

As we set out for the *flow* outdoor photography event on the water, dedicated to the Podlasie nature photographer Włodzimierz Puchalski, we hoped to encounter some wildlife. Our first stop on the Narew River was opposite a steep bank riddled with sand martin nests. For the next two days, a great egret kept us company. On what must have been the fourth night, we slept beside a gathering of cranes on the far side of the river. One day, a dragonfly perched on my wrist for so long that I asked if it was sure it wanted to stray so far from home. At one point, we accidentally (and only briefly) separated a family of swans. We think we spotted two otters, one swimming across the river. On the final day of that first journey down the Narew, after a stormy night, a flock of starlings flew low over our heads. There weren't many fish. We saw one herd of horses wading in the water and another grazing on a hillside. Along the Vistula, we mostly saw cormorants, gulls, and terns overhead, but also the rarer oystercatchers and plovers. We had to tread carefully on the sandbars and beaches, watching out for their nests built right in the sand. Once, a beaver went tumbling headlong down a slope. The exhibition is a diary of experiencing nature.

"The river is a living, dynamic, and self-organising being... It does nothing, yet nothing remains undone... [...] It calls for attunement. The Vistula is a complex entity, an organism, a system, a world. The bloodstream of the Earth. The river's endurance depends on riparian forests and underwater sandbanks, but also on beavers, fish, and psammons," reads the *flow* manifesto. "I am the river, and the river is me."

The works presented in the exhibition were created in 2025 or earlier, during or as a result of one of the annual wooden-boat journeys down the Vistula, organised by Agnieszka Brzeżańska and Ewa Ciepielewska, as well as during a kayaking plein-air on the Narew River in 2024. The past four years of this adventure are captured in photographs by Nel Lato; the views and impressions from the kayaking retreat and recent river expeditions are reflected in the paintings of Agnieszka and Ewa (one of the nocturnes is titled *What Do You See When You Step Out of the Tent at Night to Pee*), while this year's route is mapped in *flow* by the artist Yoanna Symbiosis.

The essence of the mobile residency *flow*, ongoing since 2016, lies in the idea of artistic coexistence with invited guests. The residency revolves around several themes, the central one being the observation of the river's condition and its ever-shifting course. In August 2025, when we were travelling upstream, the Vistula between Kazimierz and Warsaw reached a record-low water level, caused by a prolonged drought: the absence of snowfall in the winter of 2024/2025 and a wave of summer heat that further increased evaporation. In some places, the river was only a few centimetres deep, exposing its bed and sandy shoals. In the Czerniaków Port, few believed that the galar, a traditional flat-bottomed boat with a draught of just 20 centimetres, would be able to make it through.

The experience of taking part in *flow* is also one of community and connection, of being part of a self-organising crew that minimises unnecessary movement on deck and finds effortless, organic rhythms for the routines of everyday life. It means engaging in the shared life of a constantly shifting micro-community with people joining, leaving, or stopping by for a day or a night. A community that learns, both collectively and individually, to synchronise its

actions, as it reads the water, scanning for shallows and markers, the green and red buoys and poles that signal the navigable channel (reappearing in the exhibition in CentrumCentrum's riddle-like sculpture) and guide the way forward without running aground, caring for the flow and entering into a more-than-human, river-like state of being. It is a community of rest and regeneration, a counterbalance to the capitalist culture of constant activity and productivity. It is also a performance of mutual attentiveness, allowing each person in this microcosm to feel safe and free, to express themselves fully, and to realise their potential.

*Flow* is also about time that moves on the boat in a non-linear way, unfolding through different cycles and across several dimensions at once. This experience is reflected in the exhibition by CentrumCentrum, through their film and the game of time instructions. The passage of water and time, along with the feeling of nostalgia, is also at the heart of Lesia Pcholka's work. Time does not exist; time is eternal is also the theme behind Ewa Ciepielewska's series of clay sculptures, fired in an open flame during the journey and made from Vistula river clay. For me, time means joy, especially on the Narew River in 2024, when the solitude of the kayak allowed me to forget everything for a while and simply *be* there, in a place that was constantly changing with the flow. It also means reset, because being on the water is, after all, a reset for the nervous system, which is continually adapting to change. It's about "getting your river legs": the habituation of the vestibular system, the gradual process by which the inner ear learns to respond to new sensations, such as the river's natural movement.

Usually, the river becomes a point of departure for shared being and collective creation for artists who, without predetermined goals or the pressure to produce objects, revive the very idea of art as an experiment, as Aleksandra Jach once wrote about an earlier edition. Yet reality quickly tests such idealistic notions of unrestrained living in nature and creative freedom untouched by the state of the world. In the two most recent editions (2024 and 2025), which brought together artists connected to the Podlasie region, the transdisciplinary practices typical of *flow* gave way to more personal, post-plein-air expressions. These works are grounded in direct experience of nature, in the fleeting community formed aboard the galar, in moments of joy and sadness, in memories, and in emerging, at times uncomfortable, contexts. The first *spoilsport* (to use Sara Ahmed's term for someone who dares to speak inconvenient truths) turned out to be Nel Lato, who reminded us that in his early years, Puchalski sharpened his extraordinary photographic eye through the lens of a hunting scope. Łukasz Radziszewski, in his installation, reached back to tender memories of being with his father – of learning from him and spending time together. That tenderness awakened a sense of longing, resulting in one of the exhibition's most intimate works. For the artist Uladzimir Hramovich, who was forced to leave Belarus a few years ago, the river takes on a political dimension. The Bug and the Svislach, for instance, are rivers from which, following the escalation of the humanitarian crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border in 2021, bodies of people were retrieved, people who had been pushed back and forth across the border, believing that safety lay just beyond it. In 2025 *flow* embodies a quiet form of regenerative activism, yet it remains haunted by the recurring question: can we allow ourselves to feel pleasure when we

know that, deep below, sealed in waterproof bags, the Internet continues to broadcast the genocide in Gaza?

*Our smiles drift into the golden backdrop of evening, [...]*

*We smoulder softly, like peat.* [Andrzej Sosnowski; own translation]

Ewa Tatar

Translated from Polish by Anna Bergiel