

INTERVIEW WITH MAJA AND REUBEN FOWKES

BARNABY DRABBLE

September 2016:

BARNABY DRABBLE—Maja and Reuben, thanks for agreeing to the interview and arranging for us to meet here at the Translocal Institute in Budapest. A few years ago, you organised a project called *The River School*. Can you tell me how and why that project emerged?

MAJA FOWKES—There is always a prehistory to our projects, and *The River School* was one such case. *The River School* came out of a series of symposiums we started organising at the Central European University in 2006 entitled *Sustainability and Contemporary Art*. For many years, we looked at the general questions around art and sustainability and ecology, focusing on specific, theoretical issues. Then we realised that we wanted to turn our attention to something that is actually out there, which is part of the natural world: to get out and deal with something very concrete. This is how we decided to do a project on the River Danube. It started slowly. The currents were very uneven, but they took us along. The whole project developed in that way.

REUBEN FOWKES—It wasn't a project that started with a complex master plan, or with different elements that had to be carried out. It sort of evolved as it went along, responding to the changing conditions and things that we found out and the way our interest developed over the course of the project.

BARNABY—The participants in the original symposium, would these have been art students?

MAJA—The symposiums were always interdisciplinary, working in collaboration with the Environmental Science and Policy department at the Central European University. From the beginning, we were bringing together scientists, artists and activists in this setting. And we wanted to continue that way with *The River School*.



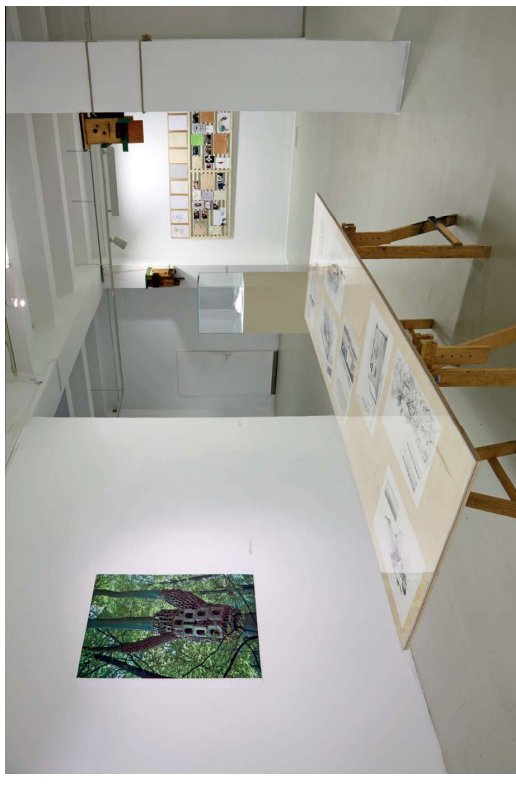
▲ *River School*, Danube Delta (2014).

The starting point for *The River School* was that we wanted to focus on the River Danube from its Eastern European side, once it leaves Austria and Germany in the West and enters into Slovakia, Hungary, and flows down to Romania. We wanted to focus on that part of the river for many reasons: some of them are more related to colonial histories of the river, others derive from our interest in the environmental history of that part of the Danube.

REUBEN—It had this dual aspect. Focusing on the eastern side of the river and also looking at the life of the river, its agency and its materiality as part of the physical universe, something more than just its place in human stories and human history, as a metaphor and so on.

In the course of our research, it became clear very quickly that although there are many books about the Danube river, and many art projects, most of them have actually ignored the river as an ecological fact and looked exclusively at its human history, its cultural and political importance. If you look in the index of these books, you will find no entry for nature or environmental ecology. We wanted to bring in the ecological side of the Danube, which has been strangely missing from many cultural and historical accounts to date.

What we soon found out was that actually these two issues were connected. The issue of a colonial relation to the Lower Danube, viewing it as this exotic other, and the issue of a certain attitude to this part of the river as a natural force. Somehow there was a link between this cultural view and the intensive exploitation of the Lower Danube, typically seeing it as a resource for energy, fishing or so on and a force to be controlled.



▲ *Like a Bird: Avian Ecologies in Contemporary Art* exhibition, Trafo Gallery, installation view (2014). Photograph—Niklos Suranyi.

BARNABY — What did the school produce?

MAJA — There were several aspects of *The River School*. There was a travelling exhibition that focused specifically on birds. We wanted to look at how the river is shared with other species and not only fish. When you go to the Danube Delta and get immersed into it, you really understand how the river is important for all species, and especially for migrating birds, and how all is interconnected. So that was one aspect of the exhibition which was held at Trafó Gallery, Budapest and then it went to tranzit.org in Bucharest.

REUBEN — It was a two-year project, so it was possible to do various events at various times. During the exhibition, for example, there were different events on several issues: a workshop, study days and a symposium. There was an introductory event at the Whitechapel Gallery in London about the methodology of artists and their response to the ecological crisis and the way their lifestyles and their practices are interconnected.

Throughout the project, we looked at different aspects and we also included the social engagements. We invited some activists to speak, who were dealing with ways to overcome people's alienation from the river, the fact that people ignore the river, even though it flows through their cities. To address this, the Valyo group from Budapest devised various activities, like walks by the river with artist installations, yoga classes, group meetings on the river, a bar which was like a beach and so on. These were various techniques for resensitising people towards the presence of the river in the city.

Then there was Slovak novelist Michal Hvorecký's project on the Danube cruise ships, *Death on the Danube*. He looked at these huge holiday boats on the Danube as sites of the exploitation of workers, which create an experience where people who go on river cruises are also completely cut off from the river. They sit on the boats, being entertained, and are taken by bus to the various touristy events in cities. So what's the meaning of these Danube cruises?

It was really important for us to bring together environmental historians and the environmental humanities in this project through the symposiums. We had environmental historians speaking about how the Danube has changed over the last 300 years from its source to the Black Sea. They pointed out that we shouldn't just see the river as a victim of human interventions and human domination, but instead they stressed the agency of the river and the times it escaped human control.

MAJA — It was interesting to hear about the latest theories of thinking about the river from the point of view of the river itself, to take a fluvio-centric perspective. It was important to note that these ideas were coming from a scientist rather than the artist. Another scientist talked about nuclear energy and the Danube, because nuclear energy is a huge issue in Hungary. There are plans for further development of nuclear power and there's no public discussion about it. The deal that they signed is a state secret for another forty years.



▲ River School, Bucharest Delta (2014).

REUBEN — The British writer Nick Thorpe, in his book *The Danube*, looked at the river in an unusual way, choosing to travel upstream from the Black Sea to the Black Forest and thereby countering the historical narrative developed around journeys from the Black Forest to the Black Sea. He described his journey upstream as a descent into a dark and exotic world: a journey from civilisation in the South East towards the barbarism of Western capitalism in Germany.

MAJA — But there were many different approaches and we also concentrated on some artistic examples, including artists who were active in around '89 in opposing the large-scale Gabčíkovo dam project between Austria, Hungary and Slovakia, which involved civil disobedience.

REUBEN — It was the beginning of the civic movements in Eastern Europe that played a role in the bringing down of communism in Hungary and Slovakia.

MAJA — And it was very much connected to environmental activism at the time, which was interesting from our point of view. We had artists, such as Ilona Németh and József R. Juhász, who were active in the '80s and the '90s, and a younger artist, Axel Braun, revisiting it all again and asking additional questions. We brought all these practitioners with their focus on the river and shared together all these different views and dimensions, working towards an understanding of how people can talk to each other coming from these different disciplines. This was really rewarding.

REUBEN — It was important that we chose not to just sit in the classroom or the museum and talk about the river but actually to get out there. We had floating workshops and excursions, and also visited the Danube Delta with artists Ursula Biemann and Vlad Basalici. We were interested in what it does to the conversation when you have the company of frogs, or when you can actually see and touch what you're talking about? This is a very specific way to talk about ecology.

BARNABY — Let's talk about Translocal; when did you decide to set up an institute?

REUBEN — In 2005, and we were thinking about what to call our activities. We wanted to have a website and we came up to this idea of Translocal, because it seemed to describe the way we were living and working at the time. We were interested in this idea of being intensely present in a plurality of localities while also adopting a perspective that goes beyond any particular local or national frame.

MAJA — Three years ago, we decided to actually open a space in Budapest as a platform for our work between contemporary art and academia. We developed Translocal as a research centre, which would enable us to do this and at the same time be small and adaptable to collaborations.

We decided to stay with the same name again, but for different reasons, because there are so many spaces in Europe which are over-conditioned by the local or national, and we wanted to have this openness preserved as a position of criticality and mobility. You cannot be closed into one geopolitical space.

Translocal is focused on research, supporting our own research and at the same time enabling others. This was the idea behind sharing our research resources, which are small but developing, by establishing an archive and a library and hosting events. The focus comes from our two long-term interests. One is Eastern European art history and the other is art and ecology. Through the Translocal Institute, we work to bring the two together.



▲ Translocal Institute, Budapest, Experimental Reading Room (2016).

BARNABY — You talk about the autonomy of this space, but also about collaborating with the Central European University in Budapest. What is the relationship between your institute and the University?

MAJA — We have been working with CEU since the first symposium in 2006 and have recently established the Environmental Arts and Humanities Initiative, consisting of taught courses and the programming of relevant events.

REUBEN — In recent years, we've also worked with several local arts universities, including the Academy of Fine Arts in Budapest and especially with their curatorial department and the art theory department. For two years we've had a group of MA students who've come every week or every other week for a whole semester to take part in our seminar on art and ecology and on the Anthropocene as part of the structure of their education. We also work with the Moholy-Nagy University of Art and Design, which in some way is seen as the rival of the Academy of Fine Arts. From our independent position we had the opportunity to work with both of them.

MAJA —All the seminars were open to people who wanted to come and join. This was the agreement we had with the University, that this would be an open class.

REUBEN —We tend to build a core relationship with each institution for each semester but we also have an open call, and there were several people who joined the group because they were interested in the subject. I feel that they got the most out of it, participating more actively because they had a particular interest and attending even though there was no obligation. This dynamic also created something different for the students.

MAJA —So, overall we prefer to see our work with academic institutions as distinct cases of collaboration, because to our knowledge there are very few institutions where employees have the full freedom to be as critical as they may want to be, without restraints. For us, Translocal is about escaping restraints, about opening up to those who we really want to have a conversation with, about trying to spread ideas in the art world, amongst activists and across specialisations. Translocal is a resource and we try to open this up as much as possible.

REUBEN —Exactly, and with this in mind it's no surprise that one of the main spaces here is the library, where we are at the moment. It's a physical space full of books, but the catalogue is also online. People can come across the books, check whether we have it, make an appointment and come and read it here. Or they can use the catalogue as a guide to what literature is out there.

MAJA —We have received grants for developing the library, which we used to create an edited collection focused on our two main fields of interest.

REUBEN —When we decided to found a physical space for Translocal we decided very quickly that we didn't want to have a gallery or exhibition space.

MAJA —Coming from curatorial practice, we know what it takes to run a gallery and programme regular exhibitions. And that's why we decided we wanted the site to focus on the research aspect of our practice, while our curatorial practice entails collaboration with galleries and museums.



▲ Translocal Institute, Budapest, Library (2018).

BARNABY —As your work has a strong focus on art and ecology, how do you work in regard to the environmental impacts of your space and your projects?

MAJA —That's a hard question and we don't have a final answer. We have been asking ourselves this for a long time and we decided to limit our mobility and live frugally while remaining flexible. We tend to go to only one large exhibition in which we are not directly involved per year, a biennial or documenta, for example. We don't do globetrotting, but if there is a meaningful reason for travelling, we travel. We like to travel by train and have organised conferences where all the speakers came by train. But here we are also flexible, we don't go often on intercontinental flights but fly occasionally within Europe when we see it as absolutely necessary.

We did try to calculate our environmental footprint. And we even tried to make a project out of it, thinking about the artwork in terms of its life cycle and in terms of the environmental footprint. But we concluded that artworks resist any kind of numbers and statistics. In assessing the environmental impact of an artwork you could maybe calculate the tons of CO₂ used in its making and showing, but what of its intellectual or experiential impact on people, how do we count awareness, change in habits and thought processes?

REUBEN — An exhibition can have a positive impact, making the public think about other things, consider their values, maybe not to be so materialistic, not to consume so much in the rest of their life; how would you put that into the equation, all these unknowns?

So, in relation to your question about environmental impact of our work we choose to continually deal with it, be aware of it, have it as an issue and discuss it with others.

MAJA — There are sectors of the art world that completely ignore their environmental impact, and the biggest problem in our opinion is the global art market.

REUBEN — When thinking or talking about sustainability we have to look at which sector of the contemporary art world you're talking about and how does that art-work or space fit into other systems, especially economic systems, systems of speculation, systems of inequality. It is not sufficient to just measure CO₂, the social aspect cannot be ignored when you're thinking about ecology.

MAJA — We're interested in the idea of curatorial sustainability, as a counter to the art market and its continual focus on production, mobility and visibility. In terms of the ethics of our work, we believe that we work only with ethical artists, including artists who are even more adaptable than ourselves, who grow their own food, live outside of the big cities and produce wonderful art. They're still part of the art world, but they like to make long-term connections like we do and we work with these artists again and again.

REUBEN — Yes, we work against the suggestion that, as curators, we should be constantly trying to come up with a new idea. Instead we work with an issue over the longer term, often with the same network of trusted people.

MAJA — In our work we feel a sense of solidarity. We have the connection with people who are discovering and exploring something similar around the world. Once you meet these people, artists, curators, art historians, you have this common sense of building something together. This is the idealistic side.

REUBEN — On the less idealistic side, the dominant mechanism of the art world is un-sustainability. It is a mechanism that is not producing the right results because certain values are getting pushed to the top, which are not really worthwhile or

interesting, and other values are being ignored because the system is not recognising their necessity. There is a problem with the mechanism of the art world.

BARNABY — Various writers on art and ecology have suggested that in such a challenging time in regard to environmental issues every artistic practice must necessarily take a stance on sustainability. How far away from this are we?

MAJA — Things are changing. I think that today it's very hard for artists to justify unlimited resources and unlimited budgets that can be applied to whatever they dream up.

REUBEN — Audiences are changing too; sometimes we see something and we can't appreciate any aspect of it because we're so overwhelmed by how unsustainable and wasteful it is. The sense of urgency does change things. I think that whereas before art history could think about environmental art as a certain niche interest within the broader field of contemporary art, as the evidence of catastrophic climate change grows, it becomes harder to separate the environmental aspect of art from other aspects. Just like the way you can't separate the social context of an artwork from its ecological significance.

BARNABY — It's clear that you are taking a stance with your work. How would you describe Translocal's contribution to this change in practice?

MAJA — We are researchers, and we are interested in the idea of environmental urgency and its history. We're talking about urgency now but in '89 people here really understood urgency, in '68 people understood urgency and in the 1940s people understood urgency. As early as 1905, Franc  and Simons' book, *Germes of Mind in Plants*, was a publication about the pollution of the environment and about the urgent need to do something about it. Clearly, it's not always the most optimistic position to see that, despite all this urgency, so little has been done, but on the other hand you understand the situation better.

REUBEN — Part of our work is about developing an understanding of how climate change is connected to all kinds of other issues around ecology. This whole discourse around the Anthropocene, which is also related to the discussion on climate change but broadens its register in different ways, leads us to investigate

the complex connections we can draw between the different aspects of the human relationship to the natural environment and the planet.

MAJA — The other objective is to bring the artistic discussion into the more general climate talks discussion, to actually inform scientific approaches. We would like to see the arts and humanities' contribution to the discussion about the environment accepted and taken seriously. It is time to acknowledge that what artists have produced in this field, as knowledge, is equal in importance to what scientists are telling us about climate change. Indeed, there is a connection between the two and a necessity to work together.

Currently, there is a danger that scientists would prefer to see the artists as illustrators. Whereas we think that it's not a question of illustration, but of a different kind of production.

Some artistic practices are activist-oriented and their work can create a huge impact in the locality they're working with. On the other hand, there are artists who are working through drawings. We believe that their practice has the potential to speak as much about important issues as the activist practices. If an artist has an exhibition which shows the depth of their engagement with the issues and presents their vision of the situation, they can also be effective in making people think about climate change, about their way of life or about the problems around sustainability.

REUBEN — We believe that what artists can do around ecology and climate change is not just about illustrating the theories or the problems that other people put out there, but also contributing to how those discussions are formed. Behind this is an acceptance that the kind of knowledge we need to produce in the Anthropocene is somehow negotiated between the sciences, the arts and the humanities. It no longer serves us to have them separated. We can't just rely on scientists anymore to give us all the answers about the planet because they haven't done a very good job of it up till now. There's definitely been something missing. So one of the challenges is to bring these streams of knowledge back together, because part of our alienation from the natural world is related to this historic bifurcation of science from the arts and humanities.

MAJA — In the first symposium we organised in 2006, we had this moment of revelation where during a talk by an environmentalist from the Department of Environmental Science and Policy, a student asked, '*Who's going to save the world? Is it education? Is it the arts? Who's going to save the world?*' The environmentalist said that if we were to get rid of the hundred largest multinational companies it would solve nearly all the world's problems. There was a shocked reaction. You wouldn't expect this from a scientist.