6.2 Ecosocial Architecture and Community-Based Solutions

INTERVIEW WITH MARJETICA POTRČ
BY HENRIËTTE WAAL & CLEMENS DRIESSEN

Natural bathing in the midst of urban regeneration in the King's Cross Pond Club, 2016. Photo: BD Landscape Architects

In this talk with artist Marjetica Potrč we explore various aspects of her work, including the King's Cross swimming pond in London and the drawings she made about the Soča River and water referendum in Slovenia. We touch on her participatory methods, her connection to water, and her thoughts on ways of remaking our relationship with nature.

THE KING'S CROSS POND CLUB

HW A swimming pond purified with meticulously grown plants on a construction site with cranes and everything else, which attracted wild swimmers in the middle of London—it felt surreal. What mattered most to you in this project?[1]

1 *Of Soil and Water: King's Cross Pond Club*, by OOZE Architects (Eva Pfannes and Sylvain Hartenberg) and Marjetica Potrč, commissioned by King's Cross Central Limited Partnership, curated by Stephanie Delcroix and Michael Pinsky, the Relay Art Programme, 2015–2016.

MP Most important was the engagement of the community. I'm known for on-site participatory projects, often made in collaboration with students, and for public art projects that involve local residents and the users of the spaces, who co-generate the project. Since we were in London, with lots of spatial enclosures and real estate development, my collaborators, OOZE Architects, and I wanted the project to put forward a new idea of what public space could be: a space organized and maintained by a community and grounded in values centred on nature.

HW What would you recommend to makers engaging in similar projects?

MP Trust your instincts and trust your vision; try new concepts and name what you want to achieve. And put value in it. With the King's Cross project we introduced a bold idea on a construction site and placed value on soil and water instead of real estate. And those are the same values that, after two years, at the end of the life of the project, were advocated by the group that formed around the swimming pond. So trust your instincts despite other people's scepticism, such as we saw with *The Cook, the Farmer*, a project in an enclosed garden in Amsterdam,[2] where a local policymaker said: 'This will be a failure. This is not how things are done here'.

2 *The Cook, the Farmer, His Wife and Their Neighbour*, by Marjetica Potrč with Lucia Babina, OOZE Architects, Overtreders W, Merijn Oudenampsen and Henriëtte Waal in Amsterdam Nieuw-West, supported by Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, Stimuleringsfonds Creatieve Industrie and the housing corporation Far West, 2009.

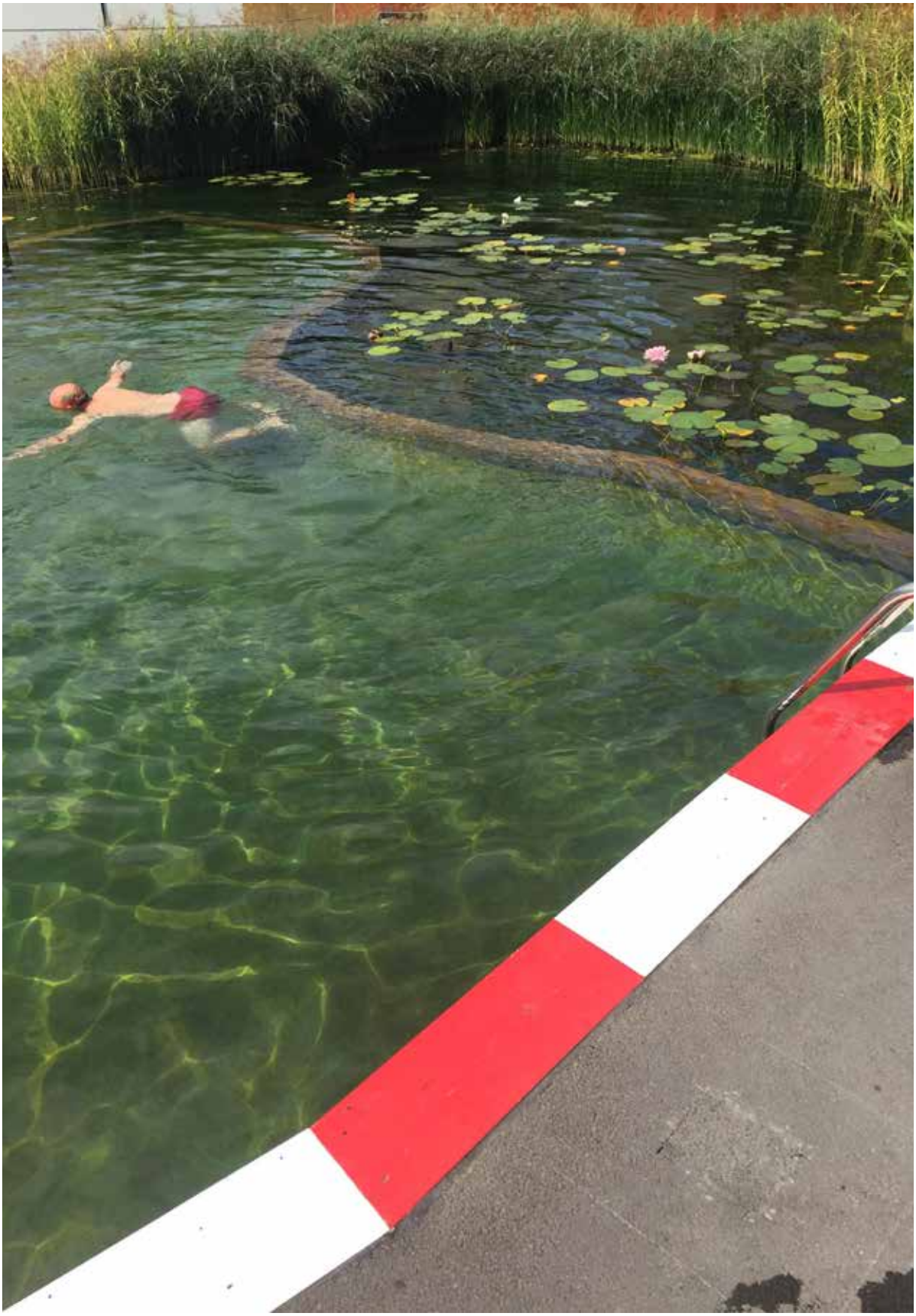
HW Absolutely, then you can be sure you're on the right track!

MP You have to try new concepts. That's very important. At the end of the King's Cross pond project, a core group of users organized a petition to keep the swimming pond going. The 'Save KX Pond' petition, addressed to the commissioners, gathered more than 5,300 signatures. The group proposed a number of ideas to keep the project alive. Initially, they suggested relocating the pond, but when this proved impossible, they argued that the project had become an integral part of London's Green Belt and asked that its biodiverse ecosystem be preserved at a different location. Most significantly, they envisioned the project becoming a community-run public space built on the original underlying environmental values.

For a project to have a meaningful impact, it must be sustained by those who become involved with it. Otherwise, it's just a burst of air. The community's commitment is vital for the project's continuity. My class Design for the Living World, at HFBK Hamburg, defined four essential steps of participatory design:

1. Listening to and talking with the local residents before making any definite plan.
2. Involving the community in the decision-making and design processes.
3. Involving the community in the construction process.

BD Landscape Architects at the King's Cross Pond Club, 2016. Photo: BD Landscape Architects



4. Transferring responsibility for the developed project to the community in order to leave behind a sustainable work that benefits the population in the long term.

CD Do you prefer temporary projects over permanent ones?

MP Both are fine with me. Whether a project is permanent or temporary is not important. What's important is continuation, that the community who joined the project take it further. You have to trust your imagination when working with the local community.

HW It is also about creating memories, isn't it? Leaving a sustainable work doesn't always mean a physical object, but it's important to leave behind the idea of the object or the event.

MP Yes, but to go back for a moment to a project being temporary or permanent, what is important is that the community itself transforms from being users of the project to being its caretakers and owners.

CD How do you announce your work to a commissioner?

MP It's very difficult to explain the process of collaboration to someone who seeks a clear and quick result and expects some kind of object. When you approach a project as a linear thinker, it's like a straight line from start to result—efficient and quick. But if you include subjective thinking, you get curves. You might end up with a similar result, but it takes more time. Designers often prefer being linear for the sake of efficiency. But if you want to have an exchange of knowledge with the local community, in a process that is always messy, the result will be a new hybrid knowledge that goes beyond standardized knowledge. In order to change how we do things, we need to have more socially conscious people with a strong relationship to nature. The challenge of our time is for humans and nature to coexist as equals.

THE SOČA RIVER

HW What is your connection or bond with the Soča River?

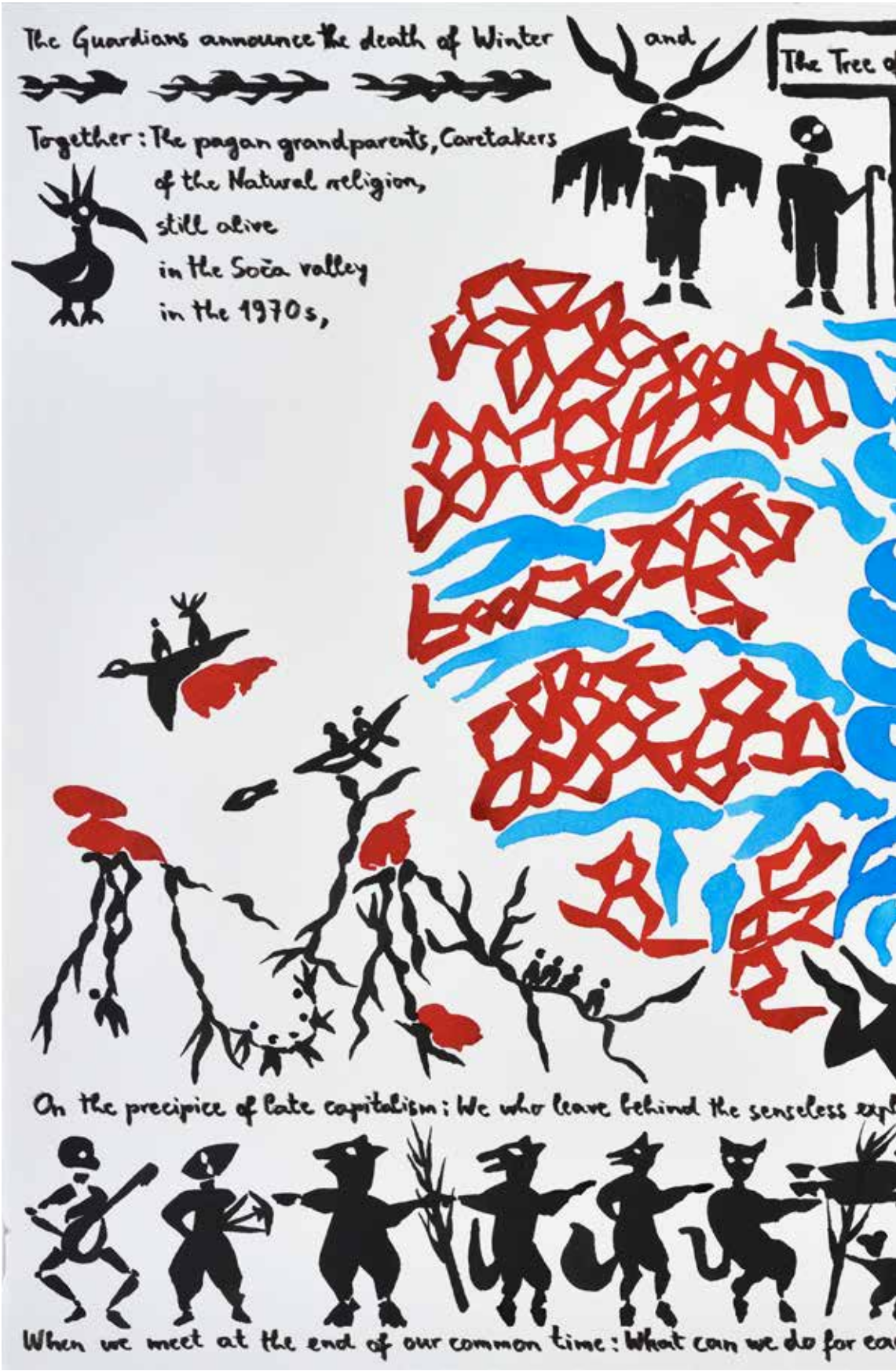
MP The Soča River is the most beautiful river in the world, in my view. But it is also an endangered natural resource. Certain areas of the river are adversely affected by industrial pollution. And many of the people who live there are advocating for the removal of dams and trying to prevent new ones from being built. Rivers hold a significant symbolic value for Slovenians; they embody the cherished idea that our Slovenian identity is deeply rooted in nature—in the mountains, forests, and rivers. Hence, there is a profound emotional bond with rivers, which we saw expressed in the 2021 referendum on water resources.

HW In 2016, Slovenia was the first EU member state to recognize water as a fundamental right. In 2021, however, a proposed law sought to transform rivers and the coastline into market commodities. You joined the referendum to overturn this law. What happened?

MP It was very interesting and I learned a lot from it. Nine out of ten voters opposed the law, which would have opened our rivers and coastline to private commercial exploitation. The referendum made it clear that the people who supported the law understood rivers as

Someone swimming in the King's Cross Pond Club, 2015

Marjetica Potrč, *The Time of Humans on the Soča River*, 2021, drawing on paper, 76 x 56 cm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The Tree o
Together: The pagan grandparents, Caretakers
of the Natural religion,
still alive
in the Soča valley
in the 1970s,
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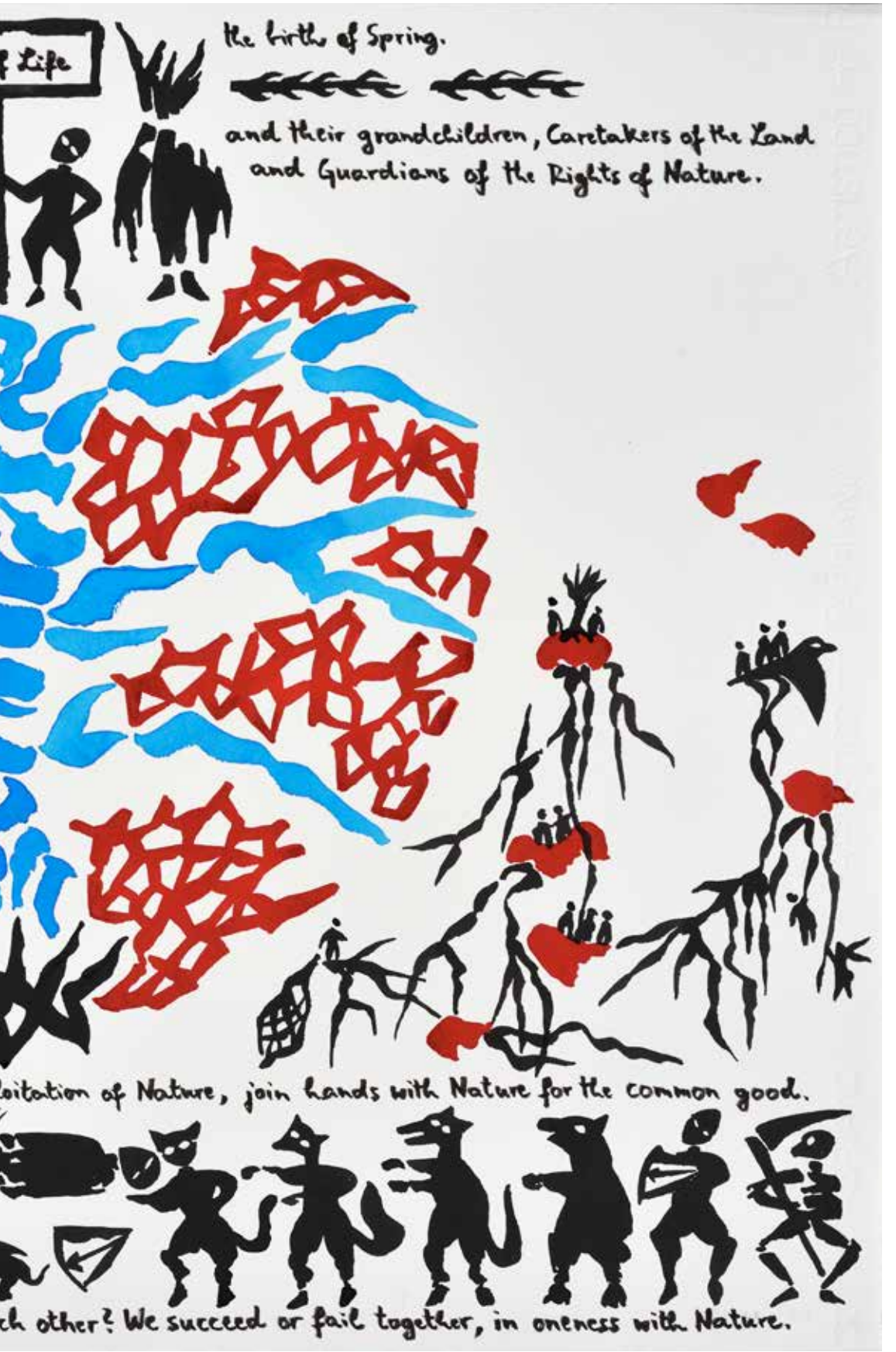
When we meet at the end of our common time: What can we do for ea


f Life
the birth of Spring.
and their grandchildren, Caretakers of the Land
and Guardians of the Rights of Nature.
loitation of Nature, join hands with Nature for the common good.
ch other? We succeed or fail together, in oneness with Nature.

objects to be used. Those who voted in support of preserving water protections saw rivers as subjects, as living beings, as friends. I liken this relationship to parenting—I'm not the owner of my child, I'm his caretaker. The same goes for rivers. When I see a river as a living being, I become its caretaker and a guardian of its rights. There has been a shift in attitude towards the natural world. We are starting to understand rivers as subjects, as persons. People are even discussing the legal personhood of rivers, and of nature as a whole. Could we be on track to grant legal personhood to the Soča River? I hope so.

HW How can we transition to a new relationship with nature?

MP In the weeks leading up to the water referendum, Andreja Slameršek, a Slovenian advocate for river rights, stressed that without an emotional connection, you can't build a relationship with nature. Our bond with nature, as with family or friends, must develop organically. A lack of empathy for nature is what makes people view natural phenomena as commodities in the capitalist system, detached from their intrinsic value. As Andreja notes, 'Without an emotional connection, you can sell a river.' Empathy towards the living world, this emotional connection to nature, is extremely important. But it's never just about the river. It's also about the wildlife and plants that rely on the river—and about us, too, as humans.

We can perform rituals of transition to develop a new, less human-centric relationship with nature. You see this in today's concern about sustainability. When we transition from being owners to being caretakers, we build our socio-economic contract on new foundations, beyond the old neoliberal agreement. This new agreement, based on environmental issues, can be seen in the increase of environmental constitutional actions that have taken place over the last two decades. The Ecuadorian constitution of 2008 reclaimed nature as *Pachamama*, Mother Nature, inscribing the Rights of Nature as a fundamental right aligned with human rights. The same is true of the first draft of changes to the constitution of Chile. Standing up for nature means standing up for social and environmental justice. We are in this together.

CD Are there other artists contributing to this transformation?

MP I very much love the Climate Care Festival in Berlin, which is organized by Rosario Talevi and Gilly Karjevsky. It is a beautiful example of exploring, without prejudices or preconceptions, ideas for building a new relationship with nature. But there are many other examples too.

During the time of the water referendum, I was reading a book by the Slovenian ethnologist Pavel Medvešček, who from the 1950s to the 1970s interviewed the last remaining practitioners of a nature religion in the Soča River Valley. Their world view was grounded in an egalitarian relationship between people and nature. No one lives that way anymore now, but their knowledge has not been forgotten. It represents a tradition we must integrate into our future. Sharing this kind of knowledge is crucial; it fosters awareness and a desire for shared wisdom. This is similar to what your friend from the Tighmert Oasis does. When I was a teenager in Ljubljana in the 1970s, I had no idea that this way of life ever existed in the Soča Valley, but today it makes so much sense. It is important that we share examples of a more egalitarian coexistence with nature. Our survival depends on it.

HW What were you aiming for with the Soča River drawings?

MP Two years ago I was invited to make a work about rivers for the Sydney Biennale. I made drawings about the rights of two rivers: the Soča in Slovenia and the Lachlan in the Wiradjuri Country of Australia. For this second set of drawings I collaborated with the Wiradjuri Elder Ray Woods. As a caretaker of the Lachlan River, Ray Woods spoke on behalf of the river in the New South Wales parliament. By speaking for the river in a human legislature, he proved himself to be a guardian of the river's rights. For me, it was an amazing experience to collaborate so closely with Ray Woods. Although we live in different parts of the world, we agreed on ethics, on environmental issues. This made me aware that Indigenous people and environmentalists are today listening to each other. You might say they speak the same language. Rationalism and the belief in linear progress has shaped our thinking for around 500 years, spanning the Renaissance, the Industrial Revolution, 20th-century modernism, and post-World War II consumerism. I think we are all trying to get out of modernism, or what I call standardized knowledge. It's the call of the time.

CD And how do you do that in your participatory projects?

MP It's a common-sense way of doing things. We work with local residents and figure it out step by step. I don't accept the idea of a single replicable prototype because conditions are so different in each project. Modernist urban planning was interested in standardization, the idea that everything could be reproduced.

CD Do you have a recipe for participatory projects? Or is it more of a situation in which you have to trust your imagination, as you mentioned? How do you involve students?

MP First, before you come to the site, study the location as a gesture of respect to the community you want to work with. Get rid of your preconceptions; don't read all the books on the subject beforehand. You need to be able to listen with an open mind to what the local residents tell you. And then, when your imagination and their imagination meet, you can develop a project together. This means not only designing it together, but also improving it together. The community must be involved in the decision-making. There is a limit to how much you can talk about things; you have to get physical with the project. This is what I believe works best.

HW Yes, it creates deeper learning and understanding.

MP Henriëtte, you gave me your photo of five or six people walking together in the middle of a river or canal. I have it on my windowsill. Milan and I like to look at it.

HW That's nice.

MP It shows them walking in the water, but I am not sure what they are doing. Perhaps they are monitoring the river by walking in the current. I love the photo.

CD So that's your advice: we should just walk into the river?

MP I think it's all about empathy. You can't learn about the river. You have to live with the river; you have to sleep by the river. You have to walk in the river. So, yes.