

## River's flow. Land Art Festival 2015

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*But which source determines the backwaters of the river mouth?*

*Helmut Kajzar<sup>1</sup>*

Stary Bubel. For townies this place may seem to be the end of the world. Hidden between hills and forests in a place where the Bug river finishes its border flow. On the other side you can see Belarus and in a close distance lies Wołczyn – a birth and burial place of the last, controversial king of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. A symbol of the end of the union, the reassuring myth of the community, but also the failure of the modern concept of the nation. This person, as a ghostly patron, fits here perfectly, because the Bug River is seething with complicated history of coexistence and fitting in of people, nationalities and religions. Therefore, walking to the river from Stary Bubel it's easy to gaze at the other bank with nostalgia for what is lost. Or to try to forget. Meanwhile, "here and now" there is only the slow river flow, the surrounding hills, forests and the geopolitical border between a completely different union and the East which terrifies with totalitarian tendencies, but fascinates with vital spirituality.

Such was the setting for the fifth Land Art Festival during which Polish and foreign artists yet another time entered the existing landscape, using nature as a building material of their installations, the reference point or a principle that defines their own work. For eleven days more than twenty works and actions were created, spread in the area of the Kalinik reserve (still in the planning phase), that is in the place where we will find ourselves if we decide to walk from Stary Bubel into river's direction. The river has become a topographic, but not a mental, centre of all works – it has been the motto of this year's edition of the festival. Nothing happened without it.

### The source

Water is bubbling gently, sand swirling affected by an invisible current – it is how a mysterious water phenomenon located near the river bank, conventionally called the source because nobody knows where the water comes from and why it is so pure looks like. It is drinkable. Next to the source, a vertical trunk on a platform, which looks like a solid sculpture but, in reality, it is a wild beehive, made in a traditional way by **Marcin Sudziński**. The artist embedded bees into it. Upstream from the source he set a tent which resembles an Indian tepee – living there day and night he could look after his bees. The form, visible from a distance, resembles something more; perhaps because it is raised up like a totem, perhaps because of the material – raw wood which has also been attractive for contemporary artists such as Jerzy Bereś. The wild beehive looks like a cult object or a tomb stele – despite its constructed nature, it blends into the landscape; it seems it has been standing at the river forever. No wonder the artist, offering honey and wine during the opening, stepped into the role of a depository of some unspecified, yet deep knowledge. He shared a part of it in a form of live-giving food which – let us reach to the Christian mythology and symbols – also offers resurrection. After all, we are in *A Holy Place*.

**Jarosław Koziara's** work is of similar totemic character. The work is *Baba (Woman)*, a cylindrical form built around a tree trunk, made of sliced tree trunks. At its top there are branches, so it is reminiscent of an African baobab, but its volume and stable structure, as if rooted into the ground, evokes associations with another "baba" - a stone standing at the Bug, in Szwajcaria Podlaska, whose meaning is lost in the darkness of history. The regional scholars and researchers argue: a pagan object of worship or perhaps a votive cross? It seems that the form created by the artist, a natural by transposed with human hands, also claims the right to unlimited lasting.

The sounds of **Jerzy "Słoma" Słomiński's** drums, whose performance was an attempt to reach the sources of music through trance rhythm, could be the soundtrack to both these installations.

Festival's music guests, the group **Księżyc**, referred to Slavic melodies, closing timeless stories in electronic tones and white singing.

The descent to the source - albeit in a different manner – took place also in the ephemeral, deeply mystical action from the series *Starting with a leaven 1985-2015* by Teresa Murak. As the place of her performance the artist has selected a small coppice near the river's bank. Dressed in a white dress she handed out small discs, which at first glance looked as if they were made of soft clay. The meaning of the action was, however, comprehensible only by those most observant. The mysterious material turned out to be a previously prepared leaven admixed with river silt. The artist left her fingerprint on each disc. An artist or a priestess? The performance transformed into a rite whose internal order and rhythm seemed to be developing on its own. The grown leaven was placed in the ground, along with silt brought from the river, and in the end it was leavened and covered forever. The matter, carried by the troubled water of the Bug river, was kneaded with human hand, like a pastry made by a housewife from Stary Bubel. And then, it was enchanted. It still lies dormant underneath the turf. It undergoes transformation processes unknown to us. One can think of it, pulsing somewhere under the surface, in the kingdom of the life-giving, fertile nature, but also in the realm of death, looking at the Bug's Host lying on the palm of the hand – and take the decision whether we are ready to begin our own mystery. To give rise and reach the end.

The same coppice hides another, completely different work. It's *The Arch* by **Mateusz Rembieliński**. A tree, taut with a rope, seems to be supported and enslaved at the same time. This strong, firm and ambiguous gesture prompts a question on the meaning of human intervention in nature. One cannot help feeling, also thanks to the vertical form of this installation, that the gesture is masculine in nature, resonating even more interestingly as it was arranged next to the leaven, dormant in the ground, and the water flowing nearby – those places exude chthonic powers, they are a domain of Mother-Earth.

An installation hidden right at the river, just above the water surface, is in turn a musical mystery. Bright threads emerge from the depths of the Bug, drawing a mysterious visual trajectory. A tube-sounding box placed on offshore sand tells us more: these are strings. The viewer waits for a sound. But we will only hear it when it is quiet. The instrument, which forces the viewer / listener to make an effort and to search for impressions on their own, is an Aeolian harp, known since the ancient times. We forgot about it, but in the Romantic era, the era of self-analysis and contemplation, it was an object of admiration. *A Test of Voice* by **Jarosław Lustych** invites us to a journey not only into the tangled stream of a Heraclitus' river of time, but also to this unique moment in which we reach the source of sound hidden within ourselves.

The mystery of sound is watched from a hill by **Sławomir Matyjaszewski's** *Pilgrims*. Monumental sculptures of wood, set in a row, resembling masts of ships, seem to tread in space parallel to the river current. All of them are marked with black paint. The passing of time casts a shadow over their shapes – the first one is complete, each subsequent one is more and more damaged, deprived of pieces. At the end of the peregrination over the river of time nothing remains intact, a confrontation with one's prime is also inevitable.

The project *H2O* by **Tatiana Talipova** and **Marcin Proczek**, students of the Artistic Department of the MCSU, is as defined in form but it draws attention to another aspect of the basic principle of reality. The chemical formula of water, made of wooden stilts stuck into the ground, indicates the basic principle of life, revealing its meaning to the viewers hovering over the ground and perhaps even to those on the other side of the river. At the same time, ambiguous in nature of the work – a raw, as it primitive form, with invisible at first yet precisely defined structure is to the same extent eternal (like Thales' *arché*) as it is historically concrete. Modern chemistry does not fit onto the same level, as ancient philosophy.

The student of the Cracow's Academy of Fine Arts, **Aneta Misiaczek**, also turned to the source of culture. Her work, entitled *Face*, is a transparent, unmodified cast of a face emerging from the water. The mysterious face's eyes are closed, lips in a half smile. Maybe one of river "bogunka", Slavic river nymphs shows her face here? They were fickle and deceptive, seduced with beauty but drew into deep water. So perhaps the artist reveals the face of the modern river – not so frightening as in the past days? She plays with beliefs about the destructive, even diabolical power of the river, leads to the question on the difference between the primitive and the contemporary

meaning of the topos – or other toposes. It also draws attention to the conditions for a dialogue between nature and man, which requires reflection – we no longer need to tame, instead we face the challenge of understanding and listening. Nature can bring salvation in the confusion of contemporary life.

**Slawomir Marzec** took a different approach to the river, although he also referred to the repertoire of cultural references. In his performance *The beach or shadow of the north. Tribute to A. Molik* the Bug river marked its presence as the border river, beyond which the mythological Hades, the land of the dead, could be. With ten tons of sand the artist built a small beach, with its size it recreates the size of a summer beer garden of a pub where he usually met his friend, the late Andrzej Molik, Lublin's journalist and art critic who passed away recently. First, like a casual passer-by, he was lying on the sand facing the sun, and next he opened a small urn and, using the ultramarine project hidden there, he drew a human figure resembling a shadow, scattered in almost the same spot where he lay and rested earlier. Finally, the warning tape surrounding the whole place has been removed and the artificial beach was opened to tourists. An intimate experience has been expressed. Does this gesture have a power of catharsis? Memory, drama, joy and carefreeness mix together here, reminding of the inevitable, yet sometimes comforting flow of the river of time.

**Agnieszka Dudek** and **Paulina Janowska** tried to reach the sources in a different way, carrying out a social project *Persistence of Memory*. The collected stories of the residents of the surrounding villages were placed in labelled bottles which were let go with the flow. Bug turned into the river of oblivion, the Greek Lethe, but also into a sort of a reservoir of memory, which carried stories such as the one about “[Grandma Natasha] was already 92, she walked on crutches, moved her legs and also... What came to her mind that death forgot about her? Her daughter in law saw her several times putting her head into the tub of water, because she wanted to drown herself”. The second set of stories was hung from the offshore tree, thus creating “a tree of memories”, which may grow further.

The mystical and existential topics to which the festival's installation lead, allow approaching the sources – not only the sources of culture in its macro and micro scale, but also the sources of re-creation. Raw, primitive materials and forms, ritual gestures or intense sounds force to ponder where the origin of creation lies – and what this creation really is. The artists sometimes change into priests who reveal the rules embedded in reality – it is however us, the viewers, that ultimately decide on their meaning, if we get to experience them. The journey to the sources, even when the artists lead us by the hand, can be difficult. Is art no longer needed when it becomes a ritual? Or perhaps it is necessary precisely due to its sacred dimension? In life, the journey to the metaphysical sources builds identity, but it can also lead into a trap – it can overwhelm, inhibit the free development. Therefore one needs to take the other way – go with the flow, take a look at the meanders, turns and recurrences, and then the shape of the backwater, that is our historical, political and social present times. Especially, if we are on the border, where it is more difficult to find a rule, it's easy to find ambiguity. Helmut Kajzar spoke of theatre, that a river overflows synonymous to the source, yet alien to it.<sup>2</sup> Let us see, if this will be the case of the works of the artists, located at the Bug river.

## Meanders

In places where the river flows slowly and the stream is weak, that is in the middle of its course, usually meanders are formed. With the passing of time they move upstream, towards the mouth and can become oxbow lakes. Animals can enjoy the benefits of a mild ecosystem in such places. But only for a short time, later vegetation overgrows the oxbow lake and it disappears. This year's edition of the Land Art Festival also had its oxbow lakes – works which had their starting point in nature and became its integral part can be described this way.

**Roy Staab** (USA) located his installation entitled *Moving currents* in the water, in the middle of the mainstream. Reeds and branches interlaced with a string making up an openwork construction

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2 Ibidem.

which with its plait imitate river currents. The mainstream is a sort of a forbidden ground, but also no-man's land, although while the work was under construction both the Polish and the Belarussian border guards placed territorial claims. This subtle work, reflected in the water, visible from both banks, seems to ignore political order and turn to the eternal order of nature. Construction elements intertwine and come undone, the currents mix and the animals, not paying attention to the political border, exist where it is most convenient for them. Also beavers which – apparently interested in the installation – repeatedly disturbed it.

**Elaine Clocherty** (Australia) found a place for her work nearby, among the trees. For several days she was creating a colourful carpet with grass and plants found nearby, for instance lupin, as well as river silt or snail shells – she was inlaying a natural land depression, located parallel to the river, with these finds in her installation called *Timeless bridge*. The work brings to mind the structure of a living organism or microscopic magnification of a plant, it sparkles with colours, pulsates with a variety of textures. The artist's installation has also hallmarks of a social intervention as it draws attention to the need of appreciating the value of inconspicuous elements of nature that constitute its fundamental building matter – to see them we must lean down and dip our hands into the water. Only when himself humans bring themselves to a sensitive gesture can, they see the beauty of tiny yet fundamental elements without which it is impossible to say “nature”.

**Bazinato** (Belarus) also bases on the found materials and the local scenery. The artist filled a hollow tree trunk with openwork structure, woven from branches found nearby. He also used them to create forms resembling plants or cocoons, which he placed in a small pond, an oxbow lake formed by the Bug – they seem to ripple in the wind, similar to the grass growing on the shore. At first glance, it seems these delicate structures are to fill some sort of gap, or perhaps to meet the artist's imagination that places unexpected form in space, creating a continuation of the natural ones. It is, however, also possible to look at the work in a different way – as an experiment which everyone should face individually, relying on their own senses. In the end, this is *The Experience of Synesthesia*.

Uncertainty about the origin of form – whether it was created by nature or was it man-made? also appears in the installation entitled *Breath* by **Bonggi Park** (South Korea). With the use of locally found branches, the artist built a large-sized form, which resembled a nest, on a tree growing right at the river side. It's possible to go inside. It is not easy, though, because a foot can easily slip from a narrow trunk – and, after all, one is above the water. If you take the risk, trust the artist, you will find yourself in a safe place, which offers a beautiful view of the shimmering river's surface and the perspective of its course. One can only... breathe. This artistic situation has another aspect, it is complicated by the existential references suggesting themselves. It is difficult to come back to the ground from a secluded place that offers the opportunity to experience the beauty.

## **Backwater**

Finally, following the river's flow, we get to the backwaters. They appear only occasionally, suddenly, especially when the snows melt in the spring. They disappear just as quickly. They bring and mix the river silt. They reach human habitats, sometimes they tangle up animal's paths. They are impatient and complicated, like the contemporary times. Bearing in mind Kajzar's intellectual approach, the backwater may be treated as a metaphor of the era's condition, as well as a synonym of an artistic approach, multidisciplinary, complex, sometimes surprising. Backwaters are a heterogeneous area, rebellious, devoid of a direction. A perfect place for a nomad, whose consciousness escapes any borders.

The work by **Uladzimir Hramovich** (Belarus), *Unknown state borders*, tells of a border in a literal sense. Wooden poles in a form of border posts, looking scorched and declining, were placed on a slope leading down to the river. Are they the relics of a long forgotten border crossing, marking a territory of a country which no one remembers anymore? Or perhaps they constitute a reference to the recent history when the Bug was crossed by ever new armies, marking their territory? The Polish and Belarussian border posts standing nearby help to look at this work as if it was a prophetic vision, a bitter reflection of the fact that everything passes, in particular the divisions set by man.

**Tomasz Bielak** also referred to the theme of a border in his work *Breaking*. A strip of ripped ground looks like a wound. A slag heap of a plowed matter stopped at a vertical wall, propped up with poles from the Bug's side. This distinctive, but also painful form seems to be a concise definition of borders, not only the tangible ones (let us not forget where we are), but also mental ones. It commands to rebel against their brutality – do we need to slow down for sure?

A similar question arises when one looks at the installation by **Rumen Dimitrov** (Bulgaria). *Fishes' passage* refers to the same subject, but draws from different poetics. Gentle forms of different species of fish, intricately woven from branches gathered in a nearby forest seem to float in the air over the border river, into the direction of another country. They are snatched by an imaginary current, the eternal movement, whose mechanism is inevitable and unknown, but stunning with its simplicity. For this reason, this phantasmagorical passage seems to be a subtle, teeming with a childlike sensibility, treatise of existential colour, for example like this: "In Heraclitus' river a fish loves a fish, your eyes – says the fish??? – glitter like fishes in the sky, I want to swim with you to the common sea, oh, most beautiful of the school of fish."<sup>3</sup>.

**Dorota Koziara's** work, *Home*, also speaks about crossing over a border. It is a strong, graphic shape closed in a sculptural form, whose two almost symmetrical halves – resembling human figures or heads turned towards one another – cannot meet. It is difficult to resist the impression that we are dealing with a metaphor, not only universal, pointing to the difficulties in interpersonal communication, but also a very current one. Here, on the Union's border, it is worth to remember those, who are trying to find a place for themselves on its territory. Can Europe be our common home?

The piece by **Paweł Chlebek**, *Harvest*, falls into the category of analogical meanings. From a distance the installation of tall, wooden pales stuck into the ground looks like an overgrown grain, but once you draw closer, you will see odd, rounded forms impaled at the ends of the poles. They resemble bellies, or maybe loaves of bread? The artists points to the ever current issue of hunger, which despite the economic emancipation of the centres, still takes its toll on the peripheries of the modern world. Contemplation of the artistic form should provoke thought, but also action.

**Katarzyna Krzykawska** referred to less universal, yet also current topics. A life-size but still artificial horse stopped on the grass. It's all white, just like the grass and a nearby tree. This surreal landscape makes one think of a typically Polish repertoire of images. It accommodated, for instance, a white horse which brings death – a romantic symbol from Andrzej Wajda's *Lotna*, or more prosaic, a Sarmatian motto: "A Pole without a horse is like a body without a soul"! The artist reminds us we are on the Polish side, in a place where horses, a symbol of the Commonwealth nobility, have been bred for centuries. She confronts the viewers with the nostalgia for a lost paradise – an increasingly controversial myth of the Borderlands. Let us take a closer look. White scenery is not a result of work with an ordinary paint, but with lime, which is used for disinfection, also of bodies. It is therefore an attempt to break the spell of the myth, clearing the field for a new content. In fact, however, this psychedelic landscape tells a lot about the Polish identity, which is characterized by a rich, yet full of contrasts and traps of imagination. Not without justification, the work is entitled *Horse vs. the Polish question*, a diagnosis that is merciless and ironic: a syndrome of finding Polishness in the smallest manifestations of reality.

Despite the fact that his works originate from a completely different cultural areas, **Duilo Forte** (Italy) also referred to the Polish iconography. *Sleipnir XLIV Ciconae* was placed on a hill over the Bug river. It is one of a series of monumental works carried out by the artists in various places in the world. Sleipnir is an eight legged, faithful horse of Odin from the Scandinavian mythology. The wooden form refers in turn to the ancient machine on wheels – a Trojan horse, though the manner in which it was done brings to mind the northern mastery of wooden structures. The work is as complex as the Italian-Swedish origins of the artist. Branches forming a stork's nest were placed on top of the machine – a regional accent, at the same time a cross-border one. Because the storks are a particularly distinctive symbol of a nomad, who forces the nearby border with ease.

**Andrzej Maruszczenko** confronted the question of the borders, posed in a slightly different way, in his film *Man-Element-Continuity* (or *The River*). Throughout the screening the viewers watch a figure of a swimming man – we recognize the artist's silhouette. The swimmer struggles with the

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3 Wisława Szymborska, *In Heraclitus' river*

current, swims against, but he does not move forward. The swimmer's effort contrasts (or maybe interacts) with sacred music we hear – an ambient created on the basis of chants of the monks of the Holy Mountain Athos. The meaning of the picture is complicated by stripes in four colours – black, red, yellow and blue – appearing at the bottom of the screen; their appearance is synchronized with the strokes of the swimmer's arm on the water, which, in turn, refer to consecutive days during which the man was filmed. The projection is constructed with great precision, its abstract language is reminiscent of the avant garde, contemplative programmer of Kazimierz Malewicz. It's hard to resist the impression we are dealing with a struggle; the swimmer is trying to reach the source of the river, yet he is not able to do so, being carried down by the current. The activity itself is, however, necessary or even infinite, it has a spiritual character; looking at the shoreline we recognize the Bug, which, as the border river allows us to look at this image in a different way – as an attempt to reach one's identity in a situation, when it is culturally complex, ambiguous.

**Paweł Totoro Adamiec** referred to the problem of identity in a different manner in a series of photographs, *Bug River Kings*. Large-format portraits hidden in the forest presented a different face of the inhabitants of nearby villages and the conversations about the photos (involving the portrayed ones) revealed information on the creation of the series – the artist arranged the photo shoot, he created the costumes, fantastic crowns, wreaths, necklaces. This play resulted in an intriguing effect. The elderly residents of the Stary Bubel transformed in front of the camera lens into persona endowed with a fantastic charm, and, as we may suppose, some kind of eternal, deeper wisdom. Even without these artistic additions we expect these features of them, since they live in such a beautiful, but also culturally rich place, where culture and religions meet and there is little that can surprise them.

Complementing to the rich festival's programme were video and photographic records which, in a variety of ways, referred to the place and the artistic activities that took place there. Three filmmakers from Wajda School, **Jan Witalis Borowiec**, **Wojciech Klimala** and **Zuzanna Jacqueline Czerniakowska** prepared original pictures devoted to the artists who participated in Land art as well as the local community, also reflecting on the meaning of land art. We will be able to check the outcome of this *work in progress* soon, for instance during the summary of the five years of the organizer's work, Foundation's *Latająca Ryba*, which will take place in the soon to be opened Centre for the Meeting of Cultures. It's also worth waiting for photos by **Robert Pranagal**, author of the Festival's documentation and portraits of the participating artists, who develops the prints in his studio in the old technique of rubber. All these projects show that the Land Art Festival is much more than an open-air gallery – it is a space of interpersonal interaction and social events worth remembering.

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The image of the land art has been becoming ever more varied with time. From the 60s, when it first appeared, it has gone through many stages, at the beginning feeding on an abrupt entry into the existing landscape, later becoming critical of the intrusive gestures, now being multidimensional. The Land Art Festival presents a panorama of art that has been designed to function in nature, exposes a variety of relations between creativity and nature, which becomes a source of inspiration, scenery, a tool, a building material, a reservoir of meanings. Artists of different generations and experience – from seniors of contemporary art to art students, representing different backgrounds – sculptors, performers, photographers, film makers and diverse cultural areas – coming from four continents – worked in the area which is planned for the Kalinik reserve, which thanks to the festival taking place in its area has a chance to enter the social circuit. The artists offered the viewers a journey not only in space, but also through the current art issues – questions on the meaning of making art, language, role of the artist or the relation between art and the socio-political reality. All of this happened far from gallery centre, in a not obvious and unique place. In Stary Bubel.

The works and activities of the fifth edition of the Land Art Festival concentrated on the river, a phenomena fascinating from the ancient times through the present day. The Bug has become a spectre, a myth, like Miłosz's Issa, a metaphor of contemporary art, like in Kajzar's works, but also it sounded clearly as a specific place, the Polish-Belarussian border river, the border of the European Union. Most importantly, however, the river, as the only constant in the festival equation

(the installations remain in place, so that the time finishes the artists' work), is a river of time, a universal symbol of existence. Watching its run and having in mind not only these waters, one wishes to repeat after Miłosz: "wherever I wandered, over whichever continents, my face was always turned to the River"<sup>4</sup>. Perhaps everyone looks to the river, but the waters are different for each person and the journey to the source looks differently. It is worth turning to the present – watching the backwaters and the curved lines of meanders.