

The Women in the Waterways:
Practice-based Research and Ecofeminism in the Riparian
Artwork of Basia Irland and Betsy Damon

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Introduction

The interests of this dissertation have been influenced by evolving notions of the ecological in contemporary art; particularly, the ways artists address issues of exploitation, disruption and degradation of ecology. Guided by a surge of ecofeminist art and exhibitions, artists are – now more than ever – equipped with a multiplicity of critical debates through which to explore environmental issues. These crucial contexts consider power structures, social injustice and paralleled oppressions; through my research, however, I encountered a poignant critique of ecofeminism by Caroline New (1996) which summarises that ecofeminism can occasionally lapse into essentialist, generalising narratives. Building on these ideas, my inquiry turned towards the artistic processes which prioritise impactful and direct ecological engagement while simultaneously embodying ecofeminist values through innovative or subversive methods, and how these processes therefore avoid essentialist readings.

This essay is resultative of a focused lens on how a ‘practise-based research’ process seen in examples of riparian contemporary art – meaning art related to, or within, rivers – provides the necessary frameworks for a comprehensive approach to eco-art; while correlating to embodied ecofeminist values, the works find their roots in science, prioritising beneficial ecological impacts. The subject of waterways is fitting when exploring the intersection of science, art and ecofeminism; while healthy rivers are essential components of our environmental systems, they are also laden with cultural and historical context, and ecofeminist beliefs often use metaphorical comparisons to water systems, as epitomised in the branch of hydrofeminism. The case studies through which I understood and developed the argument of this essay are the artistic practice of Basia Irland (b.1946) and *Keepers of the Waters* by Betsy Damon (b.1940).

Firstly, the prevailing contexts of ecofeminism, eco-art and practice-based research will be introduced and situated within the landscape of contemporary art. Then, through a close analysis of Basia Irland’s artistic practice and *Keepers of the Waters* by Betsy Damon, I will explore how these case studies employ a practice-based research process for a synthesised, comprehensive, impactful and creative expression of eco-art while illustrating ecofeminist ideologies which reject essentialism.

Contexts

Eco-Art and Water

Ecological art, or eco-art, is a movement of contemporary art which strives to restore, protect and preserve ecological systems (Weintraub, 2012, pp.3-9). The overarching tenets of the eco-art movement appear to value physical engagement, care, innovation and collaboration: Linda Weintraub describes four characteristics of eco-art; multisensory artwork for unmediated experiences with environment, an impulse to reconfigure time beyond the artists own lifespan, the use of covert strategies which are methodological and subtle, and the celebration of cooperation and collaboration for a behaviour-shaping impact. (Weintraub, 2006, p.81) In a definition by Basia Irland, eco-art is expressed as involving transdisciplinary, multimedia and activist-oriented processes, with a focus on “the possibilities of art in service to communities and ecosystems,” and that eco-artists' aspire to both raise awareness and devise innovative strategies around important ecological issues. (Irland, 2016, pp.60-61) The eco-art movement is closely related with other philosophies and practices, such as Deep Ecology, Ecopsychology and Land Ethic (Naess, 1992; Shepard, 1998; Leopold, 1987).

Although thought to be a precursor to eco-art, and similar in its use of direct engagement with environment and landscape, the 1960's Land Art movement is distinct in its situation and protest origins; rather than “ephemerality and remoteness” as a protest of commercialisation, (Cheetham, 2018, pp.90-93) eco-art often exists outdoors as a form of activism and collaboration for ecological efforts (Irland, 2016). Another movement influential to eco-art is Socially Engaged Practice, defined by Tate as artwork which involves collaboration and participation, with strong links to activism (Tate, 2017a). Arte Povera, emerging in Italy around the same time as Land Art, was a movement characterised by its use of ‘poor’ materials, such as “soil, rags and twigs.” Perhaps influential to eco-art, the movement “aimed to challenge and disrupt the values of the commercialised contemporary gallery system” with its use of natural, organic and found material (Tate, 2017b). Significant contemporary artists related to eco-art include Olafur Eliasson, Andy Goldsworthy, Agnes Denes, Édith Meusnier, John Akomfrah, David Buckland and Nils-Udo (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Waterhouse by Nils-Udo

It is the creative innovation of eco-art which is needed in a changing climate that connects so relevantly to water; not only are waterways, such as rivers and streams, vulnerable to flooding, droughts and pollution as an impact of climate change, (WWF, 2017) water is an ancient source of artistic inspiration. “Throughout art history, water and its elusiveness,” as such its essence of vitality, fluidity and cultural and spiritual significances, “has fascinated artists and provided a starting point for examining the relationship between the artist and the infinity of nature.” (Ulay & Logar, 2014, p.333) Supporting the prevalence of water to art and environment, arts journal *The River Rail* is founded on a declaration of collective interdependence on water, quoting Sherrie Rabinowitz that “artists need to create on the same

scale as society has the capacity to destroy” (Bon, 2018). The artists to be discussed in this essay, Basia Irland and Betsy Damon, have both dedicated their practices to the topic of water, specifically the protection of and advocacy for clean water. They both attain their dedication to a philosophical and personal connection (Damon, 2018; Irland, 2023a).

Practice-based Research

Practice-based research is defined by Linda Candy as “an original investigation undertaken in order to gain new knowledge partly by means of practice and the outcomes of that practice” (Candy, 2006, pp.1-19). Within the context of contemporary art, it is the idea that the artist will carry out a creative inquiry, and that the work itself exists as a form of research. It is a distinct and perhaps subversive way of considering the creative process; as noted by Baz Kershaw (Cited in Dean & Smith, 2014, p.105), to recognise creativity as a method of research challenges traditional methodologies and implies a paradigm shift within the empirical and the non-empirical.

‘Practice-led research,’ a similar term used within the same contexts as practice-based research, describes the use of creative practice as a form of conducting research, differentiated in that the emphasis is on the new information generated rather than the generative process itself (Candy, 2006, pp.1-19). The term has been developed by creative practitioners “to argue – as forcefully as possible in an often-unreceptive environment – that they are as important to the generation of knowledge as more theoretically, critically or empirically based research methods” (Dean & Smith, 2014, p.2). In universities, creative practice is said to be introducing “dynamic new ways of thinking about research,” and that there is now a “raised awareness of the different kinds of knowledge that creative practice can convey,” and it has been argued that the unique combination of creative practice and research results in “distinctive methodological approaches, as well as exhilarating findings and artworks.” (Dean & Smith, 2014, pp.1-5)



Figure 2: Ice Records by Susan Schuppli

The work by Susan Schuppli, an influential artist-researcher, exemplifies a practice-based research approach in contemporary art. Her practice examines material from environmental disasters and climate change and takes the form of documentary films of the research trips, installations and online archives (Schuppli, n.d.). In *Learning from Ice*, Schuppli and a team of researchers travelled to a glacier where they carried out “fieldwork to measure the mass balance changes of the glacier,” and used “sonic instrumentation to listen to the internal dynamics of melting ice” (Schuppli, 2023). Her project *Ice Records* compiles field recordings from these melting glaciers and “encounters with scientists, ecologists, activists, communities, and folksingers” to create an “acoustic archive” of vanishing climate histories (Schuppli, 2022). Schuppli then exhibits these recordings in audio installations (Figure 2). Schuppli explains in an interview with Ricky Ruihong Li (2023) that some understandings of practice-led research can be defined as a simple “research as input and practice as output” method. She argues that it is more of a process “out of which certain political and aesthetic insights emerge” and that it must be a creative process which is “intellectually generative,” signifying that there is no such division between research and practice. (Ruihong Li, 2023)

It is the sense of innovation, subversion and collaboration within a practice-based research process which shares an affinity with eco-art. Within an ecological context, 'fieldwork' is another term often used to describe work made through "bodily emersion into site," and that through fieldwork, "artwork is often co-produced with the multiplicities of the environment" (Crone et al., 2022 p.11). As argued by Susan Schuppli, "the ecological is a sensibility," and "should not be confined only to the biological or environmental. It is a mode of relation" (Ruihong Li, 2023). These understandings of ecology could be considered as the rationale for a practice-based research approach to eco-art; to "devise innovative strategies" (Irland, 2016, pp.60-61) the eco-artist must engage with empirical methods of understanding, but decidedly must not be limited to them. Social historian of art Peter Stupples states that "we need to enter a period of new innovation with a return to practice based research to counter the bloated ideologues that have cut people and our world adrift, yet still dominate science and the market economy" (Stupples, 2018, p.126). The dominative ideologues he describes are very evocative of the Western, patriarchal powers which Vandana Shiva and Maria Mies describe in *Ecofeminism* (Shiva and Mies, 2014, p.2).

Ecofeminism

Ecofeminism is the branch of feminism which explores connections between issues on gender equality and climate change, coined in 1974 by Françoise d'Eaubonne (Miles, 2018). Carolyn Merchant reports in her research on 'radical ecology' that D'Eaubonne saw "pollution, destruction of the environment, and run-away population growth as problems created by a male culture," and that since her call "upon women to lead an ecological revolution" there have been subsequent strains of ecofeminism, such as liberal, cultural, social and socialist (Merchant, 2005, pp.194-208). Vandana Shiva and Maria Mies detail in their book *Ecofeminism* (Shiva and Mies, 2014, p.2) that in the west, womens' struggles are paralleled, uncoincidentally, by the ongoing destruction of the environment; it is the patriarchal system which maintains gender inequality that is also responsible for the colonisation and destruction of land.

In *Ecofeminism*, it is expressed that it is crucially modern, western science, which is "projected as a universal, value-free system of knowledge," claiming to hold the "objective conclusions about life, the universe and almost everything," that is largely a reductionist paradigm, originating from the seventeenth century scientific revolution. This system has

begun to be considered by “Third World and feminist scholarship” as a “male-oriented and patriarchal projection” which entails “the subjugation of both women and nature.” In practise, modern science applies an “arbitrary barrier” between the specialist and the non-specialist, aiming to exclude non-specialist knowledge, or “other ways of knowing” (Shiva and Mies, 2014, pp.22-23).



Figure 3: Silueta de Arena by Ana Mendieta

Shiva and Mies account that as ecological activists, they discovered science and technology “were not gender neutral” (Shiva and Mies, 2014, pp.3). It is apparent that women and gender non-conforming artists are increasingly addressing climate change through an ecofeminist ideology within contemporary art. A major exhibition at the Barbican in 2023 combined work by more than fifty artists on the “intertwined oppressions of sexism, racism, colonialism, capitalism,” and the modern, western “relationship with nature shaped by science.” The curatorial vision was to comprehensively explore ecofeminist theory, reflecting the recognition that the gradual degradation of the earth is governed and enforced by ways of environmental

exploitation for profit by the same colonial, mechanistic and patriarchal structures of power which oppress “women and Black, trans, and Indigenous communities” (Barbican, 2023, pp.2-3). Contributing artists include LaToya Ruby Frazier, Susan Schuppli, Ottobong Nkanga and Ana Mendieta. Ana Mendieta was a pioneering ecofeminist artist, known for creating *The Silueta Series* between 1973 and 1980, a series of more than 200 earth-body works motivated by the urge to “reestablish the bonds” with the environment and “return to the maternal source” (Tate, 2018) (Figure 3).



Figure 4: Rain water collected over 2 days in Museum of Water by Amy Sharrocks

Hydrofeminism, a branch of Ecofeminism related to water, is a posthuman feminist phenomenology relevant when identifying ecofeminism in this essay’s case studies. In pioneering writings by Astrida Neimanis, water is considered an intermediary through which we can view the interconnectedness between humans and all other life. Biologically and philosophically, it is seen through examples such as the waterways flowing through our bodies, the primordial soup from which all species emerged, or the ancient hydrologic cycle which sustains all. This way of thinking of embodiment, that is as “bodies of water,” is what

challenges a “phallogocentric” and “self-sufficient” patriarchal vision of being human (Neimanis, 2012, pp.85-88). It is viewed that hydrofeminism “is about solidarity across watery selves” and highlights that a sense of “interconnectedness gives rise to a new kind of ethical obligation,” relevant to resistance against environmental degradation such as “acidification of the oceans, rising sea levels, dying coral reefs and polluted groundwater” (Bordorff, 2018). As with ecofeminism, hydrofeminism is an increasingly acknowledged subject in contemporary art. An exhibition titled ‘Women and Water,’ in 2023 at The Women’s Art Collection in the University of Cambridge, explored “multiplicity of women’s experiences” through their relationship with water, some works inspired by Neimanis’s concept of hydrofeminism (Murray Edwards, 2023). Furthermore, a thesis exploring hydrofeminist art practice cites artist Amy Sharrocks’ ongoing *Museum of Water* (Figure 4) work as a “vibrant articulation of key arguments within Neimanis’s work on Hydrofeminism” while “bringing people and water into collaborative relationships” (Denning, 2022, pp.93-94).

Having outlined the theory of ecofeminism, I will now discuss a leading criticism to get a deeper insight. A prominent critique of ecofeminism by Caroline New claims that the ecofeminist ethos may sometimes lapse into essentialism, for example, the belief that because “women and nature are similarly treated by men,” that “men’s opposition to nature, their instrumental use of it, is rooted in their lack of, and opposition to, such a connection” (New, 1996, p.83). Apparent in some strains of ecofeminism, such as spiritual and cultural ecofeminism which portray women as “mystical beings intertwined with the natural world,” (Perrin, 2020) there is a certain binary generalisation which suggests that all women are one thing and all men are another. This is described by Caroline New as ‘dualistic ecofeminism’ and essentialist (New, 1996, pp.79-83). Carolyn Merchant validates this claim, reporting that ecofeminism relies on an “ethic of care” which some feminists suggest “falls prey to an essentialist critique that women’s nature is to nurture” (Merchant, 2005, p.196). With these arguments in mind, the next section will analyse how the case studies of this essay use a practise-based research process to conduct their eco-art which embodies ecofeminist values while bypassing essentialist narratives.

Basia Irland

Basia Irland is an artist, activist, professor and Fulbright Scholar based in the USA concerned with international water issues. As noted by author Dahr Jamail, the understanding of and respect for water is becoming an increasingly crucial issue in today's climate, and the interdisciplinary artwork by Basia Irland finds a process which "beautifully weaves in the critical threads of conservation and education," naming Irland as "one of the liquid realm's most eloquent biographers" (Irland, 2023a). Her work intertwines a "creative understanding of water" with pragmatic cornerstones of investigation into "people, plants, animals, and other beings" which rely on water, often waterways, through her fieldwork (Irland, 2023b). Throughout this section I will review the synthesised process in Irland's artworks, revealing how this synthesis consists of an ecofeminist ethos embodied in eco-art through a practice-based research method.



Figure 5: Photographs of ice books by Basia Irland exhibited at Museum De Domijnen

In her practice, the importance of research and fieldwork is evident: Basia Irland collaborates with "scholars from diverse disciplines" to develop educational and impactful global projects on waterborne diseases, riparian rewilding, rainwater harvesting systems and documentaries

on water. She says that the majority of her process occurs in the field and in rivers and creeks, with real world objectives such as “connecting diverse, multi-generational communities directly to their local waterways” (Irland, 2023a). *Ice Receding/Books Reseeding* is a series of works, (Figure 5) the first of which created in 2008, which blend performance, sculpture and riparian restoration. The works emphasize the importance of “communal effort, scientific knowledge, and artistic expression” when addressing ecological issues, such as climate disruption and watershed restoration (Irland, 2023a). The process begins with a site-specific gathering in which participants from local communities are invited to collect water from a river, then decant the water to other participants downstream, who then do the same, and so on. The water is gathered, frozen, then sculpted into a book. Irland then works “with stream ecologists, biologists, and botanists to ascertain the best seeds” to use for riparian restoration of that particular site (Irland, 2023a). The seeds are then embedded in rows into the sculpture, which slowly release as the ice melts, after Irland sets it to float down the same river (Figure 6). The site-specificity and fieldwork used to create artwork and simultaneously generate knowledge around an ecological system can be seen as a form of practice-based research; Irland not only develops a method for restoration, but also transmits knowledge through “other ways of knowing” (Shiva and Mies, 2014, pp.22-23) through artistic, poetic and participatory elements. Amanda Boetzkes recognises the information generated through *Ice Receding/Books Reseeding* as valuable in its non-specialism, finding that the ice books are located at the “liminal zone between the limits of human knowledge and the limitlessness of the elemental” (Boetzkes, 2010, p.196). Irland’s process of intertwining research and art is also praised for “its comprehensiveness, its scientific foundations, and its involvement of and appeal among the many people it touches” (Cheetham, 2018, p.187).



Figure 6: Basia Irland launching an ice book



Figure 7: Photograph of reading river poems

In terms of eco-art, Basia Irland is considered a contemporary authoritative figure, and is said to be opening the way “for an ecological orientation through public activism” (Boetzkes, 2010, p.209). The communal water gathering component in *Ice Receding/Books Reseeding* is a variant of her previous works, *A Gathering of Waters*, which Lucy Lippard (Cited in Cheetham, 2018, p.176) claims is “a major model for eco-art.” She explains that “the best eco-artists ... see themselves as caretakers rather than earth movers.” Also described as a series which encourages viewers “to become active participants, not just onlookers,” by writer Mark Feldman, (Cited in Irland, 2023c) *A Gathering of Waters* is a series which seeks to “establish working relationships between people, and connect diverse cultures along the entire length of rivers emphasizing that we all live downstream.” The process of these works includes varied participants, such as “farmers, biologists, majordomos, politicians, Tribal members, artists, students of all ages” who collect river water in vessels, which are passed along to one another downstream, each contributing words to an accompanied logbook. The logbook and water vessel are transported within a wearable repository, (Figure 8) constructed with site-specific material, which also holds information relevant to the river, such as “scientific data, water analysis, hydrographs, photographs, maps.” The work is concluded at the end of the river, where the intermingled waters are release with a ceremony, in which the participants offer gratitude for the water (Irland, 2023c) (Figure 7).

Considering the eco-artist characteristics described by Weintraub, all are integral to Irland’s practice. Due to the emphasis on fieldwork in many of her works, they can be considered “multisensory artworks” involving “unmediated experiences with environment.” “An impulse to reconfigure time” is seen in both the ongoing impacts of rewilding and ephemerality of ice sculptures in *Ice Receding/Books Reseeding*, the use “of covert strategies which are methodological and subtle” are apparent in her unique methods of restoration and activism, and “the celebration of cooperation and collaboration for a behaviour-shaping impact” is shown through critical engagement with the local community and scholars (Weintraub, 2006, p.81).



Figure 8: River repository exhibited at Museum de Domijnen

Basia Irland is a woman artist who, from my research, has not publicly identified as an ecofeminist or commented on the theory, and gave “no response” to a study asking women environmental artists if they feel marginalised (Minickiello, 2011, p.122). However, when speaking on her practice, many of her thoughts on human’s relationship with water show clear correlations to ecofeminist and hydrofeminist theories of interconnectedness. Irland believes that “in this radically interconnected world, it becomes our collective responsibility to compassionately take care of each other and our environment.” Furthermore, she expresses that “we are water. Our bodies house streams ... Water enters, circulates, leaves, forming individualized hydrologic cycles” (Irland, 2023). In an interview with Ecospacearts, she claims that “rivers would want us to deeply understand that they are alive. They have a body called a watershed with a mouth at the delta; organs of wetlands and riparian zones; cells, molecules of water; and like us, a circulatory system. We are not separate from the waters of the world” (Hallstein, 2021). These perspectives are reflected in Irland’s *River Essays*, a series in which she writes from the perspectives of different rivers in peril. For example, describing that she, the river, is “rampant with the water-borne disease, schistosomiasis,” in

the Blue Nile, Ethiopia, or “completely encased in concrete” so that she “can no longer breathe” in the Portneuf River, Idaho (Hallstein, 2021). These works not only educate and report on site-specific investigations on waterway issues, but also evoke a sense of empathy through the use of the of first-person perspective, an “unorthodox viewpoint”, which Lucy Lippard (Cited in Hallstein, 2021) claims “removes the distanced objectivity expected of journalistic criticism,” exemplifying the hydrofeminist theory that an awareness of “interconnectedness gives rise to a new kind of ethical obligation” (Bordorff, 2018).

This integral synthesis of the empirical and non-empirical is where my argument of embodied ecofeminism in eco-art through practice-based research lies. For example, while sharing and illustrating the intertwined values of humans and ecology with hydrofeminism, Irland does not reject the scientific and empirical, but utilises it through a practice-based research process in tandem with the artistic and non-empirical. Through this process she accomplishes and encourages directly ecological restorative efforts, while poetically and creatively evoking an ecofeminist ethos. Therefore, I would argue that Irland’s approach and influence can be considered as a subtle subversion of the patriarchal notions of science and research, which are largely exclusive of “non-specialist” perspectives, while simultaneously avoiding essentialist assumptions of science (Shiva and Mies, 2014, pp.22-23).

Keepers of the Waters by Betsy Damon

Betsy Damon is an American contemporary artist with roots in feminism and performance. In the 1970s she emerged with public performance art in New York around themes of gender-based violence and the “erasure of women’s narratives from history” (Damon, 2023). It was in the 1980’s when she began to explore environmentalism and water. Betsy Damon recalls a formative experience with waterways which pivoted her artistic direction; in 1984 she encountered “many dry riverbeds” which revealed to her “the dried bones of the earth.” After this “beautiful and disturbing” experience she “resolved to learn about water” (Damon, 2024) (Figure 9).



Figure 9: Photo of the casting of a dry riverbed in A Memory of Clean Water

Betsy Damon is a significant figure of ecofeminist art; Colleen Sullivan found through her research that “Damon serves as a contemporary example of an artist who actively engages all aspects of ecofeminism ideologies” (Sullivan, 2022, p.55). Throughout her career, Damon has continuously pursued “environmentally sustainable artistic practices,” expanding to international projects on water issues in 1995 with *Keepers of the Waters*, an art event in Chengdu, China. As curator and artistic organiser of the event, Damon produced “a unified educational collective action engaging social and critical ecofeminism” (Sullivan, 2022, p.28). The event was funded by a non-profit organisation founded by Damon in 1991, ‘Keepers of the Waters,’ which “encourages art, science and community projects for the understanding and remediation of living water systems” and serves to facilitate “projects that transform our relationship to water” (Keepers of the Waters, 2014).

Betsy Damon, with the assistance of Chinese artist Dai Guangyu and several scientists, invited artists from Beijing, Chengdu, Tibet, and the United States for a group project to “raise awareness about water protection through installation and performance artworks” along the Funan River in Chengdu city, China (Asia Art Archive, 2017). In an interview Damon describes that *Keepers of the Waters* “was an opportunity to do something creative that will show people what’s going on with the waters of the rivers.” In its conception, the participating artists and organisers met regularly to share and evolve their ideas. Then, either collaboratively or individually, artworks were proposed and prepared for the event. The event spanned approximately 2 weeks (Poelzl, 2017, pp.34-35).



Figure 10: Washing Silk



Figure 11: Washing River

Here I will briefly describe four of the public artworks in *Keepers of the Waters* and then identify the elements of eco-art and practice-based research. *Washing Silk* (Figure 10) was a performance by Kristen Caskey in collaboration with six Chinese artists. They stood in the river washing strips of white silk which quickly became discoloured. This work was in response to the site, which was previously named the Jin Jiang, meaning ‘bright river,’ because “it was so clean that merchants washed their silk in it,” however due to pollution and sewage, had become poisonous and murky. In the participatory performance *Washing River* (Figure 11) by Yin Xiuzhen, the water from the river was frozen into blocks and viewers were invited to “wash the blocks clean” with brushes, while poets “recited poems beside the piece” for four days until the ice melted (Damon, 2020, pp.282-283). *Long Abandoned Water Standards* (Figure 12) by Dai Guangyu was an installation inspired by “the idea of a propaganda wall” which displayed “images illustrating water issues” alongside photos of all the artists’ faces submerged in trays of river water. The photos gradually decomposed in the “obviously very polluted” water (Poelzl, 2016, p.5). The event’s final work, *Dreams for a Pure River* (Figure 13), was a participatory storytelling and ritual piece formulated by Beth Grossman and Christine Baeumler. The public were invited to share their utopian “dreams for a clean river,” then candles were lit, and rafts were ceremonially sent down the river (Damon, 2020, pp.282-283).



Figure 12: Long Abandoned Water Standards



Figure 13: Dreams for a Pure River

As described in Damon's motivations for the event, calling attention to the river's degradation was the focal point of the artworks. These works epitomise eco-art; relating back to the tenets in Linda Weintraub's definition, many works prioritised and demonstrated rigorous environmental engagement. In the greying of the silks in *Washing Silk*, the futile scrubbing in *Washing River*, the decaying faces in *Long Abandoned Water Standards* and the amplification and ritualisation of the public's desire for clean water in *Dreams for a Pure River*, the artists used poetic metaphors to incite change, signifying a use of methodological strategies. "An impulse to reconfigure time" (Weintraub, 2006, p.81) can be seen in the gradualness of *Long Abandoned Water Standards* and *Washing River*. Additionally, many pieces were not only created collaboratively among the artists, but with the participation of the public, while also working with the river itself. This could be an example of artwork "co-produced with the multiplicities of the environment," (Crone et al., 2022 p.11) relating to fieldwork in practice-based research processes.

Keepers of the Waters can be seen as using a practise-based research approach through its use of public performance and installation as fieldwork to generate findings on the river's pollution. In *Washing Silk*, *Washing River* and *Long Abandoned Water Standards*, the actions were, although artistic and poetic in their execution, public displays of ecological findings; Dai Guanyu validates this, stating that his work "was just showing them the facts" (Poelzl, 2016, p.5). Additionally, the resultative non-empirical findings, such as the community's collective reaction to the works, were greatly influential; Damon recounted that "it was the performances that generated excitement and hope," and "inspired many to engage with the river and envision for themselves what they wanted for their city" (Damon, 2020, pp.283). Guanyu also claims that *Long Abandoned Water Standards* "really affected people. After they saw this, they started to realise how serious the situation had become" (Poelzl, 2016, p.5). The results of the event were significant, from "government officials ... clapping and shouting" in support, to being "broadcast on national China Central Television," and the later resultative governmental plans for the Chengdu "*Living Water Garden*, which would become the first urban park designed as a water cleaning system" (Damon, 2020, pp.282-283) (Figure 14). These beneficial effects show the value of practise-based research, that is intertwining fieldwork, science and creativity, in the interests of eco-art.



Figure 14: Living Water Garden

When considering an ecofeminist ethos, *Keepers of the Waters* showcases an embodiment of these theories through a unification of the community for environmental protection; Damon explains that this “challenges dominant power structures simply because it engages the public, often connecting people, offering vision and possibility” (Damon, 2020, p.280). Dominant power structures are described by Shiva and Mies as patriarchal, and responsible for “destruction of the environment” and exclusivity in modern science (Shiva and Mies, 2014, pp.2-23). *Keepers of the Waters* rejects these patriarchal paradigms through the use of contemporary performances and installations as agents of impactful ecological activism. A subversion of modern science can also be observed in the use of a practice-based research process; the performances present empirical site-specific findings while maintaining the importance of non-empirical, metaphorical and artistic forms.

It is important to consider the cultural context the event; *Keepers of the Waters* conveys clear ecofeminist observations and subversions of power structures, however, hydrofeminist philosophies are not as prominent in the works. It could be hypothesised that, differing from

the west, a conventional cultural or spiritual notion of “watery selves,” similar to hydrofeminist theory (Bordorff, 2018) was already prevalent in Chengdu. As Damon claims, “the Chinese totally understood the idea of ‘living water,’” and while researching sacred water sources in China, she encountered many people that relayed the Tibetan Buddhist beliefs of holy and medicinal properties of water (Poelzl, 2017, pp.12-30). Instead of illustrating a hydrofeminist theory of interconnectedness to suggest an ethical obligation, what was particularly imperative for the event was the facilitation of unity. Guangyu validates that in 1990’s China, this public unity “was really unheard of,” in reference to the 1989 massacre of protestors in Tiananmen Square, Beijing (BBC, 2021). Therefore, for him, the “subject of environmental protection was not at first critical,” and his goal “was to change the situation for artists in China.” He describes that both his political approach and Damon’s environmental approach “worked together very well,” (Poelzl, 2016, pp.2-6) and relevantly, it is this synthesis of political and environmental ideologues which is also the basis of ecofeminism.

With the criticism of ecofeminism by Caroline New in mind, *Keepers of the Waters* evades a lapse into essentialism through the integral synthesis of both empirically and non-empirically based research methods, seen in the use of practice-based research processes. Formulated and informed by both artists and scientists, (Damon, 2020, p.280) the performances and installations of the event involved site-specific processes which utilised aspects of modern science through creative displays of ecological findings. *Keepers of the Waters* is a comprehensive example of this method; Colleen Sullivan similarly finds that Betsy Damon’s practice, including *Keepers of the Waters*, serves as an example of ecofeminist art which avoids essentialised readings as it places a “critical focus on interspecies reliance on water as it intersects gender, race, geopolitics, and class” (Sullivan, 2022, pp.10-55).

Conclusion

Interestingly, the manifestation of ecofeminist theory in *Keepers of the Waters Chengdu* and Basia Irland's practise are distinct. The differences can be best described as 'defence' and 'offense' of the same interconnected issue; on the offence, *Keepers of the Waters* is rooted in campaign, as seen its activist-oriented unification of the public through explicit yet poetic exposure of ecological degradation. On the defence, Basia Irland's practice emphasises an integrated, yet subversive, use of science to inspire and lead direct ecological care through example. It is also important that the artists collaborated with or were informed by scientists, avoiding reductive notions of 'science' in eco-art.

I would like to theorise that a non-essentialist and non-dualistic expression of ecofeminism can be epitomized by the case studies of this essay by maintaining a critical focus on the ecological and synthesising both empirical and non-empirical research, while illustrating ecofeminist values through central themes of interconnectedness and activism on rivers. The sense of synthesis in ecofeminist artwork is crucial; in acknowledging and utilising the value of empirical knowledge within eco-art, the artist rejects essentialist notions of science, thus prioritising tangible ecological effects, such as Basia Irland's directly restorative river projects, and community unification for ecological rehabilitation, seen in the public and participatory works of *Keepers of the Waters*. This process covertly implements a subtle but effective subversion of patriarchy while simultaneously implementing an overt use of practice-based research and fieldwork for direct ecological engagement and activism. Through the use of this process the case studies can be seen as conveying crucial ecofeminist contexts, while realising a comprehensive, beneficial ecological impact through contemporary art in patriarchal societies.

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