

# The Environment

October 2018

**CIWEM**

THE MAGAZINE FOR THE CHARTERED INSTITUTION OF WATER AND ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT



## READING THE RIVER

Basia Irland: artist, ecologist, activist

**11** **Interview**  
Building resilience with  
NI Water boss Sara Venning

**14** **Special report**  
Natural capital – is it  
wrong to put a price on nature?

**24** **Infrastructure**  
Invest more in  
delivering water, says NIC

**26** **SuDS**  
Your guide to the  
updated Sewers for Adoption

**38** **CIWEM events**  
Where to meet  
your fellow members

# WATER SPIRIT

**Basia Irland** is a pioneer artist and activist who focuses on water. She spoke to Karen Thomas to mark the publication of *Reading the River, The Ecological Activist Art of Basia Irland*, a retrospective of her work



Oconee River Repository (*Navicula tripunctata*), 2011. Opened and worn. Georgia. Diatomaceous earth, matle medium, diatom collection tools, glass vials, watershed maps, etching entitled *The Water Eyes of the Hills*

## WHY DOES WATER INSPIRE YOU?

We are water. Our bodies house streams: lymph, bile, sweat, blood, mucus, urine. Water enters, circulates, leaves – individualised hydrologic cycles. Each of us is a walking ocean, sloshing down the hallway with damp saline innards, held together by a paper-thin epidermis.

We are all connected through the continuous water cycle. Rivers are alive. I was grateful when the Maori in New Zealand won a court case that granted the Whanganui River legal personhood.

This relationship, Te Awa Tupua, means that the river and the people form an integrated whole.

Water has always fed my soul; floating weightless in a natural lake, face up, looking at the clouds, sitting and listening on a rock beside an ever-changing mountain stream, hiking to the source of a river, wading barefoot in a cold creek. Memories from my personal library of the senses go hand in hand with academic research for every water project I create. Because I live in New Mexico, my external watershed is

the Río Grande, but my internal watershed includes urine. I flush my pee down the toilet, which goes to the sewage treatment plant, which flows into the river, which again provides drinking water.

## YOU'VE TRAVELLED ACROSS NORTH AMERICA, EUROPE AND ASIA, AND TO THE MIDDLE EAST: WHAT BODIES OF WATER HAVE MOST INSPIRED YOU AND WHY?

Every river has inspired me. Each has its own distinctive voice, whether it is a tiny rivulet, creek, stream or immense waterway.

Almost no river anywhere in the world is free-flowing and clean, so there is much work to do.

Some are clogged with toxic debris and full of waterborne diseases. Others are confined to a concrete ditch or are dammed and damned by mega-structures that obstruct their flow and alter whole riparian ecosystems.

The river I know best is in my own backyard, here in New Mexico. I have travelled from its headwaters in Colorado to the mouth at Boca Chica, on the border between Mexico and Texas, so this río holds a special place in my heart.

## WHAT INSPIRED YOUR ICE BOOKS AND THE GATHERING OF WATERS PROJECTS?

*Ice Receding/Books Reseeding*, was conceived for *Weather Report*, the exhibition and catalogue about climate change curated by Lucy Lippard for the Museum of Contemporary Art, Boulder, Colorado.

I carved a 250-pound tome from ice and engraved it with a native riparian seed text of mountain maple, columbine flowers and Colorado blue spruce to call attention to melting glaciers and embed an action within the sculpture.

Arapaho Glacier, which provides a large percentage of Boulder's drinking water, is receding rapidly due to climate disruption. When it is gone, where

## Ice Receding/Books Reseeding



Tome I. 2007. Hand-carved 250-lb ice book placed into Boulder Creek, Colorado. Seed text of mountain mahogany, blue spruce and columbine flower



River Maas Ice Book II. 2017. Hand-carved ice book embedded with native riparian seeds. Sittard, the Netherlands. This image was used this year in the Environmental Art 2018 Calendar



Tome II. 2009. Hand-carved 200-lb ice book at dusk beside the Rio Grande, New Mexico. Seed text of Fremont cottonwood (*Populus fremontii*)



Krill Ice Book. 2012. Senakw Staulk (False Creek), Vancouver, Canada. Irland put krill into the ice book, because the food chain is disrupted due to lack of krill to feed herring, which used to attract salmon.

will Boulder human and non-human residents obtain water?

These sculptures depict receding glaciers, and a suggestion for action – reseeding riparian zones to reduce the effects of climate change through plants. Stream ecologists, river restoration biologists, and botanists ascertain the best seeds for each riparian zone.

I have been invited to create ice books for communities around the world to launch ephemeral sculptures into the stream. Calligraphic sentences of seeds slide from melting, translucent pages into the water to be carried to shore.

In future, we will attach a monitoring probe and micro-cam to watch the seeds progress down river to view where the current takes them and how the seeds are deposited along the banks.

Another series of projects, *The Gathering of Waters*, establishes cooperative relationships between people, and connects diverse cultures along rivers, emphasising that we all live downstream, and must work together to face water challenges.

Over five years, *Gathering of Waters; Río Grande, Source to Sea*, involved more than 1,000 participants, including Native American tribal members, who poured river water into a canteen, wrote in a logbook about their experience of the river, and passed it downstream to another person along the 1,875-mile Río Grande.

The canteen and logbook travelled by

boat, raft, canoe, hot-air balloon, car, van, horseback, truck, bicycle, and on foot, to be handed person to person the entire distance. *The Backpack/Repository* sculptures that accompany these projects are constructed from local materials, which contain artifacts from the *Gatherings*.

My riparian artwork is not about theorising while sitting in an armchair or classroom, but about connecting directly and in physical ways with the river and being involved with the local community.

### YOU ARE A WRITER/BLOGGER AS WELL AS AN ARTIST – WHAT DO YOU HOPE YOUR WATER ARCHIVE WILL ACHIEVE?

My archive about water consists of many projects in numerous formats; video documentaries, sculptures, photographs, drawings and two books, *Water Library* and *Reading the River*.

My blog for National Geographic, *What the River Knows*, focuses on waterways around the world. These essays are written in the first person from the perspective of the water and will be published as a book.

My passion is to distill relevant information into works of art, hoping this distillation might lead to a broader appreciation of the importance of water in our everyday lives.

### CAN – SHOULD – ARTISTS ALSO BE ACTIVISTS?

Definitely, if they care to make that choice. Throughout history, musicians, writers, dancers, visual artists, have

spoken out against corruption, war, moral ineptitude, inequalities, and degradation of the environment. Often, artists are the conscience of their time. Nina Simone said: “How can you be an artist and not reflect the times?”

I am a member of a global network of eco artists who help the environment through their work, which is mostly also aesthetically beautiful.

Picasso's *Guernica* is one of the most powerful anti-war paintings in history. Ai Weiwei has challenged the corruption of the Chinese government, and created a film about the world's refugees.

The street artist Banksy uses graffiti art as a political weapon to address some of the toughest issues of our day. Russian punk-rock protest band Pussy Riot continues its provocative form of art. The Guerrilla Girls focus on gender and racial inequalities in the fine arts.

In the US, the environmentalist and singer Pete Seeger founded a scientific and educational programme on his sloop *Clearwater*, on a mission to clean the Hudson River.

Trent Reznor of Nine Inch Nails writes that “artists should speak out... because there are people who feel the same way but need someone to articulate it”.

South African singer Miriam Makeba was a United Nations goodwill ambassador, advocate against apartheid, and civil-rights activist who said: “I don't sing politics, I sing the truth.” ◉