CONTROL OF THE COMMONS VOYAGE ON THE MURRAY RIVER

TIME'S UP

We were told that disputes over the Murray River were part of the initial motivation for the federation of Australia. Originally started as separate colonies, South Australia, Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland all lie along the Murray River and its tributaries. Working out how to control and share the resources of the river was an issue before federation in 1901 and remains so today, 111 years later. Troubled waters to be sure.

Water conversations

In February 2012, we spent three weeks travelling down the Murray River on a sailing raft. Built from old and new storm water drains, a discarded dinghy and some sustainably grown house building pine with an old advertising banner as its sail, the vessel drew the attention of all those we passed. While some interactions were little more than a wave or questions about our fishing success (non existent), many conversations went further. The project collected attitudes and stories from people on the water, people who were using it in various ways. Ignoring the big voices of lobbyists and politicians, we collected the views, fears, hopes, memories and attitudes of those who were on the river, actually using it in some way or another. Retirees, escapees, scientists, farmers and ecologists were just some of our interviewees and each had a story, a reason for being there, something they loved about the river and something they were hoping for.

The Murray River is the largest river in Australia, 2995 kilometers in length. It forms the border between the two most populous states, New South Wales and Victoria before entering South Australia where it makes its way to the ocean. The Darling, one of its major tributaries, drains the huge outback region of New South Wales and Queensland, funneling cyclonic and tropical rains far to the south. As we write, huge rainfalls across inland Australia are sending a massive body of water, the size of France, down to the lower reaches of the river, where flooding may become a real concern. Along the rivers and tributaries, a series of dams and weirs holds water back for crop irrigation, from cotton and rice to oranges and grapes. The river has become a system for controlling water flow or at least attempting to. Water, perhaps the most clearly delineated form of commons on our planet, has become contained, controlled and contested in the service of those along its flows.

Riding the floods

Talking to anybody from the area born before 1950, and to many people born after, the conversation inevitably turns to the 1956 floods. Pointing at rooflines, trees, embankments or any other handy reference point, the speaker can recount how the waters rose, people came from everywhere to help the banks hold, of tractors and sandbags, trucks and the red earth. Or they might tell stories of swimming out to go 'island surfing', where kids would clamber onto chunks of torn off river bank, clumps of dried out earth with trees or bushes still growing on them, and holding them together, ride down the river through their home town. With six months of flooding, there was time to explore the experience of the flood rather than react in a short sharp response. We were given copies of 16mm footage from the floods, orange groves poking out of the water, the vast flood plain awash, trucks and wheelbarrows carrying dirt for levee banks and sandbags, all with a clear blue sky as if nothing was wrong at all. In the Riverland, no other flooding in the 20th century came close.

But flooding is not something anyone is scared of. While communities along the Danube and other rivers in Europe build ever more complex levee banks and water barriers, the people of Kingston on the Murray removed the levee banks several years ago to allow

the river and the town to have better contact. As it rarely rains in the area, flooding will come from upstream and the time for the flood peak to reach town is not measured in hours, but in weeks if not months, so there is ample time for preparation. Greg, an orange and grape farmer from just outside Kingston, has a simple flood plan that involves taking the doors and windows out of the house, along with all the family belongings, moving it to a farm shed and letting the river flow through. They might decide to put up sandbags, but he was not sure whether it would be worth it. A houseboat owner said the only problem with flooding was when the floods receded and they had to make sure that the houseboat did not remain high and dry on the riverbanks.

We met many people like Greg; people who had grown up around the area we travelled through and who had a certain resilient attitude. We conducted interviews with them after having a good long chat, developing some sympathy and understanding. They told stories of the attempts they were making to make things work, planting pumpkins between the vines, feeding orange skins and almond shells to cattle. In the battle to get the semi-arid environment to work, scientists and agriculturalists have worked together since the 1950s to measure and analyze the properties of the soils, developing techniques for absolutely minimal irrigation, measuring the water patterns for various sprinklers, forever optimizing techniques taken from permaculture and plastics science or anything else that seems to be appropriate. Peter, the last plant pathologist living in rural South Australia, lamented the shrinking number of agricultural scientists in the country, with government and university labs closing. Abandoning the rural environment to large-scale industrial farming seems to be a path that no one wants; yet, it is inevitable. No more farmers out there sweating in the fields, only farm managers sweating over numbers on spreadsheets.

Unheard voices on the river

And there we were, the travelling artists. Rowing for hours each day, sailing for those brief times when the wind was behind us – until the next bend in the river when it came right on our nose – we slowly took our absurd vessel down the river amidst the high speed wakeboard speedboats and luxurious houseboats. We documented and discussed, we

talked for hours with people excited to meet us, to know that someone was up to such ridiculous antics and surprised that we were actually interested in their stories, not just sound bites or quotes for a government report or sensationalist journalism. So, we are left with this question of how we should go about talking about this experience. Is it about the sculptural aesthetics of the boat? The performative aspects of the journey? Are we simply dilettante anthropologists? How can we synthesize the experiences, the impressions, the learning we collected?

In some sense, we know we cannot. The river that we visited is not the river, merely the line of concentration of a system that expands outwards. The river encompasses indigenous legends and knowledge – the pelicans are roosting higher this year, there will be a flood. The river supplies the food bowl of the nation, the waters irrigating a remarkably efficient food production environment that feeds people from Broome to Hobart as well as providing significant exports. The river waters are pumped out to supply drinking water to communities across South Australia, as far as Ceduna at the edge of the Nullarbor, 900km from the river. Rainwater in Queensland is collected in huge dams for cotton and rice growers, a reckless consumption of water that outrages the downstream South Australians. Trying to make the distribution of river water fair, allocations have been imposed so that farmers can only take a certain amount, protecting those downstream. This is evolving into a massively entangled system of laws and regulations orchestrated by far off administrations. These river water allocations are traded openly and have, at times, been mostly controlled by Canadian interests. We met people who had travelled from Melbourne to waterski on the river, a fellow who had paddled 1300km in his kayak and still had over 500km to go. At the mouth of the river, man-made barrages control the inflow of seawater into Lake Alexandrina, the water level thus decreasing over the past 10 years of drought as not enough water was coming from upstream.

All the while, we were trying to disentangle this web of inter-actions and inter-interests. One voice claiming that growing grapes in a semi arid environment is idiocy, another voice explaining how the semi arid environment means that the grapes require less chemicals and thus grow more sustainably. The river's muddiness and the deterioration of the riverbanks are variously blamed upon naturally turbulent flow, feral carp and

hooligan speedboats. The saltiness of the water and the lack thereof is blamed upon those upstream who have been mistreating the resources, while downstream the diary farmers are pumping seepage water back into the river, green with algae growing on their nutrient-rich runoff. Small farms are operating at a loss to provide a tax break for doctors and lawyers in Melbourne, undermining the possibilities of locals to make a living.

We never claimed that we would be able to make sense of the system and we stand by this. At most, we can hope that some of the players hear some of the other players; that some sympathy and understanding develops. It seems inevitable that the commons, in any of its forms, whether cultural commons, public space or environmental, becomes a site, scene and object of contention. We can only hope that by exposing a few unheard voices, the discussion becomes more open and fair.

BIO

TIME'S UP has been working for over 15 years between technology, the arts, science and entertainment. Large-scale immersive interaction, physical narratives and living spaces give a broad delineation of the scope of their practice. Their workshops, situated between the industrial harbor in Linz and the Danube, a river that crosses the former Iron Curtain and several languages, have led them to gain a certain perspective on water issues. Various aspects of the commons continue to be a peripheral, yet not insignificant, subject of their investigations.

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