

ZORÓJ

alicia wysocka

ZORÓJ

curated by Mike Bill & Teresa Heinkelmann

introduction

The project oscillates between water resources and their implications: their social, political and economic dimensions, but also aspects of healing and spirituality. Alicja Wysocka has undertaken a number of field trips to different areas across Eastern Europe which are known for their springs of water naturally rich in minerals and public thermal baths (banya). The show consist of a video (in collaboration with Iza Koczanowska), sound installation (in collaboration with Ari-Pekka Leinonen) as well as objects and sculptures. A multi-channel sound installation uses water and voice as its sonic texture. Sounds circulates and moves in the loudspeaker setup, seeking ways to liquify the space and create a transforming auditory sensation.

The video was shot in Serbia and Bulgaria, as well as other Balkan countries. One of the places Wysocka has been especially interested in is Vrnjačka Banja in Serbia. It is one of the locations which is home to a long tradition of health resorts. In the period from the 2nd to the 4th century, the Romans built the *Aquae Orcinae*, a health and recovery centre, on and around the Vrnjačka hot mineral spring. Vrnjačka Banja is the biggest and most famous resort city in Serbia. In 1935, 28,000 guests were registered in the spa and over 50,000 tourists had chosen the place for short stays, making Vrnjačka Banja the most visited place in Yugoslavia of the time. The drinking fountain and buildings at Vrnjacka Banja appear in a shrine-like aesthetic. What unites the people who come here is their will to heal themselves and their faith in being healed by the Water.

One of the references made in the video points to the public baths in Aachen, Germany. Etymologically, «Aachen» means water. It's derived from the Roman name of «*Aquae granni*», which in turn refers to the

god Grannus (Celtic god of light and healing). The spread of Christianity quickly and permanently put a stop to the physical and pleasure-orientated bathing culture of antique provenance. Only in Aachen – thanks to Charlemagne – did bathing culture experience a short-lived new high in the early Middle Ages. Furthermore, the artist refers to hand choreographies, inspired by bioenergo-therapeutic techniques, which got famous in between the change of political systems – in Russia, Serbia and Poland: Allan Chumak was a Russian healer who came to prominence at the height of Gorbachev's Perestroika. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, he began to broadcast television sessions in Russia. During these sessions, viewers would hold jars of water, pomades, toothpaste, and other items near the screen to transfer his healing energy. Chumak, after 1990 (during the collapse of Yugoslavia) was present in Serbian radio and TV, which was met with great interest by the public. After the collapse of communism in Poland, Zbigniew Nowak – Allan Chumak's Polish equivalent – was also producing healing sessions on TV, broadcasted on Polish TV. Having grown up in Poland, the artist Alicja Wysocka still has very present childhood memories of Nowak's practices.

What's particularly fascinating to the artist is how the aforementioned practices of televised healing use water as their central substance. What is it about water – plain, thermal, mineral – that makes it such a powerful means to healing practices? How is Chumak's and Nowak's success related to the ongoing political change, to the threshold between different political systems which had been a social reality during that time?

And how come, natural water spa resorts had been busy and striving in Yugoslavia whereas today they're presence is fading in the same region?

T A B L E O F C O N T E N T S

conversation

On Zdrój

1 ~~~~~ Alicja Wysocka with Mike Bill

essays

4 ~~~~~ Appendices of Betrayal

~ **Sebastjan Brank**

6 ~~~~~ What the Water Gave Me

~ **Teodora Jeremić**

9 ~~~~~ The World Described as Wet

~ **Neva Lukić**

11 ~~~~~ My Grandmother's Dream

~ **Jelena Mijić**

12 ~~~~~ 36.9°C

~ **Vera Mlechevska**

memories

14 ~~~~~ Postcards from Polish Mineral
Water Resorts

16 ~~~~~ Branchial Cleft Cyst

17 ~~~~~ Cleaning Ritual

images

18 ~~~~~ Alicja Wysocka's Water Projects

25 ~~~~~ Photos

30 ~~~~~ Archival Material

31 ~~~~~ On Zdrój

~ **Mike Bill**

32 ~~~~~ Acknowledgement

On Zdrój

ALICJA WYSOCKA IN CONVERSATION WITH MIKE BILL

Alicja, this exhibition is all about the belief in the healing powers of water, and yet we don't see any of it. How come?

Everybody knows what it looks like, so what's the point? (*laughs*) But that's exactly it—it's what belief is all about in all religions: believing is what one cannot see. In terms of water, there are scientific measurements to expose all kinds of minerals and their quantity. Often, there is arsenic and other heavy metals in mineral/thermal water, so one should not drink more than a cup a day of it. I like to think about where the thermal mineral water comes from: It springs from the warm belly of the Earth.

Coming back to belief: What strikes me in Vrnjačka Banja (town in Serbia) is that in the same space, between the taps for water, there are orthodox, religious paintings of icons, creating a sacred space. Besides, those cheshma-water-fountains are often devoted to some saints.

I remember when I felt really down at some point in my life, there was this woman who recommended that I should buy black soap and wash off the bad energy with it. But she said that I really need to believe in it in order for it to work. I remembered one artist telling me during a studio visit with her that one healer put regular tap water into those plastic bags for ice making and told her to put those on the pipes to make tap water in her house healthy. And she put it there for many years. So yeah I'm fascinated about belief as well as water; so I look upon it together in this project.

What you are describing reminds me of your profound interest in rituals and performance: Setting up spaces, bodies, or simply material that refer to something. Isn't that also where the sound by Ari-Pekka comes in? As in a sonic reference to water?

It's about creating a certain situation. The bench allows the audience to listen to the audio but is also placed by the wall where usually artworks are displayed. The notion of the artwork is moved from an object to an experience, but also to the audience itself; making them and their actions part of the exhibition space. The audio is my field recording from Vrnjačka Banja and other water places in the Balkans, beautifully edited in a very immersive way by Ari-Pekka Leinonen, making it a spacious experience, like sound water dripping from the ceiling. The title of the show *Zdrój* (meaning 'spring', or 'water town resort' in Polish but also 'zdrowy' means 'healthy'.) refers to the water source, but also water resort.

I remember entering the church in Belgrade and there was a choral sound although the church was completely empty. It was a very particular experience. It took me a while to realise the sound came from hidden speakers.

During my stay there I visited many orthodox churches and observed these ritual paths believers make: They go from icon painting to icon painting, kissing it or repeatedly making the sign of the cross in front of them. In that sense, I think, these churches—at the same time public spaces—have a lot in common with art museums or galleries: people have a special attitude towards objects, and move slowly, contemplating. Art making reminds me of creating some kind of belief that is decided by the viewer to believe or not.

This shows just how many different senses come into play in the rituals you're describing: Touching icons and artefacts, seeing and observing them, hearing gospels and songs.

However, when it comes to the thermal baths things become more entangled: You mentioned icon paintings in the Banjas...

Yes in Vrnjačka Banja, where most of the footage was shot, were a few drinking fountains as a small architecture, where next to the taps chapel-like shrines with orthodox icons were placed. So people would sometimes go from kissing the icon to dipping their lips under the tap, making the same gesture, bending their back over and touching their lips to the icon/water which made you think that both gestures were 'holy'.

Speaking of 'holy' gestures: In your film you feature many references to self-proclaimed healers Allan Chumak and Zbigniew Nowak who were at the centre of a TV phenomenon in the 1980s. Towards the end of the Cold War era they gained attention by being broadcasted on national television in the Soviet Union and Poland. Chumak, for example, promised viewers to get enriched, energised water by placing their glasses of water between his televised hands. What interests you about these 'healers'?

It's fascinating how those healers, whose practices were connected to hand gestures, became famous during *perestroika*, which caused the collapse of the Soviet Union. Especially Chumak, a Russian healer who became famous in Serbia, and also Zbigniew Nowak, his Polish equivalent, had his own programme on Polish TV. What fascinates me about these hand choreographies, apart from representing this mass belief (at that time referred to as a 'mass psychosis'), is their repetition and how

they ought to build trust/belief but also how it changes their meaning. The hand gestures are also represented in orthodox icons, which are placed, as previously mentioned, at drinking fountains located in Vrnjačka Banja in Serbia. It is interesting how these hand gestures then also get repeated by the believer when they interact with thermal water. It is fascinating how handwork and handcraft influence the ways in which human brains work. Maybe this is also a reason why part of this exhibition is handcrafted, in a way—painting and creating out of ruins.

What's so interesting about the thermal baths you've visited is that they prove to be hybrids of some sort: Spaces that were and are both mundane and sacral.

Cleansing and water is undoubtedly part of most if not all the religions. My previous solo exhibition 'Lamentations' was about water ritual in pagan and catholic tradition which were traumatic experiences for me, this time it feels a lot more positive. It talks about natural, local resources, socialising in a way where everyone gets rid of their social uniforms, adapting to the nature of the water, by for instance blocking streams of thermal water with the stones and making it a social place, where out of capitalistic frames people can meet and chat while taking a healthy bath.

In Banja Luka, a city in Bosnia and Herzegovina, I was sitting with a group of women in one of these natural hot spring places. There, everybody knew each other and talked about politics.

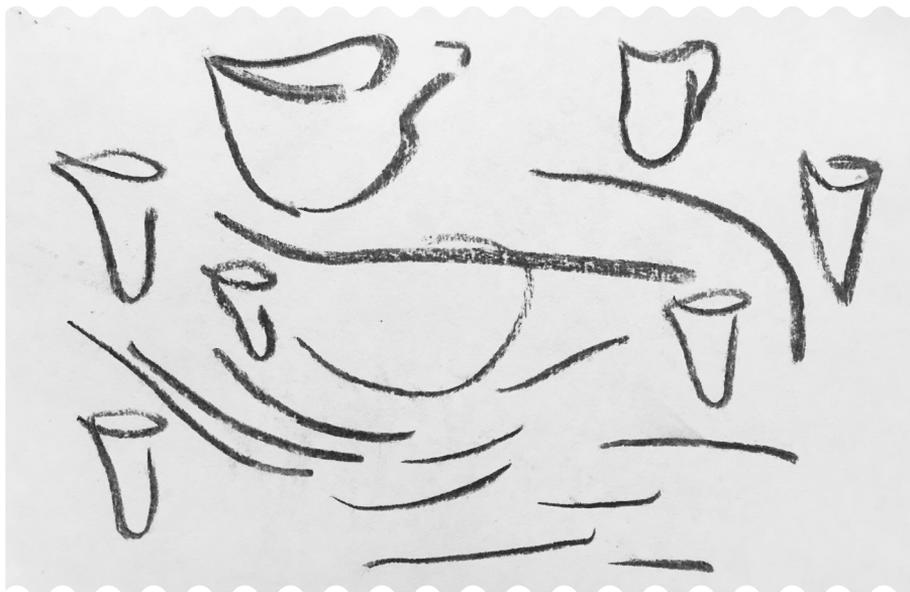
In the book 'Without Banya We Would Perish', it is pointed out how banyas were and are important social platforms to people of all classes (in this case in Russia and Soviet Union) to unite in the steam of water.

This brings me to the fact that in *Zdrój* visitors are not only allowed to gather, but that you yourself have gathered other artist's around you for this show. What does it mean to you to work collaboratively?

It is fantastic how ideas can resonate and people can inspire each other. I started my art practice from making paintings, but I found it a very lonely process and a bit selfish. I think it was the darkest moment of my life. *(laughs)* To be honest, it feels like shows in general are the closing or summary of some chapter, I prefer to think about them as parts of a process.

Within the past years you have travelled extensively through Eastern Europe: A number of artist residencies have brought you to Serbia, Bulgaria, and your native country Poland. Did one journey lead into the next?

It all started in Germany in 2020 during the Akademie Schloss Solitude residency where I was exploring water resources in Stuttgart, which is home to the second biggest mineral/thermal water resource in Europe after Budapest! After that I participated in further art residency programs: Via Belgrade and Sofia I travelled to other Balkan countries on various road trips. Along these ways and journeys I have also collected tiles, cups and other ceramic leftovers. Many of which have ended up as parts of this exhibition.



~ Alicja Wysocka, charcoal on paper, 2022

Alicja Wysocka
born in Rybnik, Poland. Interested in exploring alternative economic models and common community-based forms of coexistence such as crafts making, rituals, forms of collaborations which might function as a collective therapeutic experience.

Mike Bill
born in Baden, Switzerland. Forever drawn to storytelling. Interested in focusing on the various ways to talk about art—as an art historian, curator, art educator and friend.

APPENDICES OF BETRAYAL

~ Sebastjan Brank

My mother always despised the so-called 'dead fish' handshake. Such a gesture was considered weak, submissive, almost *immoral*. A bad first impression. To assert dominance over the person you are introducing yourself to, you are to squeeze the hand of your potential business partner/friend/carrier of excess social capital/never-to-be-seen-again acquaintance as tightly as possible. No room for uncertainty or doubt. Your hand should not be the weakest link.

That said, it would be redundant to further deconstruct the possible male aggression lurking behind the imperative of a firm handshake—it is indeed quite uncomfortable to have your hand squeezed in a 'dead fish' kind of way (and, more importantly, softness is not necessarily an antidote to aggression).

The basic point is that hands are crucial to human communication, but just like the language we use, they are often prone to slips. They betray our intentions (see: sweaty palms). Like the psychoanalytic drive, they sabotage our well-meaning ego by going their own way. That's why we have to constantly discipline them.

This disciplining of the hands, writes feminist scholar Elizabeth Freeman, reached a new height in the Taylorist manufacturing system of the late nineteenth century, when 'synchronic time enable[d] all bodies—or at least, all of a given part of some bodies, like backs or hands—to be imagined as the same, moving in tandem. We might say, then, that industrial capitalism somatized synchronic time in particularly violent ways.¹

In our content-producing society with its incessant digital output, where our hands are constantly engaged in micro-movement, they are yet again² becoming a source of technological anxiety. Are they mutating slowly, surreptitiously, *unnaturally*? A 2016 study says that 1 in 20 adults in the UK believe that one of their thumbs is bigger than the other - due to swiping on smartphone screens.

Our hands are used to generate surplus profit, and as we type away in meaningless 40-hour weeks, it's no surprise that handicraft is making a comeback.

But the psychoanalyst Darian Leader notes that such 'reclaiming' of hands might have a more ambiguous underside: 'While knitting is now celebrated as a reaction against passive consumerism towards active creation, its appeal is also explained by the very same values that drive consumer society: The importance of personal choice, a sense of autonomy, the pursuit of pleasure and working towards self-improvement.¹³

But no matter how much mastery we would like to impose on our hands, they cannot stop doing things on their own, as if detached from their owners. Evil, supernatural things. In the 1935 pre-code film *Mad Love*, a demented surgeon's obsession with a beautiful actress leads him to secretly replace the mangled hands of her pianist husband's with those of a guillotined murderer with a gift for knife-throwing. Soon, the pianist's new hands develop a mind of their own. Neuroscience, however, has discovered that such partial—albeit much less eerie—autonomy of hands is part and parcel of our design.

The unconscious brain activity leading up to the conscious decision by the subject to flick their wrist begins approximately half a second *before* the subject consciously feels that they had decided to move.

Hands speak through us. How many closeted teenage gay boys are terrified of someone commenting on their limp-wrists when they gesticulate? How petrified are we when we accidentally send a text message with an obscene digital parapraxia instead of a particular word that we intended to use? Hands fail us because—just like the human mind—they are not purely functional.

An excess materializes when we operate these appendages, an excess exploited by artists; sometimes successfully, sometimes less so.

Philosopher Gilbert Simondon gave such abdication of total control in art-making a special place in his writing on aesthetics. When artists make objects, they are not imposing, as is commonly thought, a predetermined form on a passive matter, like in the Aristotelian hylomorphism. Instead, the hands of the artist switch between form-giving and receptivity, adapting themselves while struggling with the material. Such giving up on hands' absolute mastery leads to various contingencies and unexpected results: in short, the stuff of art. The bottom line is that sometimes it is necessary for a situation to get out of hand.

Sebastjan Brank
writer and researcher based in Berlin, Germany.



~ Hands Blessing, Orthodox icon



~ Alicja Wysocka, pencil on paper, 2022

¹ Freeman, Elizabeth. "Synchronic/Anachronic". *Time: A Vocabulary of the Present*, edited by Burges, Joel and Elias, Amy J., New York UP, 2016, pp. 129–43.

² In his 2017 book "Hands: What We Do with Them – and Why" Darian Leader makes this contemporary anxiety unexceptional: "In the 18th century, waving a fan was so popular that "by 1710 there were around 300 different makers in London and there was even a fan tax at mid-century". We may moan now about how people permanently clutch their mobile phones, but back then people made the same complaints about the new technologies of the notebook and watch." in Baggini, Julian. "Hands: What We Do With Them – and Why by Darian Leader – review". *The Guardian*, June 2016.

³ Ibid.

WHAT THE WATER GAVE ME

~ Teodora Jeremić

When I asked you 'are you coming back?' you didn't say anything. Standing on the lake, I suddenly felt completely alone and there was nothing I could do about it. There are no borders, no changes, just water in front of me and a thin, fragile horizon I will never reach. Milky air is moist and I can feel its water in my nostrils and lungs while the soft gray water is splashing on my feet. Where do I go from here? An ontological amphibian.

I am at the flea market. My legs are moving fast, trying to find you in a crowd. With so many people around me, I feel exposed. You were always way in front of me until I finally lost your face. The old rabbi gave me a small bottle of ink. 'To the bottom,' he said. I took a glass of water, stirred it, and drank. As I did, I saw a dark liquid flowing through my whole body. It must feel the same when you realize you are everything. He offered me a piece of paper and I started writing without effort, without a pen. Words were flowing through the tips of my fingers, dripping and falling on the paper. Nearby, there was someone who had done something very good but I don't remember his name.

Later that day, the sun was extraordinarily high. It was dry and hot as I was packing my clothes. Walking through the desert as the roads under my feet were opening up, water started coming. A river underneath became alive, steadily soaking all the roads. There is always the risk of flooding.

I woke up thirsty. Dry lips and a head full of scenes that do not belong to me anymore. Was it all just a dream? This much water scares me every time.

Tiles are cold and smooth under my bare feet.

I remember the lake, I still feel its coldness as I am pouring a glass of water at 3:48 AM. The liquid looks beautiful in the round glass. While drinking I have that innocent realization that when I drink a glass of water the connection of all watery bodies is suddenly amplified and so clear to me. *In this act of ingestion, we come into contact with all our companion species!* I am the river and the fish living in it, and the rain falling in the distance and the sweat on your body that the sea just washed away.

Much like water, dreams and stories are rarely autochthonous as they begin at many places at once. The same holds true for traditions and customs that get so deeply intertwined that it becomes strikingly difficult to try to untangle their point of departure. Since they also go beyond today's national borders, and rather belong to the collective unconscious, we can speak about Balkan or even wider, Slavic, traditions where water is recognized as an extremely important element. There are many perspectives on this matter that one could dive into. From believing in eerie fairy creatures known as Rusalke, through participating in Dodola ceremonies that are meant to end droughts by bringing rain to land and people, to engaging in the belief that water is a living being, and very intimate healing rituals teaching how to let go. I predominantly focus on the latter.

South-Slavic folklore abounds with examples of pre-Christian beliefs and traces of the respect for water and all bodies of water from the earliest days.

It was respected as if it was a living being: when passing by the water,

one should even say good morning, good afternoon, or good evening to her.

This is also why it was believed (in some parts of Serbia it still is) that if nothing is being cooked, the water should not be left on the fire to boil as it should not 'suffer' unnecessarily. Having such an extraordinary, respectful, and distinguished position within the folk tradition, it comes as no surprise that over the years numerous beliefs and rituals with water emerged, most of them based on the idea that *'everything water wants to take away cannot be kept/held'*.

The idea of water taking something away, as well as being the borderland between worlds, followed by a highly developed system of curses, blessings, and wishes, established the belief that evil forces, diseases, and spells cannot return once they cross the border that water represents. Therefore, evil people, diseases, or bad luck are being orally (*'voda te odnela!' - 'go with the water'*) or ritually (by throwing pieces of cloth or coins into the river stream) 'sent' to aquatic areas never to come back.

On the other hand, exactly the same quality that water has, its fluidity, mobility, easiness, and natural ability to find the easiest way through, moving without stopping or getting stuck, makes it one of the most popular elements for rituals that should bring luck to someone. Expressions *'teklo kao voda'* or *'bistro i čisto kao voda'* ('may it flow like water' or 'clear and pure as water') are often followed by the ritual of spilling water after someone. According to folk belief in Bulgaria, North Macedonia and Serbia (but also Turkey, Iraq, Iran, Armenia) spilling water behind the person who leaves on a journey or to do a job, will supposedly bring good luck, and is done so that the travel or the job end happily and smoothly as the water flows.

Although the general attributes of the water are the same, different qualities are added and powers amplified depending on where the water comes from. *'Nenačeta voda'* (*'untouched water'*) is a term used for the water that no one drank or used for anything else as it was brought into the house, but also for the one that comes from the depths of the Earth, from the caves or springs directly from the ground. Such water is considered sacred and was used in most rituals connected to the greatest holidays as Božić (Christmas), Đurđevdan (St. Georges day), Bogojavljenje (Epiphany) but also in different spells around sick people, both for drinking and for washing. The act of washing the face with such water is very important as it reminds us of the prominent role water has in Old-Slavic and Balkan beliefs as a cleanser, purifier, and reliever.

It is important to note that in Balkan traditional songs and beliefs water is modeled as a predominantly female space. The maidens in the lyric poems are the ones that have the access to the creative and healing powers of the water and are the ones who move through the aquatic landscape with ease. It is only them who are given the gift and knowledge of healing and the ability to perform rituals related to water such as the making of *'voda zaborava'* (*'water of oblivion'*). *Water of oblivion* refers to water that is frozen and by the act of freezing acquires mystical properties. In Slavic mythology, this water causes memory loss. According to beliefs, whoever drinks that water loses his memory or is forgotten by everyone. In this sense, the healing manipulation of water and herbs given to the female principal in old traditional songs and beliefs is empowering and a way to use the knowledge and skills of healing to influence and change the pre-given as well as the outcome of one's own destiny.



~ Lamentations, video still, Alicja Wysocka, 2021

In regards to that, I am still contemplating my dream. The overall unrest of it reminded me of an old belief and ritual to heal fears, traumas, and damaged and hurt parts of us, still practiced by old women in some parts of Balkan, called 'salivanje (or izlivanje) straha'. Molten lead is 'thrown' into the water where it is believed that it takes on the shape of someone's fear which could then be destroyed. Everything we hope to deal with is reflected back and will show up in the water. Submerged, fear becomes materialized and therefore weaker. Later on, this water can be drunk, and with it all the pain.

I am not sure how we could drink all the pain and hurt we witness. How do we collectively heal? And how big is the water that could take all our fears, sink them and devour but something did come to my mind. In Serbian, words 'voda' (water) and 'voditi' (showing the way) have the same root. Could it show us the way to a radically different future?

It is flowing, not forcing.

Teodora Jeremić
is a curator interested in community building, believes in healing and often makes decisions by drawing Tarot cards. Based in Belgrade, Serbia.

¹ Astrida Neimanis, *Bodies of Water: Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology*, Bloomsbury Publishing, London, 2017, pg 86

THE WORLD DESCRIBED AS WET

~ Neva Lukić

This year the artist Alicja Wysocka spent several months as an artist in residence at Hestia Art Gallery & Exhibitions Bureau in Belgrade. The city, once the capital of Yugoslavia (the South Slavic land), is situated on two rivers –the Sava and the Danube– which makes it the perfect location for the artist to continue her artistic dealing with the springs of water and public, thermal baths (banya). On the first day of spring, Wysocka organized a performative group event called *Spring Equinox Celebration* on the bank of the Danube River which started with her performance of dropping eggs into the Danube, celebrating fertility, light and renewal. The celebration of the spring equinox, as is well known, was celebrated in ancient times by the pagan communities, and in Christianity it has transformed into Easter, while the celebration of the winter solstice is what we celebrate as Christmas today. The pagans lived according to nature's cycles, and depended completely on the mercy of its unpredictability and, therefore, the exchange of seasons was how they 'walked through the year.' This is also the case with the Slavic pagans and Slavic mythology, but somehow we still manage to disregard it. There is the need to deepen our knowledge about Pagan Slavs ways of life, what they believed in and what they celebrated. We get to know this mythology when wandering down the indirect routes, through the stories of the Croatian children's writer Ivana Brlić Mažuranić or through the more recent research by Croatian ethnologist Vitomir Belaj and the Croatian linguist, classical philologist, and Indo- European scholar, Slavist and Indologist Radoslav Katičić.

Unfortunately, one of the reasons for this lack of information is that not many sources of Slavic mythology have survived since their roots are, understandably, based on the pre-Indo-European models. As Vitomir Belaj has shown in his book *Hod kroz godinu (A Walk Through the Year, 2007)* that Slavs and Old Croats had come into contact with Christianity at a time when they did not use written language and therefore, most of their traditions and myths were lost after the conversion to the new religion. The extensive research and the reconstruction of Proto-Slavic ceremonial texts, sacral poetry of mythological content and Slavic pre-Christian faith were conducted by Radoslav Katičić in a series of books *Tragovima svetih pjesama naše prekršćanske starine (In the traces of the sacred songs of our pre-Christian antiquity): Božanski boj (The Divine Battle, 2008); Zeleni lug (Green Grove, 2010); Gazdarica pred vratima (Landlady at the Door, 2011); Vilinska vrata (Fairy Gates, 2014) and Naša stara vjera (Our Old Faith, 2017)*. By reading these sacred songs we learn that in Slavic –as well as in various other mythologies– the Earth and the world are described as wet.

Holy Yegorije, God's locksmith, took the key, opened the country, opened the country, let out the dew. – Holy Elijah, where are you going? – I walked on the meadows, on dewy grass, walked across the fields – germinated wheat.

These were the lyrics of hope and cry, the rhythmic prayers which invoked water to impregnate the arid soil. Also, whatever touches the hem of the dress worn by the goddess of fertility *Mokoš*, remains wet. And the god of fertility and

harvest *Jarilo* (Yegorije) who was replaced by St. George (popular *Green Jura*) walks through the annual circle beneath the *Tree of the World* (in many mythologies, and in Slavic too, there is *The Tree of the World* which connects the three levels of creation, the Underworld, the Earth, and the Heavenly Realm). *Green Jura* should bring the first April dew believed to germinate all plant life and to have healing properties.

There used to be a custom to send the children across the fields barefoot, treading on the first dew in spring.

Perun, the supreme heavenly god of thunder and lightning, placed at the heights atop the *World Tree*, is connected to the custom called *dodola ili prporuša*, a pilgrimage at the time of drought when rain is invoked. *Veles*, the god of cattle, although *Perun*'s opposite, the ruler of the underworld, was also connected to water, soil and moisture since he ruled the realm of the dead from the damp roots of the *World Tree*.

According to a myth, *Veles* also stole *Perun*'s cattle, wife and offspring, and according to another, he only stole his wife, which angered *Perun*, who furiously chased him around the world. Since then, lightning is said to strike where *Perun* thinks *Veles* is hidden.

There are always different versions of a particular myth, and these myths can only be reconstructed by studying important sources like local traditions, and by connecting the fragments from folk songs which were later transferred into 'artificial' poetry. As professor Radoslav Katičić once wrote: *Everything is open before you. Get behind the wheel and follow the path of Mokoš and Perun. Who is stopping you?! Read the layers of our old faith from the land, at first with a book in hand, and then, when you learn how to read, independently. It is possible, I tell you. We, feeling our old faith, should just go with the flow, should let the river guide us through the walk of seasons and Slavic gods.*

Neva Lukić

is a poet, short fiction writer and curator from Croatia, currently based in Belgrade.



My grandmother's dream

“I ja tako gaziš kroz vodu, a voda ladna, led ledena. Spila, počas.”¹

~ Jelena Milijć

I heard these words so many times. I grew up in the 90s in a house full of people, spending most of the time playing outside with my sister, cousins, and other kids from the neighborhood. Or with my grandmother listening to the stories about her childhood in Bosnia. She was completely uneducated and she was a great storyteller. Whenever I was bored I would come to her and say ‘Tell me something’, and she would ask ‘Tell you about what?’ I would say ‘Tell me about when you were a kid’.

My whole family moved from Bosnia and Herzegovina to Vojvodina, in the northern part of Serbia during the 60s. Both my parents were born in the village called Krupa na Vrbasu in the mountains nearby Banja Luka. The village's name refers to the two rivers beside which it was settled. They moved to another village on the slopes of the only mountain in this flat land of Vojvodina. There were no rivers there, but only a stream valley, which was dry most of the year. During my childhood, we rarely went to Bosnia. First, because of the war. Later, because there was no money. Someone from the house would go if some good opportunity arose or was forced by some sad occasion. Grandma mostly stayed at home and talked more and more nostalgically about *that* Bosnia, *that* childhood and *those* rivers that she mostly called simply “a water”. Somehow, whatever story she was telling she had to mention that cold, fast, and heavy water. Some of the stories I remember vividly. One time, she was going to take a bath in the river with other young women, but they had to be on their guard as boys wanted to sneak up and take away their robes so they would see them naked.

Or, she had to have her tooth extracted, so she went with her aunt somewhere near the river to meet the guy with the tongs, and while he was kneeling above her she was listening to the gurgling of the water. Once while she was tending sheep, a wolf appeared and grabbed and carried away one of the lambs, all the way across the river. She was already a young woman, washing laundry at the river, when my grandfather passed by. She saw him for the first time and was attracted to him immediately. She grabbed a bucket of water and poured it on him to draw his attention to her. Somehow, the entire world that she was picturing in her stories was bordered by the water. Sometimes I think about what she would be thinking about the sea or the ocean that she never saw in all her life.

As she was getting older she was speaking about those rivers more and more. And not only speaking, but also dreaming. Most mornings she would start with the story about last night's dream. Eventually, it became clear that she will never see it again. I like to think that the night she died, she dreamed of entering the cold and refreshing water of Krupa.

Jelena Milijć
cultural worker, bartender, and artist based in Belgrade, Serbia, but she would like to be a housewife.

¹ And so, I am wading through the water, and the water is cold, ice-cold. I had a dream last night.

36.9°C

~ Vera Mlechevska

Public baths were a hygienic and social necessity for many people in my childhood. Accordingly, both my grandmothers took me to the bath on Saturdays. One of my grandmothers didn't even have a bathroom in her home near the public bath in the Ovcha Kupel district, Sofia. My other grandmother just preferred the public bathroom, she said you couldn't bathe that well at home.

I personally didn't like this habit very much, I felt even smaller and even more naked and exposed—shaking like a sparrow in the bathroom's vestibule. I was purely and simply dying of shame and cold. At least, until the darkness of warm steam diluted by yellow dim light covered me softly. Fuzzy outlines of figures, mostly of elderly women, begin to emerge in the warmth, the indecipherable echo of voices and splashing water flooding in, ricocheting off all the walls in the bathing room. It was common for one woman asking another to scratch and wipe her back, which would lead eventually to a small chat.

In fact, the only thing I liked, and still do, is the pool. 37°C warm water envelops your body and anaesthetises you to a weightless state, like you're the baby in a womb. There are speculations that life originated in such extreme conditions of a hot mineral spring and lying in one, I fully believe it. I have tried to look into this information¹ and form my own opinion, to separate the truth from the falsehood, and to consider whether it is possible that *polymers encapsulated in lipids can be synthesized by cycles of hydration and dehydration to form protocells*—that means the very first cells.

I'd like to find out where we came from, how and why we came to be, and what the point of all this is, but I'll have to find out only by the means of my limited senses.

On sunny days, the rays that pass through the bathroom window cast a projection on the wall; a reflection of the water's movement—curves that bend in different rhythms and sizes like music waves that we can only see but not hear. I thought I saw the sound of pizzicato on a violin as an elderly, pink-skinned Venus was reborn and slowly emerged from the pool.

Me and other kids were hanging in the park around the bathhouse in Ovcha Kupel at the time when Kashpirovsky² appeared—he was doing healing sessions on the Bulgarian and Russian state TV and urging people to put a glass of water in front of the screen. The society of the spectacle was put under a new anaesthetic. People who had lost hope stood prostrate in front of the TV sets, indulging in the slow and hypnotic speech in Russian and soothing music. Finally they drank a cold glass of water, believing that a miraculous healing awaited them.

The children and I always watched with great curiosity the police patrol that would come to arrest some voyeur who had climbed a tree to watch the women sunbathing on the nudist (Eve beach) beach. The voyeurs had made small holes in the wall so as not to be spotted above the level of the wall. A timeless re-enactment of the art world's first installation of Marcel Duchamp's *Étant donné* finishing with police arrest.

Today, many of these baths are dilapidated or crumbling buildings. Like many other things, collective duties and pleasures began to degrade with the *transition* period. They are not necessarily an invention of the left socialist project, on the contrary, going to the bath or the cinema dates back much further.

Private bathrooms reflect this end of shared experience in a specific way.

With privatisation, collective bathing was replaced by wellness and spa. Collective rituals have become totally class-divided: Velingrad, the spa capital of Bulgaria, is a vivid illustration for this change. The middle class enjoys clean and abundantly chlorinated mineral pools in newly built all-inclusives in often kitschy hotels, while ethnic minorities have the squalid and dilapidated baths languishing in bourgeois ruin.

By the way, not a few towns in Bulgaria exist or at least flourish thanks to the Romans' interest in thermal baths. Perceived as great luxury, Pautalia and Serdica (Sofia) were populated around the *thermae*, and the most representative ruins in Hisarya also date from that time.

Trimontium (Plovdiv) must have had great fame during the Roman era, as it had a water supply and sewage system, a stadium, baths, theatres, temples and public buildings. With this long history in mind, the mineral waters could be said to have given rise not only to biological life, but also to social and cultural life in some of the Roman provinces.

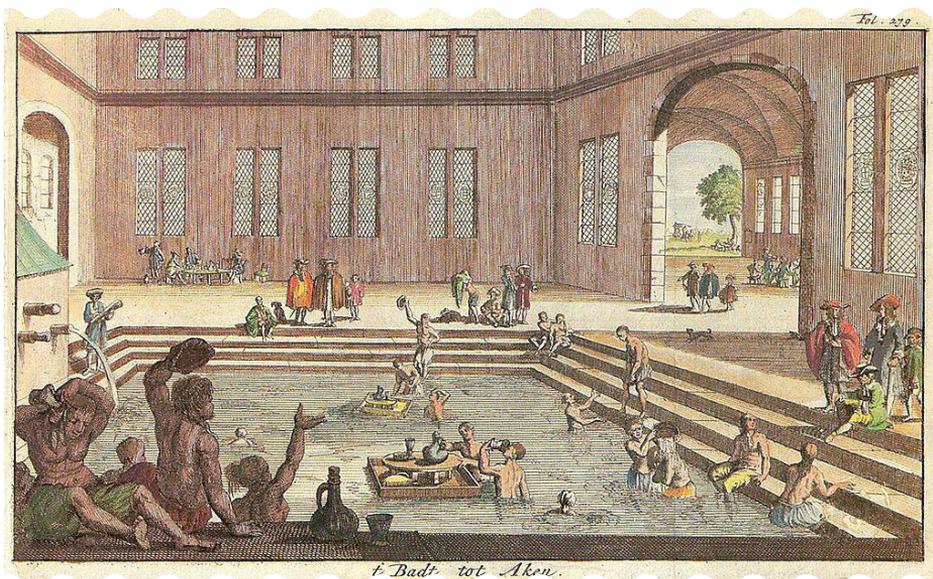
Alicja Wysocka pursues the Eros of collective ritual in union with water as a means of healing and regeneration. All these water deities who left the Roman *thermae*, or else the spirit of shared experience in its social aspect, are the subject of her search in her journey through different countries and historical periods. She seeks those ritual practices that can rejuvenate our spirit, tired of constantly throwing itself into the bright new future. A spirit that could give and receive care and rest.

¹ Bruce Damer and David Deamer, The Hot Spring Hypothesis for an Origin of Life, *ASTROBIOLOGY* Volume 20, Number 4, 2020 Mary Ann Liebert, Inc. DOI: 10.1089/ast.2019.2045

<https://www.liebertpub.com/doi/10.1089/ast.2019.2045>

² <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/jun/06/marc-bennetts-anatoly-kashpirovsky-russia-rasputin>

Vera Mlechevska
*independent curator based in Sofia,
Bulgaria.*



~ Aachen Kaiserbad, 1682

POSTCARDS FROM POLISH MINERAL WATER RESORTS



Ecology Institute PAN
Łomianki
Dziekanów Leśny, 1/3

Kudowa Zdrój 19.08.1974

Best wishes from Kudowa-Zdrój
sending Teresa.

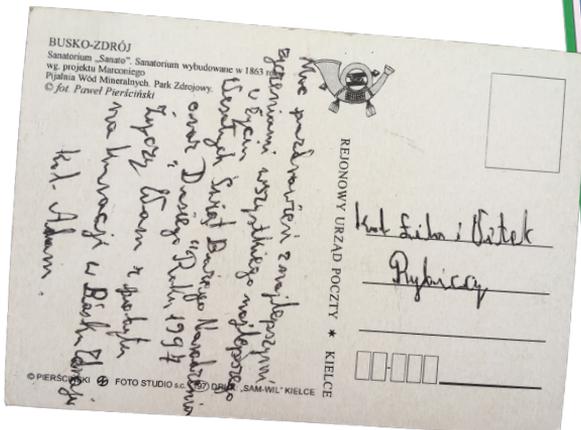


Friends Lila i Wittek Rybiccy

Busko-Zdrój, 1996

Regards and best wishes and all the best in life. Merry
Christmas and Happy New Year 1997 I wish you from
my treatment at Busko-Zdrój.

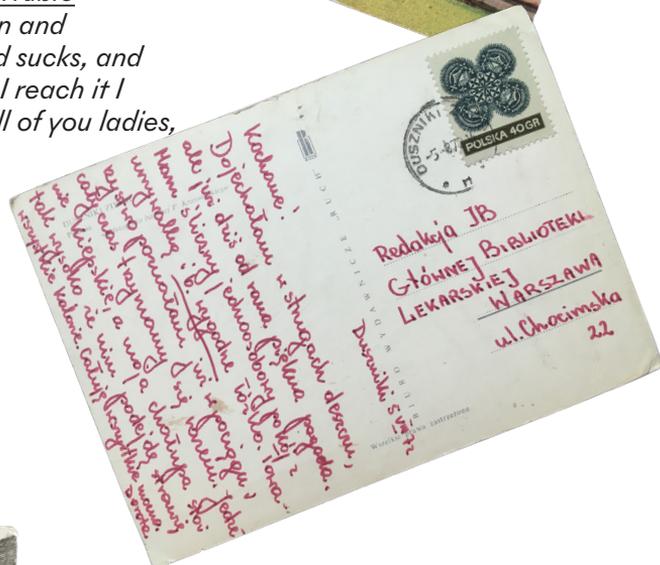
Friend Adam



To
 Publish House of Medical Central Library
 Warsaw, Chocimska street, 22

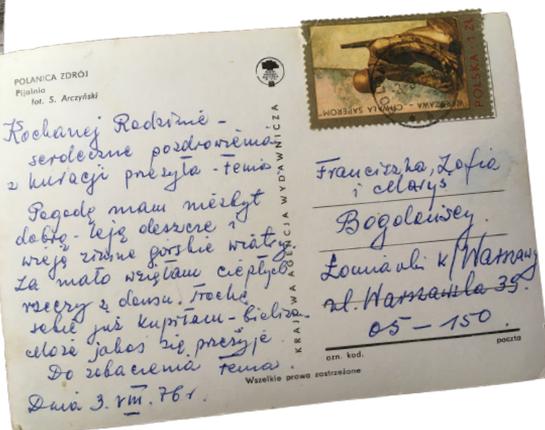
Duszniki Zdrój, 5.08.1972

Dearests!
 I reached the place in the heavy rain, but today is beautiful weather from the early morning. I have a cute one person room with a sink and very comfortable bed.. I met companions already in the train and we've hung out together since then. Food sucks, and my house is placed so high, that before I reach it I digest all the calories. Warm kisses to all of you ladies, Dorota.



To
 Franciszka, Zofia, Maryś Bogdańscy
 Łomianki, Warszawska Street 39

Polanica Zdrój, 3.08.1976



To my dear family – Warm regards from the treatment sending – Fenia
 The weather is not that good – there is heavy rain and cold mountain winds. I did not take enough warm clothes. I already bought a bit – underwear. Maybe I will survive somehow. See you, Fenia.

BRANCHIAL CLEFT CYST

My Branchial Cleft Cyst is finally removed. It was/is over two months of struggle with the healthcare system both in Europe and Africa, struggle with our own weaknesses, loneliness, fears, but also it kept reminding me that we used to have branchia and that the earliest evidence of life on Earth was discovered in a 3.7 billion-year-old rock. The ambivalent feelings were even more strong when a Ghanaian nurse was praying over my bed. The prayer of a religion which is only two thousand years old, the religion which rejected evolution theory. A religion forced on both Ghanaians and my Slavic ancestors.

3.01.2019, Gliwice, Poland



C L E A N I N G R I T U A L

Olá Alicja bom dia!

Hello Alicja, good morning!

(...) Recomendo que você tome alguns cuidadinhos e em 1 mês já estará vendo o resultado do tratamento: 1. Tome banho todos os dias (ao menos uma vez ao dia) com esse sabão preto africano. Na hora que você estiver se esfregando pense em tudo que você sabe que está te fazendo mal e ACREDITE (isso é o mais importante) repito ACREDITE que esse sabonete vai limpar sua áurea e te deixar leve das cargas negativas que estão grudadas em você. 2. Todo domingo, por 1 mês coloque essa pedrinha azul (um pedacinho da pedra) em um balde de água (ou em uma garrafa pet de 2 litros) e deixe o pedacinho do bloco dissolver. Assim que dissolver tome um banho da cabeça aos pés com essa 'água azul'. Ela também vai te ajudar a se livrar desse peso que estás carregando. Espero de coração que essas dicas possam te ajudar. Sempre que precisar de um conselho ou ajudinha espiritual podes contar comigo. Um abraço fraterno, muito amor e paz

(...) I recommend that you take some care and in one month you will already be seeing the results of the treatment: 1. Shower every day (at least once a day) with this black African soap. When you're scrubbing, think about everything you know is hurting you and BELIEVE (this is the most important thing) I repeat BELIEVE that this soap will clean your aura and leave you light of the negative loads that are stuck to you. 2. Every Sunday, for 1 month, place this blue pebble (a small piece of the stone) in a bucket of water (or in a 2 liter PET bottle) and let the small piece of the block dissolve. As soon as it dissolves, take a bath from head to toe with this blue water. It will also help you get rid of that weight you are carrying. I sincerely hope that these tips can help you. Whenever you need advice or spiritual help, you can count on me. A fraternal hug, much love and peace

Agatha

18.05.2016, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil



~ Zdrój, video still, Alicja Wysocka in collaboration with Iza Koczanowska, 2022

ALICJA WYSOCKA'S WATER PROJECTS



~ Alicja Wysocka, performance, Æther, Sofia, Bulgaria 2021



~ *Lamentations*, Jo-anne gallery, Frankfurt am Main, 2021



~ *Morana*. performance, Future School - Korean Pavilion, Venice Biennale of Architecture, 2021



~ Alicja Wysocka, *Lamentations*, Wunderkammer, Stuttgart, 2021



~ Alicja Wysocka, *Lamentations*, Akademie Schloss Solitude, Stuttgart, 2021



~ Alicja Wysocka, 'Manual', 'Touch Release' group show, Kunstverein Wiesbaden, 2021



~ Alicja Wysocka, 'Zdró', fffredrich gallery, 2022



~ *Zdrój*, video still, Alicja Wysocka in collaboration with Iza Koczanowska, 2022



~ Alicja Wysocka, *Equinox*, Nowogród, 2021, photo by Marek Czarny



~ Alicja Wysocka, *Eggs Letters to the River*, participatory performance for March Equinox, Belgrade, 2022

PHOTOS



~ Orthodox Church in Belgrade, Serbia



~ Srpске Toplice, Banja Luka, photos by Alicja Wysocka



~ Drinking fountains in Montenegro



~ Drinking fountains in Dolomites, Italy, photo by Alicja Wysocka



~ chapel in Dolomites, Italy, photos by Alicja Wysocka



~ Methana Volcanic Spa, Greece



~ Mostar, Bosnia and Herzegovina



~ Mineralni izvor "Jezero", Vrnjačka Banja, Serbia, photo by Alicja Wysocka



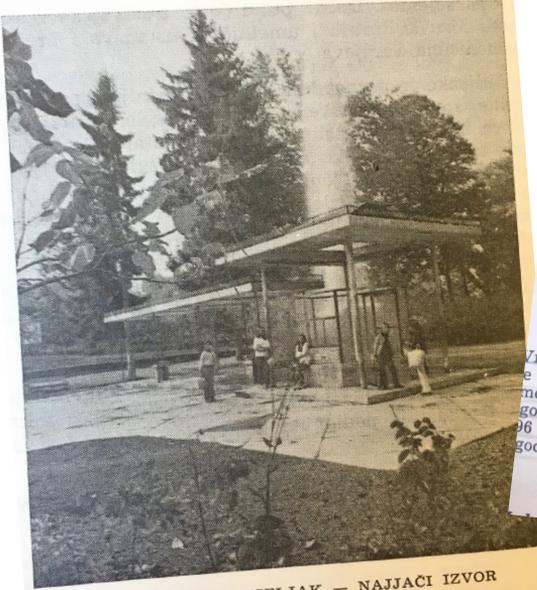
~ Allan Chumak, TV session "charging" jars of water, around 1990s, source: internet



~ Mineralni izvor "Jezero", Vrnjačka Banja, Serbia, photo by Alicja Wysocka

Archival Material

...ske banje. Rešeno je snabdevanje električnom energijom, proširen
vod i kanalizacija, izgrađeno je više zdravstvenih, privrednih i pro
adnih organizacija i institucija.



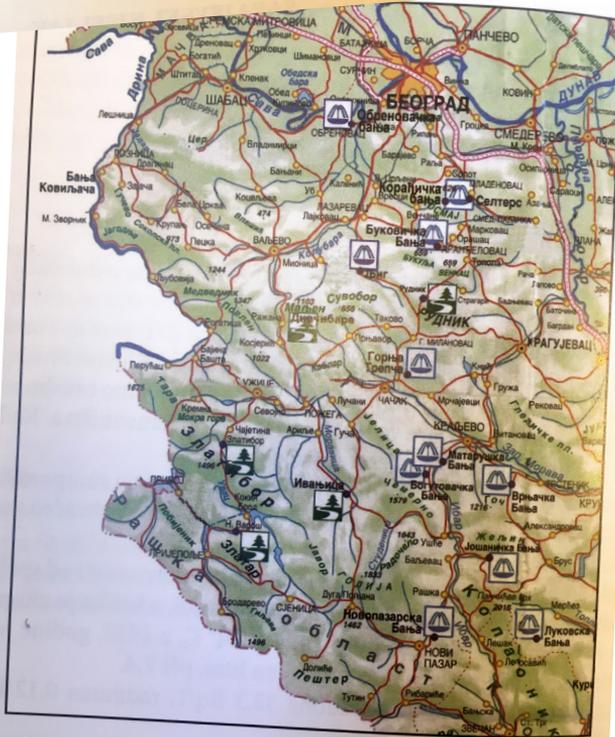
SARAJEVSKI KISELJAK — NAJJAČI IZVOR



VRNJAČKA BANJA

Vrnjačka Banja nije samo prirodno ležište. Ona je i najveće balne
e Jugoslavije. Iako ima samo oko 7.000 stalnih stanovnika, ona je
među našim, inače, populaciono malim banjskim mestima, ona je
godine živela 542 stanovnika, 1890. 762, a u 272 kuće naselja 1910
96 meštana. Banja je 1948. godine imala 2.355 stanovnika, 1961. 4.8
godine 6.506 stanovnika u 2.365 stanova.

1866 / TABLICA
1890 / 542
1910 / 762



Slika 5.3. Lokacija banja Centralne Srbije (Šumadijsko-Kopaonička oblast)

~ from the book 'Banje Jugoslavije', Belgrade, Serbia, 1980

Just like a stream that branches out, Alicja Wysocka's artistic practice reaches into a multitude of fields.

The artist's thinking is shaped by her interest in interrelations, connections and gatherings. Thus, it comes as no surprise that her exhibition ZDRÓJ is a multilayered undertaking, a delta that offers different streams to follow.

However, there is a specific questionnaire that grounds ZDRÓJ: What are the myths people have created around water? What forms do they take?

The historical examples Alicja Wysocka is referring to are closely tied to her recent partaking in residency programmes in Belgrade and Sofia, and to the many road trips across Eastern Europe that started from there. Voyages on which the artist has crossed paths with different traditions and phenomena relating to water. From architectural ruins and intact resorts built around local bathing cultures to people kissing orthodox icons before drinking thermal water.

From self-proclaimed "healers" Allan Chumak and Zbigniew Nowak "charging" water with their bare hands spread out to the people eagerly watching them being broadcasted on national TV stations during the Perestroika period.

It is phenomena like these that are at the centre of this exhibition. Moments in which beliefs and water overlap, and the liquids are made "holy", are seen and kissed as relics.

In order to bring her impressions to life in various media, Alicja Wysocka has collaborated with Iza Koczanowska and Ari-Pekka Leinonen: What does believing look like? How does it sound? And what happens to a belief once it is long gone?

Steadily, water takes its course. And naturally, people gather near the spring.

q c k n o ш л ε v g e m e n t

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this book was made on the occasion of the exhibition:

ZDRÓJ

Alicja Wysocka

16-23.10.2022

fffredrich

Alte Mainzer Gasse 4-6

Frankfurt am Main, Germany

special thanks to

Stefka Tsaneva, Goethe Institut Sofia, Sunčica Šido, Goethe Institut Belgrade, Ari-Pekka Leinonen, Mike Bill, Teresa Heinzelmann, Iza Koczanowska, Łukasz Żuber, Zishi Han, Voin de Voin, Vera Mlechevska, Archive of Jugoslovenska kinoteka, Akademie Schloss Solitude, Hestia Belgrade, Ziemniaki i Foundation

second edition

50 copies

print: Staedelschule, Frankfurt am Main, Germany

February 2023

ISBN: 978-83-931273-2-0

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**ALICJA
WYSOCKA**