybrid ecologies in which global organizations, desert developers, and tiny pollutants all forcefully affect the water and topography of Egypt.”

Ursula Biemann, *Metachemistry and Other Planetary Perspectives*, in Davis, H. and Turpin, E., eds., London: Open Humanities Press, 2015, pp. 54–57.





Ursula Biemann, Main irrigation canal of Toshka, giant land reclamation project on the Upper Nile, Lake Nasser created by Aswan High Dam, Video stills from *Egyptian Chemistry*, 2012, Photo: Ursula Biemann



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