

Artist Statement

My artwork focuses on international water issues, especially rivers, waterborne diseases, and water scarcity. *Water Library* (University of New Mexico Press, 2007) describes projects I have created over three decades in Africa, Canada, Europe, South America, Southeast Asia, and the United States. *Reading the River: The Ecological Activist Art of Basia Irland* (Museum De Domijnen, 2017) documents my water-related art projects and picks up where *Water Library* left off in 2007. The book was produced in conjunction with a 2015-2016 retrospective exhibition in the Netherlands and includes an extended interview with the exhibition curator, Roel Arkensteijn, which focuses on the early years of my career.

I hope to offer a creative perspective of water while examining how communities of people, plants, and animals rely on this vital element. I work with scholars from diverse disciplines building rainwater harvesting systems; connecting communities and fostering dialogue along the entire length of rivers; filming and producing water documentaries; and creating waterborne disease projects around the world, most recently in Egypt, Ethiopia, India, and Nepal. My working process most often occurs out in the field along rivers and creeks.

Since 2015, I have been fortunate to blog for National Geographic about international rivers, including waterways in Cambodia, Thailand, Japan, Mexico, Nepal, the Netherlands, India, and across the United States and Canada. These are written in the first person from the perspective of the river.

My art often involves facilitating and fostering connections – with rivers and with each other. We are water. Our bodies house streams: lymph, bile, sweat, blood, mucus, urine. Water enters, circulates, leaves – individualized hydrologic cycles. Water has always fed my soul whether floating weightless in a natural lake, face up, looking at the clouds; sitting on a rock beside an ever-changing stream; wading barefoot in a cold creek; or hiking to the source of a river. Absorbing water's presence, especially in wild regions, prepares me to come back to the city and carry on with my urban tasks.

Water embodies complexity. Whether in its gaseous, frozen, or fluid state it is marvelously mysterious. A quiet stream can provide a serene contemplative setting and yet that very same creek can flood and wipe out an entire village. The wrath of water that was witnessed in the Javanese and Japanese tsunamis is almost incomprehensible. We cannot survive without clean water to drink and yet it is often polluted beyond measure, with toxins, medical waste, and waterborne diseases clogging the arteries upon which we rely for our very existence.

Water meanders in and out of every discipline, so we can never have too many poets, hydrologists, urban planners, biologists, lawyers, writers, physicians, NGO's, or

geologists working to amplify and aid water's voice. One of the things that sustains me is that most of my projects happen within the context of a local community — and it is the people with whom I work who keep me going. I see so much good work being done for regional waterways, even though the task is often daunting and overwhelmingly difficult.

As Loren Eiseley writes: “If there is magic on the planet it is contained in water.”