

The river of oblivion reminds us Notes on Lethe by Adam (aka Sandra) Man

Curator and art historian Maja Smoszna writes about Adam (aka Sandra) Man's piece »Lethe« that premiered in Berlin in November 2023.



Photo: Adam Man

We are very close to sleep, falling asleep, slowly melting away. An audio-visual stillness surrounds us. There is only us and the invisible currents of the Tagliamento River. From time to time, the calm, slow, soft voice of the performer, Lisa Densem, pierces through. Immersing herself in the gathered crowd, the voice describes the landscape with the river and the feelings and thoughts of a person standing in the riverbed – a situation we cannot see. Many of us close our eyes to see it better. Balancing between dream and waking, between nothingness and fullness, between religious sensations and inner philosophical debate, the space poem *Lethe* leads us into a silent meditation on the question of memory, the beauty of nature, and our place in it.

Time Travellers

The Tagliamento is one of the last existing rivers that has not been altered by human interference. Lethe is a mythical river of oblivion in the ancient Greek underworld. Flowing downstream on the Tagliamento/Lethe, we pass through various stages of life to death. Lethe means mystery. The dead drank the water of Lethe to forget the world before death, those who managed to come back to life drank the same water to forget that there is life after death.¹

Meanwhile, in the present, the Earth as we know it is dying. Natural treasures such as Tagliamento are in danger of disappearing. How will people from the future, who may never have the chance to see it, remember this land? In a four-channel video installation, we can occasionally observe the distant figure of a dancer, Laura Siegmund. She moves through the desolate landscape as if she were traversing it for the first time. I imagine that she has just arrived from another dimension, has just landed on the ground, and is trying to understand where she is. The slight, slowed-down movements may indicate that she is exploring the unknown or shaky rules of gravity. She seems to be testing what is possible in this particular space, trying not to dominate or appropriate it. The dancer is alone and we cannot see her face. She could be anyone. She could be our guide and companion in this moment of awe of nature, or perhaps a traveller from the future, exploring life on Earth after our annihilation.

Tunnels of Perception

The artistic form and means in Lethe are very much reduced to those necessary, the voice, the single human body, the cinematic image, fully static, barely technically manipulated. This simplicity

¹ Harald Weinrich, *Lethe. The Art and Critique of Forgetting*, New York 2004, pp. 6-8.

seems somehow radical, unexpected. Before seeing the video installation, we can imagine the place through the visuality of the words recited by the performer. An imaginary landscape is painted before our eyes. There are many elements in the description that indicate processes of decomposition and transformation, such as uprooted and 'washed away tree trunks', 'rotten branches', 'bleached wood deposited by water'. Some passages in the poem indicate feelings similar to the Kantian category of sublimity, such as 'the vastness of a field of stones', 'the weight of a clear, open sky'. Nature is a great force, so magnificent and yet overpowering and even threatening in some way. Following this thought, when encountering the sublime nature, we confront our human vulnerability and fragility.

The performer's voice says: 'The riverbed contains me. It holds me inside, but also leaves me exposed'. As it seems at first glance, the human figure is an integral part of the natural landscape; nature is our haven, a place of peace and reflection. At the same time, we no longer belong to it. We have excluded ourselves from it; many of us, especially in the Western world, have learned to live outside of it, sometimes even against it. This reflection is bitter, but it visualises our contemporary identity crisis, and our lack of a sense of belonging. The lyrical subject goes on to reflect: 'I think of those to whom I would like to say that the Earth is beautiful. I have seen it with my own eyes and it seems unreal to me.'

This reflection and concern for the Earth in the face of its slow decay bring Adam's work closer to land artists. Their work often encourages us to travel to remote places, still surrounded by unspoiled nature, to realise its beauty. Land art aims to 'bring the vastness of space (...) back to a human scale',² as Nancy Holt wrote of her work. Her Sun Tunnels (1973-76) consists of four concrete cylinders placed in a desert dried out by an

2 Nancy Holt, Sun Tunnels, *Artforum* vol. 15, no. 8, April 1977. Online access 27.12.2023: <https://www.artforum.com/features/sun-tunnels-209423/>

ancient lake, surrounded by rocky mountains in northwestern Utah, USA. Standing in or around the tubes, we can experience the ever-changing play of light and shadow; we can follow the movement of the sun, the moon, and the reflections of the stars on the surface. Holt's installation creates a reference point, a framed visual field for viewers to gain a deeper understanding of the desert landscape. The installation calls on people to visit the place probably for the first time, see its uniqueness, and spend some time there. In this way, the artist creates a kind of natural sanctuary deeply rooted in the fabric of the landscape, referring to ancient sacred sites. In Adam's work, we don't really visit the actual river, but we can travel these dividing kilometres in our imaginations. We can connect with the landscape depicted through a sensory experience, as if we were looking at a realistic, somehow romantic landscape painting.

Dancing on the Moon

The sounds of water from Judith Hamann's musical composition move around the gathered audience members as if we were inside a vortex. The music bubbles like lava, wheezes like machines, opens and closes space, pulsates, and builds tension. Sometimes we can overthink that we hear some crowded city from afar, but we hear it as if through a glass or from a distant hill. In some moments we plunge into the depths of the river, swimming with the current against the water, like fish. This multi-layered and spherical music takes Lethe – a composition of the poem, performance, and video installation – to another sphere, namely to the futuristic one.

The Tagliamento riverbed visually resembles a lunar surface with a limited colour palette, mainly white and grey tones, and an absence of people and barely their footprints. This type of desolate and wild landscape appears in the history of cinema as the setting of classic science-fiction films. I will only mention

two examples from Eastern Europe, such as *Stalker* (1979) by Andrei Tarkovsky and *On the Silver Globe* (1988) by Andrzej Zulawski. Unlike Western films about the conquest of space with images of advanced technology and machines, far beyond what humans could imagine at the time, these examples do not hide their aesthetic rootedness in earthly nature. It is a nature that nevertheless seems unreal and distant. Scenes of moving through sea coasts full of sand, stones, or lakes overgrown with lush grass and flowers, point us to the metaphorical overtones of the films and their implicit critique of authoritarian regimes through speculative and futuristic narratives.

In *Lethe*, the people seem long gone, but traces of them remain. We can remember from a poem at the beginning of the performance: 'I see a couple of footprints in the sand, the remnants of a fire, a plastic bag, a can.' Traces of life, of a possible celebration or ritual, but also human thoughtlessness that leads to the deposition of non-biodegradable rubbish along the river. It reminds me of Octavia Butler's *Xenogenesis* trilogy. In *Adulthood Rites* (1988), humans, resisting mixing their DNA with other species from distant planets, discover an old human and mostly destroyed city, Phoenix, where they collect and preserve plastic objects from the past like sacred relics and archaeological treasures.³ Butler's books clearly show human absurdity and the extraordinary ability to quickly forget the infamous past. In this series of books, humans are creatures who, through constant wars and nuclear conflicts, bring about the destruction of nature, the planet, and ultimately the entire human species. Rescued to some extent by unknown species from other galaxies, in Butler's vision, however, they are unable to fully recognize their self-destructive drive.

3 Octavia E. Butler, *Adulthood Rites. A Lilith's Brood Novel*, London 2022, pp. 152-153.

Rights of Nature

In the even broader context of eco-activism, Adam Man's work brings to mind the concept of environmental personhood, which has been actively adopted in many countries, mainly in India, Australia, New Zealand and the Americas, over the past two decades, protecting rivers from further destruction. When an environmental entity is given 'legal personality', it cannot be owned and has the right to go to court. In *Active Hope* (2012), Chris Johnstone and Joanna Macy comment on this practice in the following way:

'When we speak on behalf of another life form, a shift happens in our relationship with it. Whether we've spoken for ants or glaciers, bringing our imagination to bear in reporting their experience, they are no longer strangers to us. What emerges is a deepened appreciation of how they are affected by human activity and, with this, a sense of connection with their suffering and a desire that they be well.'⁴

This very legalist and yet primarily Western practice draws its inspiration from many indigenous traditions around the world, dating back to the time before colonialism and Christianity. The association of the mythical Lethe with the existing Tagliamento river in Adam Man's space poem may also allude to this tradition. In Greek mythology, Lethe was not only one of the rivers of Hades but also the name of a minor goddess, daimona or spirit, daughter of Eris, goddess of strife and discord. The mythological Lethe shows us, namely, the ambivalence associated with the concept of memory and forgetting. In this sense, Adam's piece reminds us of the history of our relationships and responsibilities towards nature, while pointing out our human forgetfulness and negligence. It does not condemn us to suffer or feel guilty about it, which often leads to nothing, but rather invites us to a calming meditation and spiritual contemplation of ourselves. Just as Nature does.

4 Joanna Macy & Chris Johnstone, *Active Hope: How to Face the Mess We're in without Going Crazy*. Revised Edition. New World Library, 2022, p. 133.