

Bogdanka Poznanović, Katalin Ladik, and Milica Mrđa on the Shorelines: “Aqueous Imaginaries” to End This World*

Introduction

The finite resource of water on Earth, from which 0,01% can be directly consumed by humans, moves through times, ecosystems, and civilizations, intensely shaping and connecting the cycles of life. It transforms the landscapes we inhabit, influences the way we move through them, and structures our daily rhythms, guiding how we orient ourselves on this planet. In its various forms, water has the ability to cleanse or poison us. Often being a battleground for conflicting interests, it is tangible and abstract at the same time. Too often serving as a mere dumping ground, carrying away what we wish to discard from our immediate view, water’s uncontrollable force can erase centuries of human sediments and leave behind a path of devastation. In the era of climate change, many of the problems that arise out of the extractivist practices of living with the planet are water related: floods, extreme droughts, melting glaciers and sea ice, ocean warming and rising sea levels, the decline of coral reefs, polluted bodies of water and the increasing number of regions with inadequate access to clean drinking water (Bailey-Charteris 2024). Given that the human body cannot breathe underwater nor survive in it, it often remains a mysterious body of unknowability and, from another perspective, one of the greatest sources of inspiration for myths, spiritual practices, and artistic production. There has been a growing interest in the humanities in exploring the relationships between water and culture.¹

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¹ See for example Bloomsbury’s book series *The Blue Humanities* or others such as *Hydrohumanities: Water Discourses and Environmental Futures* (2021) and *An Introduction to the Blue Humanities* (2023).

Astrida Neimanis, in her renowned book *Bodies of Water: Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology*, departs from the problem that the prevailing “contemporary aqueous imaginaries of water” (Neimanis 2019: 156) influence the ways in which water is treated and perpetuate the destructive ways of inhabiting the Earth. Namely, as the authors note in the introduction to the book *Thinking with Water*, “[w]hen dominant cultures are undergirded by anthropocentric logics of efficiency, profit, and progress, waters are all too often made nearly invisible, relegated to a passive role as a ‘resource,’ and subjected to containment, commodification, and instrumentalization” (Chen et al. 2013: 3). Following Neimanis, water “constitutes one of the so-called Anthropocene’s most urgent, visceral, and ethically fraught sites of political praxis and theoretical inquiry” (2019: 20). As an alternative, the author offers a new framework of phenomenology to conceptualize (human) bodies as bodies of water, emphasizing that “[o]ur own embodiment [...] is never really autonomous” (*ibid.*: 3) thus underlining the necessity to dissolve dominant narratives by creating alternative imaginaries. Neimanis’ work gained considerable attention in the arts as well and inspired numerous artistic projects.² As Bronwyn Bailey-Charteris observes in the book *The Hydrocene: Eco-Aesthetics in the Age of Water*, “art is going into the blue” (2024: 31) and continues to explain that “[w]ays of relating to water in non-anthropocentric modes are being remembered, realised and reinvented by this new wave of water-based artistic practices” (*ibid.*). The interest for relating to water in the arts, however, perhaps spans across centuries and cultures. Decades ago, in the early 1970s and late 1980s, three women from Vojvodina in socialist Yugoslavia stood on the shores of the Danube, the second largest river in the European mainland, and made some of their earliest performative actions.³ As we live through the 6th mass extinction and intensifying impacts of global warming, this contribution seeks to underscore the importance of revisiting and exploring artworks from the past by answering the central research question of what kind of “aqueous imaginaries” did the art propose in the very early stages of the Anthropocene, an era as Donna Haraway says, we should aim to end as soon as possible.⁴

Drawing on the work of Astrida Neimanis, Cecilia Chen, Bronwyn Bailey-Charteris and others, this article analyses works by Bogdanka Poznanović, Katalin Ladik, and Milica Mrđa, created when the experience of the world was radically

² See for example *Hydra* by the Danish *Laboratory for Aesthetics and Ecology* and *The 13th Shanghai Biennale Bodies of Water* in 2020 and 2021.

³ The Danube is acknowledged in the art world with for example Novi Sad’s *Festival of Contemporary Art Danube Dialogues* that has been taking place since 2012 and *donaufestival* that is happening in Austria since 2005.

⁴ “The Anthropocene marks severe discontinuities; what comes after will not be like what came before. I think our job is to make the Anthropocene as short/thin as possible and to cultivate with each other in every way imaginable epochs to come that can replenish refuge” (Haraway 2016: 100).

different. The conceptual framework is informed by the notion of “environmental imaginary” (Neimanis et al. 2015: 67), as discussed in the article *Four Problems, Four Directions for Environmental Humanities: Toward Critical Posthumanities for the Anthropocene*. In this text, Cecilia Åsberg, Johan Hedrén, and Astrida Neimanis emphasize the importance of environmental imaginaries in dealing with environmental problems. The authors call for attention towards different speculative and lived imaginaries to mobilize those that might help us cultivate relationships with the environment that are countering those shaped by capitalism. To illustrate the transforming potential of imaginaries, a quote from Astrida Neimanis and Rachel Loewen Walker may be helpful: “[h]ow we live in the world is contingent upon how we imagine that world to be” (2014: 563). Art can play a significant role “for cultivating better ways of living with water” (Neimanis 2019: 21) or, as the editors of *Thinking with Water* suggest, “alternative ways of ‘storying’ and mapping waters can give voice to inclusive and evolving vocabularies of watery place, thereby transforming collective ways of thinking” (Chen 2013: 9).

On the Shore

According to art theorist Miško Šuvaković, the artistic practices of the three authors in focus can be situated within three different artistic paradigms (Šuvaković 2002). As he points out, Poznanović’s work may be understood in the context of the neo-avant-garde and its tendencies to open art towards life and expand media and art’s communication possibilities. Ladik’s work can be read in the context of the post-avant-garde performances of the 1970s that were challenging the norms through excessive and subversive acts, while Mrđa’s work belongs to the post-historical and eclectic performances that relativized boundaries between life and art or between elite and popular culture (Šuvaković 2002). Bogdanka Poznanović (1930-2013), Katalin Ladik (1942-), and Milica Mrđa (1960-2021) all began working as artists and performed in public spaces in the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. At the time in question – the 1970s and 1980s – they all lived in Novi Sad in Vojvodina, an autonomous province of SFRY, and today a region belonging to the Republic of Serbia. Bogdanka Poznanović began her path in arts and culture by studying painting at the Belgrade Academy of Arts. The early years of her career, up until the late 1960s, were focused on experimental painting. Afterwards, she continued with what Denegri famously termed “new art practice” (Denegri 1978: 8). She was among the first in socialist Yugoslavia to engage with mail art, artistic interventions in public spaces, and artist's books.

Katalin Ladik was part of the Hungarian minority in Novi Sad and grew up bilingual, speaking both Hungarian and Serbian. While working at the Yugoslav Investment Bank, she completed her first studies at the College of Commerce, later enrolling in acting school and working as an actress at Radio Novi Sad. She entered

the field of performing arts through poetry in the late 1960s which led her to sound, voice, and body explorations. Ladik mainly created as a performer, poet (especially in the field of visual poetry), and writer. During her time living in Novi Sad, she did not receive recognition from the local community but was very well accepted internationally. Her work has gained significant visibility in recent years, establishing her as one of the first female (and feminist) performance artists in Yugoslavia.⁵ Milica Mrđa studied painting at the Academy of Arts in Novi Sad. In 1983, she began working on more experimental practices to open the act of painting, making performances and video pieces in the late 1980s and 1990s. Her practice was strongly inspired by myths, shamanism, and the unconscious, pre-cultural aspects of humans, focused towards creating energetic and ecstatic rituals (Milenković 2016). While it seems that her work was acknowledged and noted as an exceptional practice in the 1990s (see: A. Tišma: *Umetnost koja hoda*, 1998), her work, in comparison to Ladik and Poznanović, remains largely understudied and, except for catalogues, lacks the detailed research that would provide an overview of her artistic practice.

Following Miško Šuvaković, the art scene in Vojvodina had a very limited representation of female authors, and the majority of them and their works remained marginalized (Šuvaković 2002). In most cases, they were excluded from the dominant narratives of Yugoslav art history and rarely studied or contextualized from the perspective of gender. Scholars like Nikola Dedić (2008) and Šuvaković (2002) have later historicized the three above-mentioned artists as pivotal figures for the development of women's performance art in Vojvodina. Miško Šuvaković categorizes them in a linear narrative of three different "stages of 'women's performance'" (Šuvaković 2002: 145), each representing a different phase in the research of female identities and body politics. According to Šuvaković, Bogdanka Poznanović's actions can be read through the lens of the beginnings and emergence of female identity that still lacked any kind of discourse; Katalin Ladik's artistic performances as part of the next step of an already critical and feminist position of creating "female politics of the body"; while Mrđa's performances as part of the post-feminist strain challenging the traditional notions of female representation and female sexuality, offering a space to perform the identity of an individual (*ibid.*). Similarly, Dedić writes that while Poznanović's work can be recognized as an example of "women's modernist art" (Dedić 2008: 725), the feminist tendencies of the artists who worked in Vojvodina can be first noticed in post-avant-garde and conceptual artworks, highlighting the practices of Ladik and Mrđa (*ibid.*: 727). While Mrđa began her artistic career later, this timeline underscores the pioneering contributions of Poznanović and Ladik for critical engagements with gender and therefore for the development of feminist art in socialist Yugoslavia.

⁵ Ladik is also amongst the recipients of The *Lennon Ono Grant for Peace* (2016).

Performances on/with the Danube

In 1971, a year after her first action *Heart-Object*, Bogdanka Poznanović created *Cubes-Rivers* on the Danube in Novi Sad. She prepared seventeen styrofoam cubes, each inscribed with the name of one Yugoslav river, and placed them on the Danube's shore in a pyramid-like structure. The audience was invited to take the cubes and put them into water. Soon, all of them were floating and left to the Danube's own agency, to wherever it would take them. This action was video documented by film director Želimir Žilnik and photography director Dušan Ninkov, and later shown in Buenos Aires. Seven months later, on June 29, 1972, Poznanović performed the next action on the Danube titled *Rivers Transmissions*. This time, she prepared frames and foils with the names of Yugoslav rivers that were again set afloat. Exactly one month later, she performed the piece in Montreux, Switzerland, at another body of water, Lake Geneva. In the words of Kojić Mladenov, "Bogdanka Poznanović's entire action arts rested on communication" (Kojić Mladenov 2016: 122), which can also be observed from Poznanović's own words in an interview: "Throughout my entire career, ever since I started painting, I have been interested in the process itself, to exit the traditional and limited spaces; but above all, I have been interested in communication on planetary coordinates" (Damjan 2001: 308). This highlights a key aspect of the Danube's role in these two actions – Poznanović's interest in communication, which led to opening the development of the work to the river's flow.

A few years later, in the mid-1970s, Katalin Ladik also engaged with the Danube in her performative action *Float Novi Sad Down the Danube*.⁶ The project was part of the *Novi Sad Projects*, a series of interventions in the city's urban spaces. Even though this work is mentioned as one of her most important performances (see: V. Kopicl: *Katalin Ladik*, 2024), there is not much information on it. The exhibition catalogue titled *The Power of a Woman: Katalin Ladik* holds some insights with the following instructions: "Throw some postcards of Novi Sad, from Novi Sad into the Danube. Find out later where the river threw them out" (Šuvaković, Šuler 2010: 165). The catalogue also includes photo documentation of Ladik on the shore, releasing the postcards into the river. According to the quoted instructions, the focus seems to be on the intervening part of the action and drawing attention to a non-human logic of the river's flow. Ladik later performed a similar action in 1988 on the Danube in Budapest, titled *Descent of the Town of Budapest Down the River Danube*, this time perhaps dropping postcards of Budapest. In Ladik's oeuvre, we can also find other performances and actions in or near the sea,

⁶ The title seems to be used inconsistently, as we can also find a version of *Descent of the City of Novi Sad Down the River Danube*.

showing the importance of water for her.⁷ In 1989, Mrđa made a video performance that later, in the catalogue for the exhibition in 1992, is described as a “video aquarelle” (Miloš Arsić’s term).⁸ Titled *Body, Pigment, Water*, this performance was a kind of a ritualistic painting act. The performance, recorded on video and repeated at various locations, involved Mrđa placing white sheets of paper along the shore of the Danube and sprinkling pigment onto them. As the water gradually approached, it began to dissolve and carry the colours, creating intricate patterns in shades of yellow, purple, etc. After that, Mrđa also moved the papers to the water, allowing them to be carried away by its unpredictable currents. This action can be interpreted as an extension of the painting process involving the agency of natural processes, and creating an elusive painting of the world made by its own forces. As seen, the selected case studies engage with water (and the river) through different strategies, each offering their own interaction model, but mostly focusing on the river’s flow. Poznanović’s work might enter the relationship through the idea of expanding communication by incorporating the agency of the body that transgresses borders in any possible sense. Sharing some similarities with the idea to connect or float the city away of its own infrastructure, Ladik’s action could be interpreted more as an intervention aimed at challenging the established rhythms of life, employing water as an unpredictable and uncontrollable force that introduces elements of chance and spontaneity. Meanwhile, Mrđa’s performance foregrounds the involvement of non-human natural agency in a human dominated realm of culture and painting, challenging their exclusivity and prompting a reconsideration of the relationship between art and the natural environment. Based on these modes of relating, what kind of “aqueous imaginaries” can be observed in these works?

“Aqueous Imaginaries” From the Danube

Amitav Ghosh argues that “climate crisis is also a crisis of culture, and thus of the imagination” (2016: 9). Building on this insight, the article argues on recognizing the transformative role of art in fostering imagination that transcends anthropocentric, capitalist, and extractivist paradigms. Before continuing, it is crucial to draw attention to the fact that the aqueous imaginaries in the selected case studies are all intensely tied to the features of the river that most powerfully influence the strategies through which they engaged with the water. In all the examples,

⁷ See for example her two works that were made in Hvar, Croatia: *Ego-Alter Ego* (1979) together with Peter Below and *Painting the Sea* (1982).

⁸ See: Kuzmanov Mrđa, M. 1992. *Video radovi, instalacije, performansi, gestualna poezija (1988–1992)*. Novi Sad: Galerija savremene likovne umetnosti Novi Sad

the set-up for collaborating with water is focused on opening the works to other influences, inviting the river for its uncontrollable flows, but not situating the works in any of its specificities or critically considering water pollution. It could be said that the water is imagined through the idea of the river as an abstract running body and inspiration. While it is not treated as a resource, they are nevertheless focusing on its material aspects, using it more as a canvas than engaging with its complexities. All the works are performed in public spaces, and Poznanović's and Ladik's use of it needs to be read in the context of the avant-garde tendencies to exit the four walls of enclosed art spaces, intervene in the cities and natural environments, and merge art with life. In Poznanović's *Cubes-Rivers* and *Rivers Transmissions*, water perhaps serves more as a powerful symbol. Drawing from her own words on the significance of rivers, water is included in the performance as a connecting possibility, enabling and facilitating communication between distant lands and transcending human languages. By invoking the names of various rivers, Poznanović's intention may be interpreted as a desire to connect them all, creating a vast water body that would not be an obstacle or a border, but a unifying element. In an interview, she describes these projects as "'[w]ater' on water" (Damjan 2001: 305). Here, following Bailey-Charteris' terminology, the main imaginary of the Danube is "the imagery of the rivers as 'running' or 'flowing'" (Bailey-Charteris 2024: 52), working with water for its physical movements and metaphorical potentials, and opening another path for communication, led by the river's own rhythms.

A similar fascination with the river's flow can also be observed in the works of Ladik and Mrđa. Throwing postcards of Novi Sad into the river, Ladik was sending the city "to the world" and inviting a human mind to follow the non-human logic of the river's stream in order to open life to coincidences that are beyond human control. According to Miško Šuvaković's text in the catalogue, the actions from the series *Novi Sad Projects* are "potential disruptions" in the city's "social constellation", aiming to change "the ordinary state of affairs" (2010: 167). The imaginary of the water is therefore first the abstract flow that has a different connection to the space. Mrđa's work with water is similar, but, however, seems to be slightly more engaging. Namely, Mrđa, trained as a painter, is intentionally opening her own process of painting to water's agency, aiming to create a framework for the environment to paint itself. She immerses herself to its forces, fostering the connection between her and the environment. Sanja Kojić Mladenov (2009) observes that Milica Mrđa in her performances *Body, Pigment, Water* and *Rites of Body and Earth*, "sees herself as symbolically, indissolubly connected to nature, through pagan, mythic symbolism, while performing her performances in a manner close to ritual" (Kojić Mladenov 2009). Mladenov also notes that Mrđa's works "represent some of the first artistic experiments exploring the relationship between women and nature through contemporary visual language and media" (*ibid.*) Therefore, it could be stated that Mrđa's performance is the closest to dis-

mantling the binary opposition between nature and culture. Besides engaging with water as a transgressive and unpredictable element as seen in Poznanović's and Ladik's work, or immersing the creative process to its, again, uncontrollable flows as in Mrđa's case, there is yet another significant aspect of employing the water's agency. This involves the intentional limitation of the author's control over the artwork, allowing its dramaturgy to be shaped by a non-human force. Such an approach not only challenges traditional notions of authorship but also reflects a possible ecological tendency of minimizing the dominance of human subjects in their relationships with the environments. By creating a framework that foregrounds water's agency, these works could gesture towards the resistance to the anthropocentric framing of water solely as a resource.

Conclusion

In exploring the tools and inspirations art from the past might offer for developing non-anthropocentric imaginaries, it is essential to acknowledge the profound shifts in awareness regarding climate change and extractivist modes of living that have occurred over the past decades. The second half of the 20th century – marked by the destruction of World War II and the looming threat of nuclear disaster – witnessed the emergence of environmental activism and a growing awareness of consumerist culture. With public spaces in the cities being increasingly occupied by cars, and a growing amount of produced waste, etc., environmental awareness from that period primarily focused on pollution.⁹ This is also a time of large-scale building projects and water management strategies, promoting the imaginary of water as a resource. Back then, waters were perhaps among the first to show the after-effects of pollution, whether through changes in colour or by the enclosure of surrounding terrestrial spaces. If the selected works were to be re-enacted today, they would likely evoke very different connotations. Nevertheless, these works engage with water and offer us valuable insights into how artists imagined water and environment in the beginnings of the Anthropocene. Although the art was made at a time when the awareness of the Anthropocene was still emerging and thus may be pre-Anthropocentric, they still function as “amplifiers” or “sensitizers” (Neimaniš 2019: 55) for the agency of water. Apart from that, their work, especially Mrđa's performance, produced years later, could reflect the growing awareness and emergence of the need to dismantle human dominance over the natural environments. This study represents an initial step in examining the environmental imaginaries present in the works of Poznanović, Ladik, and Mrđa. By situating their

⁹ See for example works by *Grupa TOK* from Zagreb in the 1970s and Mako Sajko's movie *Poisons* (1964).

practices within contemporary theoretical frameworks, I hope this contribution has highlighted the daring and emancipatory nature of their practices (created in a deeply patriarchal environment) and underscored the importance of continuing to study them. Finally, the focus on water has sought to demonstrate how engaging with the unknowability of water may offer a promising approach to practice responsibility to other agencies and paths to end the Anthropocene as soon as possible.

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SAŽETAK

BOGDANKA POZNAKOVIĆ, KATALIN LADIK I MILICA MRĐA NA OBALAMA: “VODENI IMAGINARIJ” ZA KRAJ SVIJETA

U trenutku u kojemu se čovječanstvo suočava sa šestim masovnim izumiranjem te kada su posljedice globalnoga zagrijavanja sve strašnije ovaj rad nastoji ukazati na važnost umjetnosti u njegovanju imaginarija koji se suprotstavljaju dominantnim zapadnim narativima o eksploataciji. U njemu će biti reinterpretirane umjetničke prakse iz 20. stoljeća, nastale u jednom sasvim drugom kontekstu. Oslanjajući se na teorijske radove Astride Neimanis, Cecilie Chen, Bronwyn Bailey Charteris i drugih znanstvenika, ova studija istražuje odabrane performanse i akcije Bogdanke Poznanović, Katalin Ladik i Milice Mrđa kraj rijeke Dunava u socijalističkoj Jugoslaviji. Pristupajući tim umjetničkim praksama iz perspektive okolišne humanistike, žele se naglasiti neki dosad zanemarivani aspekti. Stoga analiza njihove suradnje s rijekom Dunavom upućuje na “vodeni imaginarij” (A. Neimanis) u početnoj fazi geološkoga razdoblja antropocena.

Ključne riječi: okolišna humanistika, vodeni imaginarij, rijeka Dunav, B. Poznanović, K. Ladik, M. Mrđa