

rivers of knowledge bulletin #3, March 2010

» *The machine threatens all we have gained, so long as it dare become the tyrant of spirit, rather than its servant.*«

Rainer Maria Rilke, The Sonnets to Orpheus, 2. X., (1922)

By quoting Rilke's Sonnet 2.X. I refer to a discussion we have opened with bulletin #2: the interference / contradiction of nature and civilization. We know that Rilke in his time, the turn of the 19th to the 20th century, was highly critical of what he perceived the destruction of the "Lucky Earth" (Sonnets 1, XXI.). By citing the machine as a metaphor for all processes driven by technology he addresses what we call *infrastructural planning*.



Mühlheim Main River Shore. Photo by Anne Schleissner



Before his eyes and during his short lifespan many of our Central European free floating rivers were turned into channels. At Main River from 1883 -1962 thirty-four barrages were build, "turning a natural river into a building" as Ute Habelt put it in our meeting on 25.2.

In this sense, while being a mystic, Rilke was also one of the earliest environmentalists. In his time, when technical progress and man-made transformation of nature into capital was perceived as an undisputed and positive concept by most of his contemporaries, he was a complete outsider. Now, 90 years later we dispose of by far more complex and erudite perspectives upon these aspects of human interaction with nature. And we can see, that during these 90 years since Rilke, on a global scale things have worsened decisively. Insofar, we should sometimes listen more attentively to our artists and poets.

»Natural« and »artificial« situations.

The rivers included in our project, Amazon, Indus, Okavango, Markarfljót, Kızılırmak, Tajo, Yukon, Daugava and Main River, represent entirely different realities in this sense.

Indus, Tajo and Main River belong to a highly industrialized and exploited species of rivers, while Okavango, Markarfljót and Yukon run through very scarcely populated areas, mostly left to themselves.

In a process of self-definition, and while trying to find a position of our own in this contradictory, non-linear and non-parallel development between civilization and letting go vs taming, there is one thing that's for sure: There is no single river on our planet which is NOT affected by climate change in a more or less harmful way. Thus, climate change is a feasible common denominator if we wish to wholeheartedly touch the river-topic.

As depicted in the images in this bulletin #3 we have two results of human interaction with the river. Non of these situations is »natural«. The first is a reconstruction or recovery of an allegedly *natural* situation. It is obvious, that we perceive this as a positive situation. This is what we consider life-worthy. The way to achieve these positive changes is what Lucius Burckhardt called the »human perspective of planning«. That means that this spot is NOT planned on a grand scale map but rather by means of Burckhardt's »Promenadology«, the walking perspective. It is Mühlheim's achievement to have regained this riverbank for the Mühlheimers and their children.



Main barrage at Offenbach, Photo: Reinhard Henke

The second picture shows the Offenbach barrage (Main-km 38,5; first built in 1901), a building which represents the other side of the game, the hydrological taming of the river, the law of the square angle, the geometrization of nature. There is no way to return to the pre-industrialized era, but there are several ways to pacify the struggle between the presumably logical and stringent dynamics of technology and John Thackara's demand to »change the innovation agenda in such a way that people come before tech.« Let's put it bluntly that way: as soon as tech starts to reduce life-quality it has to be cut back. And that's where Rilke comes in again. We do have to take care of Creation, but as human beings we have to take care of our species. As soon as our industrial logic started to harm ourselves we entered a new phase – the reconsideration of aims, targets and goals. Our goal in this project is to create awareness in order to stop further degradation of rivers in favour of new, life-worthy interaction with these monumental organisms, that run through our cities, lives and minds, silently but unceasingly.



Time schedule

Our time schedule is set: April 13th will see the start of the University project, on April 20th we'll go on a river trip on River Main on a hired bateau in order to grasp the river's perspective on the natural, technical and urban structures alongside it's riverbank. On June 1st and 2nd we'll stay in Bremerhavens's Klimahaus (Climate House), a research and educations institution dedicated to the overall phenomena of climate. 29th of June we'll have our final presentation, a really tough schedule we can only cope with if we work in a strictly concentrated and co-operative manner.

Now let's get right to our work

Bertsch

Prof. Georg-Christof Bertsch
Frankfurt/Main, March 18th 2010



Meeting of the occupational group on climate changes impact on river systems, Feb 25th 2010, Umweltamt Offenbach; f.l.t.r.: Prof. Georg-Christof Bertsch, Rolf Weyh, Anne Schleißner, Jochen Schaab, Ute Habelt, Dr. Anna-Christine Sander, Sabine Swoboda. Photo by Beate M. Schwarz