

NATURAL CONTRACT LAB

presents

STILL HERE:

**AN ALLIANCE OF CARE
FOR THE SZENNE RIVER**

**A WALKING-WITH SYMPOSIUM &
PUBLIC TRIBUNE**

*What does it mean to recognise
a river as a bearer of rights?*



NATURAL CONTRACT LAB

presents

STILL HERE:

**AN ALLIANCE OF CARE
FOR THE SZENNE RIVER**

**A WALKING-WITH SYMPOSIUM &
PUBLIC TRIBUNE**

02.05.2026

10:00 - 19:00

**NATURAL
CONTRACT
LAB**

STILL HERE:

AN ALLIANCE OF CARE FOR THE SZENNE RIVER

A WALKING-WITH SYMPOSIUM & PUBLIC TRIBUNE

What does it mean to recognise a river as a bearer of rights?

Since 2021, **Natural Contract Lab** has been *Walking-with* the **SZenne River** and its kin – trees, people, mud, knotweed, nettles, seen and unseen – from its source under a willow tree in Naast to its confluence at Zennegat. Listening to its waters, attempting to learn modes of care from its beings, experiencing its resilience, and growing **an alliance of care** with its kin.

On **May 2nd, 2026** this ongoing practice opens to a wider public during the **Walking-with Symposium** at *VIERNULVIER* in Ghent – a moment in time to share the transdisciplinary *Protocol of Reciprocal Care* for bodies of water amid deep ecological loss, and the process through which Natural Contract Lab has developed a proposal for the legal recognition of the Szenne River's rights in Belgium.

The day unfolds in **3 movements**. Beginning outside, **Walking-with** in solidarity with the waters of Ghent, a site-specific flow that activates listening, sensing, storytelling and song. Next, at *VIERNULVIER*, we immerse in a gathering with River allies for **a transdisciplinary conversation**, weaving together reflections with invited guests. Finally, **a tribune** with Natural Contract Lab will share the restorative principles of SZenne's *Living Law* alongside the emerging alliance, those who have been *Walking-with* the SZenne and its beings.

How can we propose a law rooted in ecological grief, care, and embodied relationships—one that weaves reciprocity, kinship, and restorative justice with a river and its more-than-human communities?

The tribune culminates in an **Enchoiring-with**, where we are invited to become **a multispecies choir** voicing the *Living Law* through song. Together, we explore how to resonate our **stewardship**, share **stories** of connection with the river and its beings, and carry this living testimony to the parliament through **attunement and care**.

PROGRAM

10.00 - 12.30

51°02'17.5"N 3°43'47.1"E

WALKING-WITH: IN SOLIDARITY WITH THE WATERS OF GHENT

We meet under the bridge Ter Platenbrug, *Walking-with* the Schelde. These site-responsive walks are at the heart of NCL's practice – moving narratives that activate listening, sensing, storytelling and grief, while turning participants into witnessing bodies giving and receiving care alongside the river.

12.30 - 14.00

LUNCH BREAK

14.00 - 16.00

Theater Foyer, VIERNULVIER

A CONVERSATION WITH RIVER ALLIES

We then gather inside for a transdisciplinary conversation weaving together a reflection on rights of nature, ecological grief, embodied knowledge and solidarity between water bodies – with Youngsook Choi, Xandra van der Eijk, Hendrik Schoukens and Christiane Bosman, moderated by Brunilda Pali (NCL).

16.00 - 17.00

SNACK BREAK

17.00 - 19.00

Theater Foyer, VIERNULVIER

EMBODYING THE LIVING LAW

We open with a conversation between founding members of NCL, Maria Lucia Cruz Correia, Vinny Jones, Brunilda Pali and Lode Vranken, moderated by Christel Stalpaert, unfolding the Protocol of Reciprocal Care and its transdisciplinary roots. We close with a tribune, where Brunilda Pali and Jef Seghers present the restorative principles of the Living Law alongside the emerging alliance, those who have been *Walking-with* the SZenne and its beings – culminating in a collective Enchoiring-with: a multispecies choir voicing the Living Law through song, carrying this living testimony toward the parliament.

from 19.00

outside by the Schelde river

CLOSING APÉRO

Join us on the quay to sing, celebrate over a SZenne Spritz and a bite.

LYRICS

Song: **THE LIVING LAW** – created by stewards of the Szenne River

Refrain (sung twice between each verse)

*The river lives, the river flows,
Her law evolves, her wisdom grows.*

Verse 1 – Evolving Law

*This law shall change, this law shall bend,
Like rivers turning, without end.*

LEXICON

LIVING LAW is both a legal document and a Living Preamble – not written to represent the river, but to emerge from its remembrance as an embodied knowledge to become stewards. A sensing cartography of stories, songs and memories that remembers the SZenne river as an ecosystem of meaningful relationships, as a living entity. A proof of evidence: of reciprocal care, of kinship, of a legitimate alliance calling for the river's recognition in Belgian law.

PROTOCOL OF RECIPROCAL CARE is rooted in an environmental restorative justice proposal by Brunilda Pali (2021). This evolving framework adapts continuously to the waters and communities NCL collaborates, exchanges and learns with. It holds together the transdisciplinary knowledge within the group – rights of nature, ecological grief, sensory scenography, embodied literacies and ancestral cosmology – flowing and mutating like a river through an ecosystem.

WALKING-WITH are our site-responsive artistic walks with the river. They are a moving narrative that activates sensory scores (listening and sensing), conversational circles (exchange of water memories, river stories, harms and ecological grief), storytelling and speculative ecologies (learning from the river as our teacher). While walking-with, we become witnessing bodies, giving and receiving care. Walking-with is an act of accountability, a gesture of solidarity, a moment for unlearning and reconciling with the river.



GUEST SPEAKERS

CHRISTIANE BOSMAN

Rethinking human and non-human water relations in Europe.

Addressing the climate crisis demands a fundamental rethinking of Western conceptions of the relationship between humans and the natural world. Ecosystems should no longer be understood merely as objects for human use, management, and exploitation, but recognized instead as (legal) subjects with intrinsic value.

The Embassy of the North Sea, an interdisciplinary collective founded in The Hague in 2018, seeks to represent the North Sea as a legal, cultural, and political entity. In collaboration with TBA21-Academy, the Embassy also leads the Confluence of European Water Bodies. Founded on the shores of Spain's Mar Menor saltwater lagoon—the first ecosystem in Europe to be granted legal personhood — the Confluence is a solidarity network of more than 35 grassroots initiatives. These initiatives work to represent Europe's seas, rivers, lakes, lagoons, glaciers, and wetlands. The Confluence fosters learning and exchange around local human-water relationships while advancing the Rights of Nature across Europe.

YOUNGSOOK CHOI

Isn't silence the most precise common language? Eco-literacy from ubiquitous wetness.

What could we learn from witnessing ecological loss? Instead of moving forward, rushing into solutions, and promising another Babel towers, Youngsook urges full immersion into ecological grief through the lens of climate interrogation, collectively scrutinising repeating patterns of environmental destruction. Staying with the loss and organising communal witnessing could open up the space of interspecies solace that intrinsically engages relational knowing and planetary pedagogy of love – a humble beginning of an interspecies healing. Honouring the words from Robin Wall Kimmer, "I could not bear the loneliness of being dry in a wet world", Youngsook will invite the participants to ubiquitous wetness through her eco-grief practice across various sites, ecosystems, and species.

HENDRIK SCHOUKENS

The right to have rights: does nature already have rights in Europe? What can we learn from Hannah Arendt?

Drawing on Hannah Arendt's concept of "the right to have rights," this contribution outlines the main tenets of rights of nature theory and examines to what extent nature can be considered to hold rights in Europe. It asks whether EU-protected nature can be regarded as having been indirectly granted rights – and whether this framework helps to explain the current backlash against environmental regulation in the EU. Furthermore, it explores whether certain ecosystems in Europe may have inadvertently been granted rights, and how their future can be safeguarded in times of war and environmental crises.

XANDRA VAN DER EIJK

Meeting a river on their own terms.

What does it mean to engage with a river as a living system rather than a resource? And what happens when artistic fieldwork and artistic methods are used to let river agents participate in that inquiry, rather than simply serve as a subject?

These questions resist easy answers. They touch on the limits of representation, the politics of speaking on behalf of nonhuman entities, and the friction that arises when artistic and scientific knowledge-making practices meet. They also produce something less theoretical: grief, a sense of injustice, and an uncertainty that does not resolve with time.

Drawing on the experience of two years of artistic practice collaborating with the Rhine River, I will share some of the approaches used and what they did, or did not, deliver. In the context of growing discussion around Rights of Nature and multispecies stewardship, this talk considers what sustained, practice-led engagement with a waterbody may look like.



BIOGRAPHIES

The SZenne River begins under a willow tree in Naast, humbly seeping to the surface before trickling down the slope and slowly widening into a river that meanders 103 km to its confluence at Zennegat. Here it meets the Dyle, Nete, Rupel and Scheldt and eventually the salt of the North Sea. It is a resilient river – reshaped, redirected, buried and once considered dead as one of the most polluted rivers in Europe. With the solidarity of its companion plants, bacteria and restorative projects, it has been revived. The Szenne teaches us a story of adaptation and survival rooted in the cooperation of the beings that cohabit its waters and the many people who carry its memory.

Natural Contract Lab is a transdisciplinary artistic practice weaving an alliance of reciprocal care with bodies of water undergoing environmental loss. Hybrid and adaptable, NCL's interventions emerge in dialogue with each river – as collaboration, reciprocal sensing, and a gesture of care. With the intention to fabulate new forms of justice, NCL has developed a *Protocol of Reciprocal Care** that entangles restorative justice, river rights, ecological grief, sensory ecoscenography and walking methodologies. NCL is a body of care that invites you to join them for Walking-withs, grief rituals, collective storytelling, Agoras, River Guardian Schools and other actions that emerge in collaboration with the river and its kin.

Christiane Bosman has over 15 years of experience developing cultural interventions in the public realm, with a background in art history and heritage studies. Since joining the Embassy of the North Sea in 2019, her practice has focused on human-non-human relations and how art can deepen ecological awareness. She leads the Confluence of European Water Bodies – a transdisciplinary solidarity network of over 35 grassroots initiatives exploring the cultural, legal and political representation of aquatic ecosystems across Europe. As an independent curator and producer, she has initiated public art interventions addressing gentrification, ecology, democracy and future thinking at organisations including TAAK cooperative and Ministry for the Future.

Xandra van der Eijk is a Dutch artist and researcher working with the fluid, networked actors that constitute water bodies. Central to their practice is the concept of Materiality of Place – how site-specific actors embody ecological, cultural and political worlds, uncovered through artistic fieldwork, material experimentation and technological mediation.

As founder of Ecology Futures at Avans University of Applied Sciences, they have shaped ecological art education in the Netherlands. Their long-term project Hydroformations engages the Rhine as a living entity with its own rhythms and agency. Their work has been exhibited internationally, including at the Biennale of Sydney and ZKM Karlsruhe.

Youngsook Choi is an artist, researcher, and eco-grief advocate with a PhD in feminist/queer geography. Their socially engaged, site-specific practice explores aesthetics of solidarity and collective healing under the theme of “political spirituality,” positioning feeling and compassion as ways of knowing. Ecological grief is central, framing collective witnessing as a socio-political autopsy, while fostering eco-literacy as emergent pedagogy. Key projects include *The Book of Loss* (2022), commemorating seven lost glaciers; *Slow Sips with Earth* (2023), tea-blending as grief-literacy; and *In Every Bite of the Emperor* (since 2021), tracing neo-colonial extraction impacts. Youngsook founded the eco-grief council Foreshadowing and co-founded Decolonising Botany.

Hendrik Schoukens is a part-time professor of environmental law at Ghent University and a lawyer at the Brussels Bar. His research focuses on nature restoration, environmental impact assessment, climate litigation, and sustainable development. Over a twenty-year legal career, he has developed particular expertise in strategic environmental litigation, contributing to landmark rulings in areas including nitrogen pollution, species extinction, PFAS contamination and pesticides. He served six years as an alderman responsible for environment and spatial planning in Lennik. Furthermore, he regularly publishes opinion pieces in *De Standaard*, *De Morgen* and *Knack*, and is a frequently consulted media expert on nature protection and climate litigation.

Christel Stalpaert studied German philology and Theatre Studies at Ghent University, where she earned her PhD in 2002. Her dissertation proposed a post-semiotic analytical method drawing on Gilles Deleuze and Luce Irigaray, offering new insights into postdramatic theatre. Since 2003, she has lectured in Theatre Studies (Performing and Media Arts) at Ghent University. She has published widely in journals and books and serves on several editorial boards. Stalpaert co-edited key volumes on contemporary performance and co-directs the S:PAM research group. She is also active in multiple international theatre and performance research networks.



CREDITS

NATURAL CONTRACT LAB was initiated in 2021 by Maria Lucia Cruz Correia in ongoing co-creation with a transdisciplinary group, including the SZenne River (ally/mentor), vinny jones (sensory scenography/dramaturgy), Brunilda Pali (restorative justice), Lode Vranken (design/philosophy), Margarida Mendes (research/sonic guidance)

STILL HERE (2023- 2027)

Overview of collaborators with different temporalities of engagement:

Marzia Dalfini (design), Jef Seghers LDR Advocaten (SZenne Living Law), Caroline Daish (vocal archivist), Julie Vanderhaegen/Atelier Cartographique (digital companion), Xandra van der Eijk (river oracles design), Melanie Matthieu (creative producer), Patricia Van Cutsem (singer/song writer), Tania Soubry (choreographer), Christel Stalpaert (hyphenated thinker), Thessa Kruger (intern/sound research), Saartje Monden (river guardian pedagogies), Laura Eva Meuris (weaver), Flore Herman (mediation dramaturgy), Melanie Ganino (artistic assistant), Matteo Deblasio (river vessel design/conception).

Production: HIROS

Coproduction: VIERNULVIER, Kanal Centre Pompidou, SoAP, Workspace-brussels, Nadine, UGent Research Centre S:PAM Local partners: Brussels Environment, Contrat de Rivière Senne, Regionaal Landschap Rivierenland, Natuurpunt Mechelen, Coördinatie Zenne, Kunsthal Mechelen Supported by: Erfgoedcel Mechelen, Werkplaats Immaterieel Erfgoed, Centrum Kunstarchieven Vlaanderen, Vlaamse Gemeenschap, European Forum for Restorative Justice (EFRJ), Marie Toussaint (Member of the European Parliament, Greens/EFA), Con-fluvial (Ugent)

HIROS

**NATURAL
CONTRACT
LAB**

viernulvier

An aerial photograph of a river. The water is covered with a thick layer of bright green algae. In the lower-left portion of the image, the water is turbulent, creating numerous white, frothy bubbles. The overall scene is a natural, somewhat overgrown waterway.

A COLLECTIVE GESTURE OF CARE FOR THE WATERS

**With gratitude
to all the rivers
and its people's
generosity**

www.naturalcontractlab.com

