

WHERE THE RIVERS MEET

À LA CONFLUENCE
DES RIVIÈRES



where the rivers meet
exhibition leaflet

An exploration along the rivers that flow in Atlanta and Marseille - a the portrait of the riverside communities in their watersheds by photographers Virginie Drujon-Kippelen (Atlanta) and Geoffroy Mathieu (Marseille);

The story of the ecological, political and poetic rehabilitation of these rivers by members of the riverside communities, and how artists reinforce local action.

A story by Hannah S. Palmer.

Flint River, Atlanta, *Lost in sight* by Virginie Drujon-Kippelen



Les Aygalades, Marseille, *Mauvaise réputation* by Geoffroy Mathieu



Where the Rivers Meet is presented by Villa Albertine and the Franco-German Cultural Center of Atlanta, as part of *City/Cité - Towards Earthly Cities*, the Atlanta Design Festival and France-Atlanta.

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Where the Rivers Meet is a tribute to the actions of Finding the Flint and the Atlanta Creek League (Atlanta), the Gammare's collective (Marseille) and all the riversides' grass-roots communities elsewhere on earth.

City/Cité - Towards Earthly Cities (Atlanta, Oct 11-22, 2023) is a program inviting professionals from Atlanta and Marseille and the public to learn together about urban ecology and the future of our cities. Associate curator: Alexandre Field (Marseille).



WHAT GOOD IS A RIVER?

In Atlanta, there is a big river, but I hardly ever see it. My drinking water flows from a distant reservoir in the hinterlands, processed through some obscure technology and delivered to my faucet. Electric energy comes from coal-fired power plants located on another river somewhere, I don't know where. I can't swim or fish or kayak in a natural body of water anywhere near me. So what good is a river?

In cities around the world, where we have effectively engineered a landscape divorced from rivers, artists and advocates are uncovering and celebrating lost waters. I'm one of many local water advocates who find storm drains and creeks irresistible. In my neighborhood, I've been immersed in a years-long effort to restore the Flint River's headwaters at the world's busiest airport. My social media feeds are full of similar projects in Baltimore, Queens, Louisville, Greenville, and more. It starts with digging up river stories from the past, then sketching renderings of the future, and leads to digging up concrete to touch the water.

I've been "finding the Flint" long enough to ponder what it is we are doing when we go on this treasure hunt. Is a lost creek a novelty, some romantic notion from our childhood? Do our animal bodies crave water or is it simply gravity pulling me down under bridges? These urban creeks are littered and unpredictable. What good is a river?

When I visited Marseille in April 2023 to experience Les Aygalades, an urban river at the heart of an ongoing artist-led restoration project, I asked myself this question. Les Aygalades, like the Flint, is tucked away out of sight, corseted in canals on the industrial edge of the city. What good is a river in Marseille when you can swim in the Mediterranean Sea? What good is a river when people are struggling to escape poverty and violence, to find jobs, education, and healthcare?

I met the photographer Geoffroy Mathieu for a driving tour of this river. As we loaded into his Volkswagen, I spotted the river maps and bright yellow safety vests—the same items that cluttered the trunk of my car. We started our tour at the mouth of the river, where it meets the port of Marseille. Mathieu pointed out a strange rectangular trench between a row of parked cars and a vacant lot. We leaned over an iron barricade to watch our reflection warble in water eight feet below. To call it a river was a stretch. It was like an open casket.

When he pulled out a laminated map of Les Aygalades, I allowed myself to be convinced.

Later, we visited La Cité des Arts des la Rue, an enormous public arts center built in 1999 on an old soap factory site. The stream snaked through a ravine behind the building, forming the western edge of the property. Since 2013, activists, sculptors, dancers, poets, and musicians have transformed this marginal greenspace into a cultural playground for the community. They named it the Jardin de la Cascade.

Le collectif des Gammars, the artists/activists at the center of this revitalization, named themselves for the gammare, a tiny freshwater crustacean that lives in the creek. They recounted a familiar story of urban stream syndrome. Les Aygalades absorbed aluminum leaching from a pharmaceutical factory upstream, the Flint contended with jet fuel from the airport. Different contaminants, same result: a complete erasure of the nuisance river.

Why do we need these small streams? One reason is climate change. Last month, one furious rainstorm stalled out over downtown Atlanta, dumping 3 hours of rainfall water in 15 minutes. The areas that flooded matched the corridors of historic streams. Marseille, on the other hand, is stressed by drought due to the loss of snowpack upstream in the mountains. The old infrastructures of Marseille and Atlanta are insufficient in the face of the climate crisis.

Beyond their value as natural infrastructures, what is the value of public greenspace and access to the streams? What good is a small trickle of water in a big city? Where we could invite the community to step into the muffled green light of the forest, watch hawks and tadpoles, maybe paint or pray. Le jardin shows what can happen when people have access to a creek. This place flourished as an outdoor classroom, art gallery, a patio for picnics and seminars. Les gammars created a joyful, relaxing pocket of forest to tell a new story for this lost cause river. Wherever there is water, there is life. What could be more precious?

Hannah S. PALMER