





Basia Irland's *Gathering of Waters* An Invitation to Know Your River

BY MARK B. FELDMAN

How can art convey the interconnectedness that is so central to ecology both as science and cultural theory? And how can artists nudge viewers to become active participants, not just onlookers or consumers of beautiful images? Basia Irland's *Gathering of Waters* offers one compelling set of answers to these questions. Her projects help us to notice something that we often take for granted (water) and to visualize what is usually invisible (watersheds); they facilitate social situations that foster environmental stewardship; and they also involve the more familiar production of beautiful objects as documentation for ephemeral, process-based actions.

On a cloudless day in 1995, Irland dipped a canteen into the snowmelt-fed headwaters of the Rio Grande, located high in the San Juan Mountains in Colorado. The canteen was then passed downstream hand-to-hand, with river water added at each transfer. Accompanied by a logbook, this iteration of *A Gathering of Waters* completed the entire 1,875-mile journey from source to sea over a five-year period and, in so doing, realized the river not just as a biophysical, but also as a social entity, dependent on human care and a powerful catalyst for community formation. Sometimes quietly and sometimes accompanied by festivals and educational events, the canteen traveled by foot, car, hot air balloon, bus, plane, and boat, through Colorado, nine New Mexican Pueblos, Texas, and Mexico. A ceremony at Boca Chica, on the Gulf of Mexico, marked the end (and, in a certain way, also the beginning) of this particular journey

Opposite: *A Gathering of Waters: Nisqually River, Source to Sound, Repository/Backpack*, 2009. Cedar frame with maps, hydrology reports, photographs, logbook, and canteen. **This page:** *A Gathering of Waters: Rio Grande, Source to Sea*, 1995–2000. **Left:** contents of backpack. **Right:** Steve Harris, Rio Grande Restoration, adding water to canteen.

OPPOSITE: DEREK IRLAND. COURTESY THE ARTIST / THIS PAGE: COURTESY THE ARTIST



celebrating the Rio Grande. The waters that had been carefully gathered and periodically decanted were returned to the sea to evaporate, feed new clouds, and descend as snow once again. But this and other *Gatherings* continue, with Irland noting, “I love that these projects never really end.” *Gatherings* are realized on other rivers, and the projects often continue after Irland concludes her work. For instance, a hydrologist starting an international water institute in Santa Fe is using the Rio Grande *Gathering* as a model for connecting people to watersheds.

The slowness of the five-year voyage seems to be part of its message—only over relatively long stretches of time are significant connections and relationships formed. This was not a race or individual struggle; instead, the vessel was carried by hundreds of people, and the educational and restoration events engaged many more. Mayors and governors, scout troops, conservation organizations,

school groups, and hydrologists all took part and recorded their experiences in the log-book. Over two days, Native American runners relayed water 180 miles from the Pueblo of Taos to the Pueblo of Isleta. The Rio Grande was a logical, if unusually ambitious, first site for *A Gathering of Waters*, because Irland has deep roots in the Southwest. She is Professor Emerita at the University of New Mexico, where she taught for many years and established a program in art and ecology.

Irland is regularly invited to realize new *Gatherings*, which Amanda Boetzkes notes have become her “modus operandi,” her way of generating site-specific and participatory environmental art in collaboration with students, scientists, and activists.¹ The ideas animating the project are very much alive, continuing to flow and cycle through other rivers, bodies, and minds. Irland has subsequently realized *Gatherings* on very different rivers, including the Don River in

Apothecary for Creeks and Other Living Beings, 2013. Wood, carrying strap, vials, and 45 medicinal plants, in use in Glen Helen, Yellow Springs, OH.

Ontario—Canada’s most urbanized river (sponsored by the C.G. Jung Foundation and Save the Don River Task Force, 2000); Calaveras River, California (University of the Pacific and Calaveras River Keepers, 2004); River Dart, Devon, England (Dartington College of Arts, 2005); Boulder Creek, Colorado (Center for Contemporary Art, Boulder, 2007); Nisqually River, Washington (Evergreen State College, 2008–09); heavily polluted Deckers Creek, West Virginia (University of West Virginia and Friends of Deckers Creek, 2010); Big Wood River, Idaho (Sun Valley Center for the Arts, 2010); Oconee River, Georgia (Biology and Art Departments, Georgia College and State University, 2011); and the Great Miami and Yellow Springs Rivers (Antioch and Dayton Universities, Ohio, 2012–13).

TATIANA BENALLY, COURTESY THE ARTIST



Apothecary for Creeks and Other Living Beings, 2013. Wood, carrying strap, vials, and 45 medicinal plants, detail of ongoing work.

Certain elements are common to all of the *Gatherings*—including a canteen, log-book, video documentation, river maps, and a handmade sculptural backpack/repository—but each project is shaped by particular circumstances, by what Irland calls the “personality” of the river. Each *Gathering* involves extensive research and numerous site visits. For the Nisqually River project, Irland went to Washington State three times, often spending several months. She was given a studio at Evergreen State and worked closely with a stream ecologist and with the Nisqually tribe, including a group of young musicians—the Shooting Stars—whose music often refers to the sounds of water.

A Gathering of Waters: Boulder Creek: Continental Divide to Confluence, was espe-

cially concerned with global climate change. Drinking water for the city of Boulder, Colorado, comes from the Arapaho Glacier, which is melting alarmingly fast. To help visualize this potential loss and offer the possibility of restoration, Irland created a 250-pound book out of frozen creek water studded with native plant seeds. The book was left in the creek to melt and gift its seeds to the watershed. All of Irland’s more recent *Gatherings* include ice book sculptures.

For Boulder Creek, which people float down in inner tubes, Irland used recycled truck inner tubes to fabricate a backpack, while the backpack for Deckers Creek incorporated materials referencing the area’s history of acid mine drainage. For the Oconee River, Irland worked with an aquatic ecologist and an environmental scientist to design a repository based on the form of a freshwater diatom. While the particulars vary, Irland’s projects often facilitate

connections between artists and scientists, who usually don’t cross paths, and between people and their watershed.

While Irland is primarily concerned with sites and processes, she by no means turns her back on producing beautiful objects. She restores a largely vanished ritual function to the art object, which tethers it to particular places and functions. The backpacks/ repositories are like portable altarpieces or cabinets of wonder. The Rio Grande repository is made of ponderosa pine floorboards salvaged from a demolished Albuquerque church. The backpack’s compartments contain relics such as water samples, the log-book, maps of the river mouth, and cast silver sculptures replicating the endangered Rio Grande silvery minnow.

The repositories, along with the numerous social dimensions of the *Gatherings*, help us to comprehend what is usually incomprehensible—a watershed. The water-



shed is an organizing idea of bioregionalism, an eclectic body of environmental thought that includes thinkers such as Gary Snyder, Kirkpatrick Sale, and Robert Thayer. They suggest that watersheds are natural geographical units and that focusing on them is essential to “rehabitation” — coming to understand the particularities of place as a way of rediscovering a more sustainable way of life.

Geographically, a watershed is the land that drains into a river; ecologically, a watershed is characterized by a particular set of natural conditions; and culturally, a watershed is marked by human responses to place (patterns of settlement and agriculture, vernacular architecture). Becoming conscious of your watershed also promises an

increased awareness of what Irland terms the “ongoing hydrological dance.”

A watershed is known not by a single person, but through the activities and perspectives of many, many people. This is one of the key insights offered by *A Gathering of Waters*. For Irland, rivers are collective, social entities realized through communal action. She has remarked that project participants mirror the river itself: “As the river vessel traveled from source to sea and the hundreds of people who were involved in the project made connections with each other along the shores of the Rio Grande, we too became a kind of river.”

What I find most compelling about Irland’s *Gatherings* and most encouraging in their approach to environmental art is just how

A Gathering of Seeds Repository: Big Wood River, 2010. Fishing vest, native riparian seeds and willow saplings, old creel, and watershed maps.

social they are. Lucy Lippard, in discussing Irland’s work, distinguishes Land Art and earthworks from eco-art. Eco-artists, she writes, “see themselves as caretakers rather than earth movers. They cross back and forth over disciplinary boundaries to improvise natural and/or social situations that are environmentally determined and aesthetically manipulated. Like *A Gathering of Waters* this relatively new kind of art is often invisible within the landscape. But its powerful ripple effects can make waves within the various societies through which it passes.”²



Tome I, 2007. 250 pounds of ice and mountain maple, columbine, and blue spruce seeds, 28 x 20 x 8 in.

Irland is also centrally concerned with creating social situations and providing contexts for participation, and these concerns situate her work within the realm of relational aesthetics. Such art, which often eludes previous art historical categories, tends to be concerned not with aesthetics, but with inventing “models of sociability” and creating “places of conviviality.”³ The art opening might become the work of art, or the gallery might become a salon or a restaurant. In relational art, spectators become active participants, often through physical contact and involvement, and the work of art is a “proposal to live in a shared world.”⁴ In the case of *Gatherings*, this would be a world in which rivers mattered and were cared for, a world in which water was cherished as a biological and social necessity.

That the Rio Grande river-vessel completed its improbable voyage and that each subse-

quent *Gathering* has brought together new communities illustrates the cumulative power of small actions. Irland’s *Gatherings* expand our sense of the possible. The records of the journeys in the logbooks attest to the many interlocking communities that use and value each watershed. The repositories focus and materialize the connectivity and wonder of rivers and watersheds.

For more than 30 years, Irland has taken water as her muse, often her medium, and always her central subject. In addition to the *Gatherings*, her other important bodies of work include “Ice Books: receding/ reseeded” and the “Waterborne Disease Scrolls.” The “Ice Books” are a series of sculptural books formed from frozen river water, with the text written in local seeds. The hand-carved books are launched into a river to melt, and the seeds float downstream and sprout along the banks. The “Waterborne Disease Scrolls” feature enlarged images of *E. coli*, schistosomiasis, and other pathogens on fabric scrolls. The works in both series are beautiful, but in

troubling or terrible ways. The “Ice Books” are gorgeous, ephemeral objects that reference our warming planet, while the “Waterborne Disease Scrolls” locate an otherworldly beauty in life-threatening pathogens that can be greatly mitigated through basic and relatively inexpensive public health measures. All of Irland’s works explore environmental issues, combining site-specificity with what she terms a universal ecological language — whether of water, plants, or pathogens — that transcends the particularities of place to speak to all residents of this earth.

Notes

¹ Amanda Boetzkes, *The Ethics of Earth Art* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).

² Lucy Lippard in Basia Irland, *Water Library* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2007), p. 56.

³ Irland, *Water Library*, op. cit., p. 28.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

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