



MEANDERING

Inspired by how rivers bend and curve, connecting entire ecosystems, Meandering is an artistic research program devoted to encouraging a relational approach in generating both inner transformation, and the conditions of possibility for social change within riverine sites. Departing from what we call at TBA21–Academy “thinking oceanically about more-than-ocean,” it explores expanded notions of Ocean stewardship, climate responsibility, myth-making, and contemporary ritual to deepen critical-creative insight of our interdependence with the watershed.

Expanding for the first time from the Ocean into river systems and waterways, Meandering anchors TBA21–Academy’s research methodologies in the physical and spiritual water elements that connect all lifeforms. Referring both to the outline of a river on a plane and to the figure of speech, ‘meandering’ is a means of wayfinding and sense-making, of formulating a practical and poetic toolset for engaging in situated, context-specific research in contemporary art and ecology. These orientations chart a culture of learning that intends to serve diverse human and non-human communities impacted by anthropogenic change over centuries of civilization-making on riverbanks.

Rivers are earth-holders, they are arteries that breathe life in and out of the Ocean to regenerate the body of land. A river holds life-giving practices, from fishing and grain-grinding to thirst-quenching and lovemaking. They dress both our physical and subtle bodies, from fulling cloth to clothes-washing, shaped by centuries of singing and storytelling. They are places of ritual, from baptisms and ablutions to funerary expressions across transnational borders. As a space of sociality that reveals our fundamental interconnectedness, rivers are intimately tied to a loving practice that can help us develop inner resources, grow communities of resilience, and cultivate ways of life that enrich, rather than deplete, the planet.

The challenges brought about by the dissolution of the wet and dry divide, shown in the pervasiveness of extreme drought and severe flooding across national borders due to climate change, ask us to acknowledge waterways as fluid, living entities that cannot be entirely contained through drainage, damming, embankment, or deforestation. Despite these often violent changes to the shape of streams and, consequently, to the landscape of the whole floodplain, their boundaries remain inherently fluid and are continuously recreated each passing moment.

If our shared futures are defined by the expansion of arid regions and the precarity of life within them, we feel that learning from the river flow can expand our capacity for responding creatively to ongoing social uncertainty and the escalating ecological crisis. The complex histories of rivers’ destruction and dispossession as it co-exists alongside the resilient and vibrant aspects of river life, such as the intertwined living, culture, and activism that takes place in riverbank communities, is central to this learning. Grounded in non-extractive knowledge-making practices that gesture towards reciprocity, we work with Indigenous and spiritual leadership, peasant knowledge, and ancestral wisdom, as well as with critical scholarship in legal studies, ecology, environmental humanities, and design, to listen to the guidance and critical insight these communities can offer to replenish our fundamental belonging to life and our capacity to remain open to its fullness.

By leading us through and with a sense of wonder and reverence for the watershed, many of these world views and Earth-based ways of knowing enable us to release the false dualisms such as world-self, or nature-culture, that both frame the world as distinct parts, disconnected and independent from the whole, and condition our ability to act within it. In their teachings, we learn to peer below the surface and into a world of ecological subtlety and complexity

where rivers emerge as intentional paths, connecting land, ocean, and atmosphere.

Inasmuch as they orient us both upstream and downstream, rivers open courses into the unknown. At once transforming landscapes through erosion, colonial encounter, and diffused contamination, and creating new landscapes through deposition, navigation, and flood farming, among others, their vibrant materiality sediments our civilizational narratives. Rivers chart a journey of mutual transformation that changes what the river and I are, and what we are in interbeing. The “not knowing” that is intimate to the vitality of life, can simultaneously put us in touch with a sense of possibility and aliveness, as well as with the loss and vulnerability of living in a shared world.

A river’s destination, I am learning, is always the arrival at oneself, as an extension of the world. In a journey, then, that is both the practice and the destination, Meandering encourages proposals that query, inspire, and challenge what it means to imagine futures where every species and element can thrive. It is committed to identifying which capacities or resources might be needed for us to realize more ecologically sound and socially just worlds based on what I call “live research”—an experiential and experimental approach to how artistic research can offer renewed sensibilities by cultivating presence and relational awareness. Through a threefold scholarly, sensorial, and spiritual itinerary, live research mobilizes inquiry and curiosity with engaged and contemplative propositions, performative vocabularies, and experimental pedagogies.

By making research public through study, commissioning, convening, and co-creation that emerge from the intersection between contemporary art, science, and activism, as well as decolonial, feminist, and anti-racist practices, the program aims to gather a transnational network of cultural, environmental, and social changemakers.

Structured along three-year cycles, it contributes to contemporary debates on justice in river governance and the transformation of freshwater ecosystems as well as to the growing field of interfaith and interdisciplinary environmental studies. Its launching course through the Guadalquivir (2022-2024) traces river systems through the sierras and forests in the south Spain, to the heartlands of the Americas and the undersurface of the Mediterranean, interweaving lives along the streams of canoe-borne and ship-led cultural, ecological, and spiritual exchange.

As an artistic research program, Meandering aims to seed a wider sense of self, a richer experience of community, a larger view of time, and the creative imagination to manifest inspiring visions in fellowship with every Ocean, river, and waterway that interconnects and surrounds us. May we flow into one another, for every river is me and you are every river.

Sofia Lemos

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