





# **“We are Fluid.”**

**23rd Biennale of Sydney: rīvus**

**A zine**

## **Celestial Navigation: On charting a safe passage**

*There is an unspeakable awe that can be felt when standing way out in the midnight sea, gazing up and seeing the sky twinkle with infinite possibilities.*

For as long as we have breathed, we have felt thirst. A thirst so fundamental, so human, that our ancestors founded their civilisations around magnificent bodies of water. We see the flowing river and feel blood rushing through our veins. It is the universal instinct. That water means survival. It means life.

*Tagai* (2018), by Meriam artist Gail Mabo, is intrinsically tied to this notion of survival. Delicate but powerful, the piece invokes the vitality of celestial navigation in Mabo's culture. Before navigational technology, constellations were used to chart a safe passage between different islands.

You find seashells on the beach. The sand crunches under your feet as you reach down to collect them. They glisten along the shoreline. It is not night time, but you could swear that they are the stars. There is a certain brilliance about them that cannot be explained any other way.

The work is composed of bamboo, twine and seashells, woven together to form the star map of the constellation *Tagai*. Aside from navigational purposes, *Tagai* is used to determine when to plant, when to hunt, when to harvest – the bare essentials of life. Constructed in the image of a protector, it is a beacon of trust. Of guidance. It is a symbol of safety.

You're out on choppy waters. The tar of the night sky drips down, down the side of the boat and into the river. You look up at the sky once more and see glitter. The needlepoint holes poked through the black canvas of the sky. They stitch together an image of a man on his canoe – of a hunter whose hand is a compass pointing home. The threads from which he is woven are bright and multicoloured. Shades of survival and

celebration are spun into the very fibre of the man. Look to him, your fellow sailor. Let his Southern Cross spear point you in the right direction.

*Tagai* is a triumph. It is a deeply personal love letter from Mabo to her culture. For the audience, it gives pause, inviting us to consider our connection to the natural world. Just standing with the piece takes you to another place. You are not looking at an artwork affixed to a wall. Instead, you are standing on a boat in the middle of the ocean, looking up at the expanse of night sky. The work's power lies in its ability to transport you – connecting you to countless bodies of water – the far-reaching seas, the still lakes, the quiet ease of the waterhole.

In all of this, take a moment to appreciate the river. It holds the capacity to mirror the everyday, with its constant motion and steadfast nature. We cannot allow ourselves to take the rivers we exist alongside for granted. They are the lifeblood of our very being. When our lips were dry with thirst, the river quenched us and soothed the cracked skin. Listen carefully and hear that in the background of every story we tell, the river hums along in gentle support. In the same way, let the sounds of the river accompany you as you undertake your own journey – and do not fear getting lost along the way.

Look up. The stars will guide you safely.



## A Latin Student, Microorganisms, and the Journey of Language and Art.

A waterway follows a journey flowing through the environment, carrying with it vital water and abundant food but also carrying community, as it brings life to ideas and stories which flow through time and nations. The 23rd Biennale of Sydney traces this journey, exploring how human connection with water has evolved over time. This waterway is transformed into an artistic journey, one which we are invited to join by the participants of the Biennale, who utilise art to express the ideas of this journey. In the same way that a waterway is not one singular thing, the Biennale is not only visual, but it is also a tactile, conceptual, audible, and linguistic journey. While each dimension of this artistic journey connects with people differently, I was more fascinated with the use of language to enrich the Biennale than any other element.

As an avid lover of etymology and all things linguistic, and as a higher-level Latin student, I was intrigued by the role of language in the Biennale from the moment José Roca first unveiled the title, *Rīvus*. The Latin word for stream or river – and an anagram for virus – this title encompasses so much of the exhibition's role and purpose within five simple letters.

However, I believe *rīvus*, holds much greater value in shaping the journey that is the Biennale, as the word itself has travelled through its own journey, a fascinating etymology which traverses the history of language like a river flows through a valley. This arrives at our English word rival – a person who is competing for the same object or goal as another. The Latin noun *rīvus* evolved into *rivalis*, meaning those who use the same water source as another. Soon after, this second noun transformed into *rival*, indicating competition between two individuals in love; 'My foolish rival, that her father likes....For love, thou know'st, is full of jealousy' as Shakespeare used it in his play *Two Gentlemen in Verona*, in 1623.

This etymological journey mirrors the Biennale, as it conveys the constant battle over who has the right to use and control waterways, and explores the parallelism of waterways and human emotions, such as love's everchanging presence. *Rīvus*, as an ancient word, invokes these themes in a historical context, enabling us to see how despite the urgency of climate change, many current ideas around water have persisted for thousands of years.

Excitingly for me, this title is not the only way in which the ancient Roman language is involved in the Biennale. Alex Cerveny's artworks *Atlântida* and *Acquifera* work together to create an interpretation of both the world we currently inhabit and an idealised mythical territory. *Atlântida* is largely drawn from a 1650's children's book called *Orbis Sensualium Pictus*, meaning the Visible World in Pictures, and includes inscriptions of Latin and Spanish words relating to water. This highlights the vast scope of how humans use language to describe water – a scope that includes both the evolution of language across history as well as the breadth of words in any one language that relate to water. Cerveny's use of language underscores the importance of water – in its many manifestations – to the human experience, whether that be historical, present or in a mythological future.

This same journey – of water, linguistics, and a distant future – travels even further in a second Biennale artwork, *Nimiia Cétii*. In this twelve-minute video, Jenna Sutela uses extremophilic bacteria and a Martian tongue, invented by Hélène Smith in the 1800s, to generate a new written and spoken language.

Sutela's use of artificial intelligence explores the possibilities of communication with non-human entities that could arise as our language moves into the digital age. *Nimiia Cétii* envisions a future – a futuristic evolution of language, building upon the journey which modern-day words have been on since their ancient counterparts. Such technology could enhance the way in which humans can communicate among ourselves but also how we connect with both artificial intelligence and the environment, even on a microscopic scale. Sutela proposes that communication between these three realms of technology, humanity and bacteria, could lead to an understanding that would allow for greater interconnection and equality throughout the world – listening to and respecting one another in a way that is not currently possible. Thus, *Nimiia Cétii* explores the communicative power of our waterways in a literal sense, in contrast to typical explorations of metaphorical exchanges through water.

In the 23rd Biennale of Sydney, José Roca joins a long lineage of curators and artists who have merged the powers of language and art, as he creates a multi-faceted journey which traces waterways throughout history. I traced this exhibition through my own love of Latin, in the same way audiences are able to trace a waterway which spans from ancient aquifers to a modern climate crisis. As we trace this waterway and experience this Biennale, we are guided through a journey across the past, present and future, in equal parts water, language and art.





## Songs from the Riverways

Within the language of nature exists auditory forces that may appear nondescript, yet hold countless words and stories. Regardless of location, these natural sonic forces remain inherent to our way of living. Whether it is water raucously striking the surface of rock, streams that whimsically pulse in a river or the melodic interactions of wildlife - there is an undoubted sonic ecosystem in which nature thrives.

Rivus exhibits a naturally constructed sonic architecture where works reinforce one another, displaying a contemporary ecosystem that liberally draws on an emphasis of the past. Each space of the exhibition possesses an aura that transcends each work, creating an enhanced biodiversity for audiences to explore.

Milton Becerra's deeply immersive installation, *Lost Paradise*, flourishes sonic aspect through an intimate understanding of space. The line between audience and installation blur, as the work inherits and interprets the sounds around it. It then offers these back to its ecosystem, relating itself and the audience as one. Continuity of thread enables Becerra's work to become seamless as lines intertwine without interruption, allowing the stimulation of "orbits that create vibrations and subtle sounds." With the enhanced relationship between the installation and audience, the work becomes an object of the newly found environment.

In *A Connective Reveal*, Robert Andrew's demystification of language is one that initially appears visually synthetic, yet machinery becomes personified and the technology takes on the essence of natural life. The mechanism jitters its delicate body to softly fill the room with a warming sense of existence. Although technically non-living, the machinery's unshrouding of language awards itself a humanistic quality that invites participants engagement. The space becomes evolutionary not only as Andrew's language is uncovered - but also as technology converges with dialogue. The jittery machinery mimics the buzz of invisible nature, bleeding into other spaces of the exhibition not in a pervasive fashion but rather complimentary.

By communicating rivers and waterways through a more exploratory framework, visual artists provide musicians with a specific concept to dwell upon. The sustained and atmospheric recordings of Christian Fennesz and Balam Acab embody this interaction.

Ambient composer Christian Fennesz's 2004 album *Venice* includes the unfazed *City of Light*. This song does not demand attention or intentionally provoke participants, yet it can flourish if allowed. Built on repetition, it values neither progress or traditional structure, allowing itself to exist freely – akin to a motionless body of water calmly holding its position. Ambience becomes layered, executed with such economy that is somewhat unidentifiable. The layers of ambience converge peacefully to create a powerful yet utterly still entity, embracing both itself and the listener. The album's cover artwork features a modest boat that rests atop unmoving water; it isn't difficult for the listener to become one with this world and embrace the essence of stillness. Similar to breathtaking water bodies, *City of Light* can easily be ignored, and it yet it offers an undoubted sense of comfort if sought.

*Fragile Hope* by Balam Acab begins with the alluring sounds of water drops caressing the cave floor, an introduction to the vulnerable and intense world that the song creates. Shifting around the water are slow winding patches of ambience that further construct this desolate but graceful environment. On arriving at the halfway point, the audience experiences the tumultuous convergence of these natural sonic elements. Water beats upon rocks and the thunder of electronic drum patterns light up what was previously dark. Obscured human vocals mimic distraught crying, heightening the state of vulnerability. The song achieves a cinematic and monumental quality yet stays true to its original understatement – a poignant showcase of water's nature in its entirety.

As music untunes the sky, sound coordinates life. Whether it is the intentional conveying of waterways through Ambient compositions or the whimsical blending of sonics by Biennale artists - songs of the river spark a necessary joy.



import time

# Tefekkür #

# # التَّفَكُّرُ

# Thinking, Reflection, Meditation, Training the Heart #

conversing = input("Who is your heart connecting to?")

remember = ["ablution[1]", "drinking ice-cold water",  
"playing with the hose during summer", "rainy school days and wet knee-high socks"]

for memory in remember:

print(memory)

print("[1] Cleansing/purifying the body as part of a religious ritual."

"In this context, it refers to the Islamic preparation to pray involving "

"washing the hands, face and feet with clean, running water.")

if conversing == "tabita":

print("""North Wollongong Beach was an hour's drive from my house.

We never went to any others because Mum worried about how beachgoers would react to her burkini.

The beach had two-metre-tall waves, and only a handful of lifeguards.

From my beach towel, the smell of charcoal and kofta dominated the saltiness of the sea.

We always went outside of peak times,

where the wind would turn my lips blue and the water was scattered with only a few children.""")

if conversing == "canowindra fish fossil":

print("""As I grew, the water became an older sister, a friend and a mentor.

I went to North Cyprus when I was seven and the memory that sticks is

of seeing the distinct shape of the island from the window of the small Turkish Airlines plane.

Cyprus looked like a manta ray or a brine shrimp. Its head was intimidating, uncanny, yet strangely familiar.

The shoreline was made of smooth stones and there were no fish in sight.

The water was so calm it felt like the Moon herself had fallen asleep and forgot to carry the tides in her embrace. """)

if conversing == "birrarung yarra river":

```
print("""I did not leave my room for most of 2020, but after Mum warned me of blood clots from sitting for too long,
```

```
    I agreed to go for a walk with her. Mum and I decided to walk while it was raining.
```

```
    The rain was not heavy but was not light either.
```

```
        There is no footpath on my street.
```

```
    Concrete had claimed invasive species status in my neighbourhood;
```

```
    I had forgotten the feeling of physically sinking into the ground.
```

```
    Seeking solid terrain, we decided to walk along the M7 Westlink bike track.
```

```
    At the end of the path is a bridge that shakes as you walk on it, with the remnants of a river underneath.
```

```
    The water is covered in neon green algae and dead seaweed.
```

```
    Once at the bridge, we noticed that the rain had cleared the water and the most beautiful eels were suddenly visible.
```

```
    Concentric circles bloomed into existence on the face of the water,
```

```
    some from the impact of the rain droplets, others from the small fish kissing the surface.
```

```
    We saw baby gweela seeking their mother, who was also enamoured by the kissing fish.
```

```
    Pacific black ducks ruffled their smoothed feathers,
```

```
    waiting for the clouds to drift away so they could sunbathe in the reeds.
```

```
    We stood there until my hair was soaked and then slowly went home, staring back the entire time.""")
```

if conversing == "jenna":

```
print("""I'm standing outside the MCA
```

```
    Busking with the clicking of my jaw
```

```
    A bin chicken tiptoes towards me
```

```
    Clacking her beak
```

A playful glint in her eye

She opens her beak and tells me my hair has fallen out of my hair clip

I stare for what feels like hours""")

```
time.sleep(60 * 60)
```

```
print("""Then twist my straw-like strands and clip them to the top of my head
```

```
She nods, distinctly maternal, and takes flight
```

```
Soaring over the water
```

```
The swell of the water matching the beating of her wings""")
```



## *Why Cry?*

She was trying -  
She was trying by crying.  
They saw her, yet sat  
And let her be sad.

The droplets ran down,  
They'd tilted her crown.  
She no longer reigned  
She could not be sane.

Raining, not reigning -  
Cold showers falling  
As cold as their hearts  
The way they were stalling.

She was drowning  
Her body submerged  
Tears forming waves  
She could not emerge.

Only until the tides ran high  
Did they seem to notice  
How long she'd cried.

But now it was late  
Why did they wait?  
Why didn't they help?  
When she did welp.

Her tears had run dry,  
But they now were too deep,  
Buried under streams,  
They now did sleep.



**This zine was created by members of the 2022 MCA Youth Committee:**

Celestial Navigation: On charting a safe passage by Karina White  
A Latin Student, Microorganisms, and the Journey of Language and Art by Kate Snashall

Songs from the Riverways by Will Naufahu

Collage artwork by Miya Sywak

Tefekkür by Zeynep Nevzat

Why Cry? by Kaela Goldsmith

Cover artwork and water creatures by Amethyst Townsend

With content support and editing by Ethan Bell and Lucie Stevens

Museum of  
Contemporary  
Art Australia

