

Becoming with the Meuse A Dialogue on Political Legibility, Multiplicity, and Spatial Design

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Abstract Based on a cycling fieldwork journey along the Meuse (November 2024), this paper asks why Rights of Nature initiatives in Europe lag despite existing legal vocabularies and tools for river subjecthood. The promise to reconfigure responsibility and long-term stewardship often stalls between recognition and practice. The blockage is not only juridical. It is spatial and political, epistemic and ontological. Spatial design is proposed as a mediating political practice that can stage situated encounters, develop representational formats that sustain plurality in public life, and build interfaces through which claims can land, travel, and persist.

Keywords Environmental humanities. Rights of Nature. Political legibility. Meuse. Spatial design. River personhood. Altered nature.

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1 Prologue at the Mouth, Where Endings Refuse to End

Hoek van Holland, late November. The beach is a pale strip of sand and foam, a net of footprints the wind keeps softening, erasing, and making again. I wheel my bicycle to the water's edge and stand with the North Sea in front of me. Behind me, the river that has accompanied me for days continues in its own tempo, carrying inland sediments, stories, thresholds, and the faint taste of industry towards the tides. As the journey ends, the river returns as dense, stratified memories: a lock gate gathering waste at its doors, rhythms of the wind caught by reeds, a phrase spoken by a stranger and carried for kilometres, as if it had lodged itself in the spokes. Looking out to sea, I notice how the mind keeps trying to make a single account out of these fragments; gathering what is multiple into something that can stand alone [fig. 1].

I: So this is where you disappear.

Meuse: Disappearance is a human word. At the mouth I mix – brackish, tidal, worked by gates and dredging. I will continue.

I: And what am I meant to carry back? A map? A theory? A policy suggestion?

Meuse: Carry back what resisted becoming one story.

I had come to the Meuse with a research question and a familiar reflex as an urban designer: to make sense, to render legible, to build a solid argument. But the river did not meet me as a stable object. It met me as weather and risk, as municipal ambition and competing priorities, as a fisher's grief, as the hush of reedbeds and the percussion of barges. Not one thing seen from different angles, but a field of coexisting realities produced in different practices and negotiated in the same institutional world.

I: Then which of these are you?

Meuse: All of them. As practices that shape what I can do, and what can be done to me.

I draw on legibility, multiplicity, and political appearance to describe this condition: how institutions simplify rivers into governable objects, and how rivers nevertheless persist as plural beings enacted through different practices. The design question follows: what representational and procedural forms can hold that plurality, while allowing the river to appear as a subject in administrative, legal, and civic life?

What follows keeps the mediation visible.



Figure 1 *Arrival*. 2024. Hoek van Holland beach, The Netherlands. Photo by Author

2 The Issue of Political Legibility

Rights of Nature (RoN) initiatives ask a deceptively simple question: who or what can count as a subject of politics? The question appears legal, yet it is also sensorial, political, and spatial: a right exists in practice when it registers as meaningful in public life and can be exercised institutionally. Similarly, a subject only becomes political when it can appear and can be described in ways institutions can work with. Otherwise, the right remains aspirational and the subject remains symbolic, however radical the declaration.

Haraway is helpful here because she lays the groundwork for intra-action, a term further developed by Barad that refuses the idea that subjects pre-exist their relations (Haraway 1998; 2003; 2016; Barad 2007). Beings do not arrive as ready-made entities waiting to be recognised; they become through situated practices that bind and separate, train attention, and distribute obligations. Becoming, in this sense, is becoming-with, and political capacity depends on response-ability: the cultivated capacity to notice, answer, and stay accountable over time. The question, then, is how a river comes to count as a subject in the sites where decisions are made. Political legibility is produced through the work of giving the river a public voice: assembling knowledge and evidence into forms that allow

its persona, needs, and claims to be articulated, contested, and sustained in institutional life.

Meuse: I am readable in many ways. Which do your institutions read?

I: I came to you with the same question.

Europe is not short of environmental law (Darpö 2021). River basin management plans under the Water Framework Directive, flood risk management under the Floods Directive, water quality standards, habitat directives, municipal zoning, industrial discharge permits, cross-border commissions, and a dense ecology of expertise already govern rivers. Yet this governmental abundance exacerbates, rather than resolves, the problem of political legibility. The issue is not whether the river is known, but which versions of the river are allowed to count in decision-making, and which forms of harm, responsibility, and obligation remain outside the frame.

Northwestern Europe is an interesting laboratory for this tension. Decades of control-oriented water management that prioritised predictability, safety, and efficiency, has gradually displaced everyday practices of reading and responding to rivers. Skills once central to living with water, such as interpreting bird flight, reading cloud formations, soil moisture, or subtle changes on the water surface, have lost political and epistemic relevance. In their place, digital models, centralised monitoring systems, and technocratic governance frameworks promise predictability and control.

Recent years of climate disruption and ecological instability have exposed the limits of this approach. The Meuse floods of 2021, which affected communities across Germany, Belgium, and the Netherlands, exemplify how rivers increasingly behave in feral ways that exceed predictive control (Tsing et al. 2024). These events reveal that social life (which knowledges are valued, which skills are cultivated), politics (risk governance frameworks, market-oriented river uses, technocratic planning regimes), and space (canalised riverbeds, sluice-and-weir complexes, embankments) are deeply intertwined. Infrastructures and spatial plans do not merely respond to rivers; they materialise specific socio-political paradigms (de Jong et al. 2024).

This matters directly for Rights of Nature. Rights are increasingly proposed within governance systems that continue to conceptualise rivers as objects to be managed rather than as subjects with whom relations are negotiated. In that context, rights risk being applied to an already standardised account of the river, one shaped by existing categories, metrics, and administrative routines. Without a relational understanding of what the river is and how it lives through these

arrangements, RoN may have limited capacity to alter the terms on which decisions are currently made.

Meuse: If I am already managed through plans, directives, and thresholds, why add rights at all?

I: Because management can be efficient and still be indifferent.

To speak of political illegibility is not to claim that institutions do not know the river. It is to argue that dominant ways of knowing it leave little room for the river as a subject that can make claims. A compliance threshold can be met while an ecosystem quietly degrades (de Lucia 2015). A flood wall can be safe while it severs civic encounters. A riverfront plan can be green and still turn the river into scenery. The rights idiom becomes legible only where human and more-than-human agencies are first attended to, then translated and composed into a shared account of responsibilities and claims, rather than being absorbed as technical side effects.

This is where the altered nature condition matters most.¹ The Meuse is neither a pristine entity nor a simple infrastructure. It is a living river assemblage repeatedly composed through intervention [fig. 2]. Embankments and dredging works, extraction, and river regulation do not simply sit beside the river. They enter it as material memory, reorganising the river's capacities: how water moves, where sediment settles, which species can persist, who can reach the banks, and which futures are imaginable. In political terms, the river's subjecthood is spatiotemporal: topos and habitat, ecological process and built infrastructure, sedimented layers and geopolitical arena.



Figure 2 *First Encounters*. 2024. Altered nature (left): canalisation near Saint-Germain-sur-Meuse where green riverbanks overlap with sand extraction in the background; Sensing the river without seeing it in Orbigny-au-Mont (right): fog in air, condensation on my skin.
Photos by Author

1 "Altered nature" refers to the fact that 'pristine nature' is a political and cultural fiction, and that humans are never outside nature but always part of its ongoing composition (Cronon 1996; Haraway 2003; 2016; Latour 2004; 2005).

Meuse: You look for a subject. Where do you think my subjecthood sits?

I: In the multiplicity of your relations.

From this perspective, the contribution of spatial design to Rights of Nature becomes clearer. It lies less in communicating rights after the fact, and more in helping to establish the ground on which rights can be articulated in the first place. This involves clarifying what the problem is and for whom, making the relevant human and more-than-human agencies perceptible, and articulating the spatiotemporal dimensions through which harm, alteration, and dependency unfold. It also involves tracing how the river has been altered and where acceptable limits might be drawn, so that claims and responsibilities can be specified with precision.

This entails staging situated encounters and devising forms of representation that keep plurality operative in governance and reject reducing it to unity. It requires organising the material and procedural conditions through which the river can be met and attended to. It becomes not only an abstraction in plans or datasets, but a presence in institutional life. It also means developing modes of witnessing and articulation that can travel into decision-making without flattening the river, making change perceptible over time, holding together ecological processes and lived consequences, and allowing claims, injuries, and responsibilities to be argued and acted upon. A river cannot be captured by a single definition. It is not only hazard or resource, but habitat and living body. Governance tends to stabilise one dominant version. Spatial design – among other fields of expertise – can keep multiple versions in play and should be held to it. It can bring those versions on the table, making it possible to negotiate responsibilities and claims without collapsing difference into a single authorised account.

3 Approach and Method: Travelling with Partial Sight

The research informing this article developed through a ten-month design research process that started with a two-and-a-half-week fieldwork journey along, and with, the Meuse. From 10 to 26 November 2024, J. Schasfoort travelled by bicycle from source to mouth. The journey combined embodied fieldwork, critical mapping, and site-writing as forms of situated spatial inquiry. Cycling offered a mode of research that permits intimacy without claiming local belonging: slow enough to register smell, sound, weather, surface, access, obstruction, and exposure, and fast enough to experience the river corridor as continuity. On a bicycle, the body becomes a registering instrument, producing a partial, accountable form of knowledge in the sense of

Haraway's situated objectivity (Haraway 1988). The route followed river-adjacent paths where possible and detoured where fences, industrial zones, infrastructural breaks, or discontinuous access forced rerouting. These detours were treated as data. Following Corner's understanding of mapping as a critical and projective practice rather than the neutral representation of an already-given territory, they exposed the spatial politics of encounter: where the river becomes accessible, where it is hidden, where it is fragmented, and where a citizen is asked to relate to it only through signage, policy, or prohibition (Corner 1999). The writing itself forms part of the method. Drawing on Rendell's concept of site-writing, the text writes through the site rather than simply about it, allowing the material, ecological, legal, aesthetic, and political conditions of the Meuse to structure the argument from within the fieldwork encounter (Rendell 2010).

I: How can I understand the full range of what is there?
Meuse: Partial sight is unavoidable.

Field notes were produced at roughly twenty-five-kilometre intervals and whenever a change in river character demanded it. Notes included weather, bodily state, sensory observations, sketches of infrastructures, and reflections on conversations and encounters. Fourteen semi-structured interviews were conducted with people whose daily practices enact the river differently.² Interviews were structured around practice rather than attitude. Instead of asking whether participants agreed with Rights of Nature, conversations traced how the river enters routines, what counts as a good river, how harms are detected, what evidence persuades, and where conflicts are negotiated.

Each evening, field notes were brought together with conversations held throughout the day. Over time, patterns emerged and categories tightened into four clusters. The enactments cluster tracked moments where the river was performed as system, risk, corridor, habitat, memory, amenity, or border. The conflict cluster tracked recurring sites of dispute, including access, discharge, dredging, extraction, and flood protection. The evidence cluster tracked formats ranging from metrics and models to photographs, flood marks, formulas, inspections, and sensory cues that triggered local knowledge. The care cluster tracked imaginaries of future relation, including

2 Interviewees included a factory chemist, a city mayor, water managers, an artist, a retired skipper, the head of a gravel extraction company, a forester, a hydropower operator, a social enterprise organising river clean-ups, a pottery maker, a municipal ecologist, members of a floodplain restoration consortium, a museum director, and a Dijkgraaf. Enriched through informal conversations with residents along the riverbanks.

restoration, intensification, economic continuity, civic intimacy, and climate uncertainty.

I: Your character reads like a net.

Meuse: Nets catch some things and let others pass. The ethics is to say which.

Because the journey moved across national borders, the research confronted mismatched institutional languages. A practice that counts as restoration in one administrative setting might count as maintenance in another. These frictions are part of the empirical field: they show how the river's corridor is also a corridor of governance, where categories travel unevenly and responsibility can be diffused through shifting jurisdictional frames.

4 Findings, Meeting the River as Presence, Multiplicity, and Textured Patches

The journey began in thick morning mist on the Plateau of Langres. Visibility dropped to a few metres. My world shrank to road, meadow, breath. In those first days, the Meuse was not encountered as a clearly delineated object but as an atmospheric condition: humidity on skin, muffled sound, wet earth, the resistance of muscles working uphill. Water announced itself not only through sight but through a constellation of sensations, each revealing a different grammar of the landscape [fig. 2].

Multisensory engagement revealed the river as diffuse, relational, and affective. This finding emerged through the method. Cycling rather than sampling, pausing rather than surveying, and moving continuously along the river's course oriented attention away from representational knowledge and toward embodied participation. What I encountered could not be accessed through maps, hydrological models, or policy documents alone. The distance that had previously separated me from this place was mirrored in the knowledge available from behind my desk in Rotterdam, where the Meuse appeared primarily as data and text. On the road, that distance collapsed.

Merleau-Ponty's insistence that perception is always situated and bodily became tangible (Merleau-Ponty 2012). I was not observing the river from the outside but moving with it. Perception arrived as a whole rather than an accumulation. Over time, sound, movement, and atmosphere began to orient me without conscious interpretation: uninterrupted hushing noises, flying drops, and the sudden appearance of cormorants hinted at a dam before it came into view. In such moments, knowledge was not representational but relational.

The relational is felt in a dual movement: sensing the river also meant being sensed by it, becoming implicated in its conditions. Touch matters here. As Puig de la Bellacasa suggests, touch cultivates care precisely because it is reciprocal (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017). Implication produces affect, concern, discomfort, attachment, and transforms knowledge into something that matters.

Downstream, mist lay on the water like a second skin; a weir announced itself as insistence; a dam as a pause in the river's sentence. Near industrial reaches, the air acquired a metallic edge. In restored floodplains it softened, and the soundscape thickened with birds. These were cues of altered nature: infrastructures and practices rearranging life and perception, confirming that 'nature' here is never pristine, never outside us, but always already composed with us (Cronon 1996; Haraway 2016). The altered nature condition is encountered here as sensory fact, not as abstract premise.

The multisensory encounter did not simply enrich understanding; it enabled the river to appear as a political subject. Presence, rather than representation, is a condition for political legibility. This is where Barad's ethico-onto-epistemology becomes necessary rather than ornamental (Barad 2007). Being, knowing, and responsibility did not line up in sequence. They happened at once. Responsibility did not arrive after knowledge was formed; it emerged within the act of coming to know. To encounter the river bodily was to become entangled in futures being written into it. Without such engagement, the river remains legible primarily as data, infrastructure, or risk, an object to be managed rather than a subject within political relations.

Meuse: What is knowledge to you at this point?

I: It is presence.

4.1 Coherent Multiplicity, the Meuse Enacted as Many Rivers

Between the Ardennes and the industrial reach, the river began to speak in many voices at once. Municipal ambition, industrial operations, ecological processes, infrastructures, and sedimented memories enacted different versions of the river. Mol's notion of multiplicity clarifies that these are not viewpoints laid over a single river. They are enacted river realities, produced by practices with material effects (Mol 2002). Multiplicity also foregrounds power: some enactments carry institutional authority and durable inscription, while others remain local and fragile. Political legibility depends on whether these enactments can enter the same space of appearance without one being automatically dismissed as anecdotal or subjective [fig. 3].



Figure 3

The Layered River (from top to bottom). 2024. Legends of the Four Sons of Aymon rock formations; foothill vegetation; human and more-than-human occupation; riverbanks and the reflective water.
Photo by Author

The stations below are not a representative sample in the scientific sense. They are situated evidence. They mark where enactments become graspable through access, encounter, interview, infrastructure, and artefact, and where it becomes possible to see how the river is made legible, and by whom.

Station 1 The Industrial Bend, Where Water Becomes an Input

In the industrial reach the river changed posture. Banks carried the geometry of efficiency: quay walls, access roads, fences, warning signs. The water looked the same until one learned to read its surface: a thin film, a slightly different shade, the sudden lack of weeds. Inside a facility, a chemist spoke with intimacy toward numbers. We do not want to harm the river, he said. Harm, in his account, was a matter of miscalculation. The river was a recipient of process water after filtration; compliance with international standards equated care. Neighbourliness was real, but conditional. It depended on what counts as harm being defined by permitted thresholds.

Outside, the factory was a wall. The public could not approach the water at that reach. Multiplicity was spatially segregated. The river of permits existed inside meetings and spreadsheets; the river of everyday encounter was absent because access was removed. Legibility is achieved through simplification, and simplification has

territorial implications. It is built into fences and routes as much as into indicators.

I: What are these pipes and permits to you?

Meuse: Uncomfortable human necessities.

Station 2 The Gravel Pit, Where the River is Mined into Landscape

Further downstream, the river is reworked through gravel extraction. Here the Meuse appears as a resource in the most literal sense. The bank opens into a scar of bare aggregate. Trucks cross a temporary bridge. Water is diverted into holding ponds. New lakes are promised as recreational futures. The rhetoric is circular: extraction that becomes nature again.

Gravel extraction produces altered nature in a way that resists a single moral grammar [fig. 4]. It can destroy habitats and create new wetlands. It can intensify flood risk and open space for overflow. Its politics is inseparable from permits, economic cycles, and the long afterlife of pits as lakes. It is also where personhood language stumbles most clearly, because it asks for a subject that can be wronged while alteration disperses across time, actors, and mixed outcomes. In interviews, extraction was described as inevitable, part of the region's prosperity. The river became a partner in a bargain: reconfiguration is acceptable as long as compensation is planned. Making this ontology visible is already political work, because it clarifies where legal words would need to attach: not only to the river, but to the bargaining infrastructures that shape it.



Figure 4 *Nature Commodified* (from left to right). 2024. Active extraction site in France; post-extraction as recreational park at the BE-NL border; pottery maker in the Netherlands. The contrast with the pottery maker who works with river clay makes tangible how one type of extraction is justified or maintained through mobilising either cultural, ecological, economic, or political arguments. Photos by Author

I: Is this injury or transformation?

Meuse: Both. The question is who gets to call it restoration.

Station 3 The Flood Mark, Where the River Returns as Memory

In several towns, flood history is visible as lines on walls, small plaques marking water height and year. People point to them without melodrama, as one points to a scar. A Dijkgraaf drove me around the landscape, showing subtle flood protection infrastructures integrated into fields and streets, while recalling nights when people layered sandbags to block the rising water. A pottery maker spoke of the capricious nature of Mother Meuse with deference, recounting days when he returned again and again to the river's edge to track the water's rise.

Flood memory is not merely anecdotal. It is evidence that shapes voting, municipal budgets, and tolerance for restoration projects. Yet it rarely enters governance in the same way as modelled risk. This is where Arendt's notion of appearance becomes concrete (Arendt 1958). A flood mark is an artefact that carries experience into the common world. It is a material witness. When governance treats it as sentiment, it narrows the political scene. When governance can hold it alongside probabilistic models, it opens a space where different enactments can be argued without automatic hierarchy (Arendt 1958).

This is also an aesthetic observation in Rancière's sense: it concerns what can be sensed and made public, and therefore what can become political. A river encountered as a presence interrupts the managerial habit of seeing only variables. It expands the repertoire of harms that can be named, from threshold breaches to quieter injuries, such as the thinning of more-than-human life, or the loss of access that makes public responsibility harder to sustain (Rancière 2000; 2004).

These multiplicities did not cancel one another; they accumulated. Here, plurality is not a failure of definition but a condition of agency. The river emerges as an agential being precisely through these heterogeneous relations (Barad 2007).

This finding unsettles persistent dualisms. Nature and society, subject and object, human and more-than-human do not sit on opposite sides of a boundary. They are co-produced in practice. Even the idea of the river as a linear entity with a clear beginning and end began to look like a cultural construction. Conversations repeatedly returned to water as dispersed, circulating, and omnipresent, reappearing far beyond the channel itself. This aligns more closely with concepts such as hydrosocial territories (Boelens et al. 2016) or oceans of wetness (da Cunha 2018) than with a bounded line on a map.

In this reach, the Meuse is a hydrosocial and more-than-human critical zone. Water, sediment, flora, fauna, infrastructures, institutions, and people co-produce one another. Treating the river as a “natural object” external to these relations misreads the altered nature condition European rivers inhabit. Treating it only as infrastructure erases more-than-human life and dulls histories of injury (Swyngedouw 2004; Linton, Budds 2014).

4.2 Texture and Patches, Rights as Local Politics

While the river can be understood as a connected system, it became difficult to imagine what universal rights could meaningfully entail across its entire course. Rights of Nature shift from abstract generalised principle to localised politics when the river is encountered as a series of situated patches (Tănăsescu 2016; 2022; Tsing et al. 2024).³

Near Pouilly-en-Bassigny, where water emerges quietly from the ground in an unremarkable meadow, the river sustains modest ecologies and intimate relations. In the industrial north, where width and depth increase, the Meuse supports dense infrastructures, economic dependencies, and heightened political stakes. Each locality hosts a different river, shaped by particular histories, materials, and practices. While connected, these patches demand different forms of care, responsibility, and governance [fig. 5].



Figure 5 Localities (from left to right). 2024. The source; the city; the harbour. Each locality gives rise to different questions and conflicts, necessitating different forms of mediation. Photos by Author

3 Rights of Nature is often linked to Indigenous philosophies through totalising figures such as Pachamama or Mother Nature. As Tănăsescu (2022) notes, many Indigenous traditions instead articulate obligation through specific places and relations rather than universalised notions of nature. De la Cadena’s (2015) discussion of Aymara *ayllu* as the ensemble of beings that constitute a place, and Watts’ (2013) concept of “place-thought”, clarify how rights can be understood as localised politics emerging from situated relations rather than abstract subjects, which resonates with the patchy, altered conditions of European rivers such as the Meuse.

Tsing's language of friction and patchiness helps name why universal rights language can lose traction at seams, where a right travels into places already organised by livelihoods, flood safety, jurisdictional boundaries, and sedimented blame (Tsing 2005; 2015).

I: How can rights attach to you?

Meuse: Attachment is not a pin. Rights are a practice.

Station 4 The Infrastructural Breach, Where the River is Made to Behave

In urbanised and industrialised reaches the river is asked to behave. It is kept within lines. Wildness is numbed through large scale canalisation; movement silenced through normalisations and reinforced banks. Sluice and weir complexes regulate discharge levels and direct flows westward to Antwerp or further north.

Rights become local politics through texture: access, flood protection, institutional responsibility. A declaration must attach to a stair, a path, a meeting agenda, a maintenance budget. Where banks were accessible and memories thick, rights felt imaginable as lived practice. Where corridors were fenced, rights sounded distant.

I: Despite the barriers, people are coming to you.

Meuse: Yes, they are. But proximity is not always the same as nearness. And while nearness is not yet politics, it rarely begins without it.

Station 5 The Border Reach, Where Jurisdiction Becomes Current

At several points the river is a border, and the border is a governance device. Pollutants and sediments cross administrative lines that do not flow. A water manager described cross-border coordination with the fatigue of someone who has attended too many meetings without a meaningful follow up. The river becomes a current of diluted accountability.

Scott's insight into state legibility takes a different shape in this reach (Scott 1998). The state is not a single eye but an assemblage of partial eyes, each with its own indicators and mandates. Legibility is therefore fractured. The river can be highly readable in one regime and almost invisible in another. Rights of Nature asks for continuity of obligation across such fractures. That continuity will not emerge from a declaration alone. It emerges from interfaces that can travel across institutional boundaries, carrying evidence, claims, and responsibilities in durable forms.

Meuse: When no one can be addressed, rights feel weightless.
I: Rights see unity where maps do not.

Station 6 The Restored Floodplain, Where Care Becomes Technique

In a restoration site, the bank opens. The river is allowed to spill, to braid, to create wetlands. Information boards tell a story of ecological recovery. An ecologist spoke carefully about time. Recovery is not a return, he said. It is a negotiated future under a changing climate. The river is permitted to be more dynamic, but within design constraints. Even care is a form of alteration.

Restoration shows that European governance can make room for more-than-human life, but often through technical projects legible mainly to experts. When restoration becomes a project code rather than a public matter, it can fail to build the attachments that would sustain it against future economic pressure. The design question returns: how can restoration sites become spaces of appearance, places where obligations are publicly negotiated and sustained?

These stations extend the earlier finding about patches. Rights become local politics not only through the texture of place but also through the patchwork of jurisdictions. The river's subjecthood is spatiotemporal and institutional. It is habitat and permit, memory and maintenance, geopolitics and sediment, because cross-border arrangements, supply chains, and energy systems are written into its banks.

Station 7 The Delta Logistics, Where the River Becomes a Schedule

Approaching the delta, the river acquired the tempo of logistics. The horizon filled with cranes, containers, freighters. The river became a timetable: the medium through which goods move. At that scale it became easy to deny responsibility locally. It is bigger than us, people said, and the sentence became a distancing device.

Yet the port is still an environment, producing noise, particles, jobs, and vulnerability to sea level rise. In such settings Rights of Nature can appear either naive or threatening. Political legibility is hardest here because enactments are tied to livelihoods and national infrastructures. To make rights legible is to build interfaces where all conflicts can be articulated without immediate dismissal.

At the mouth, categories become unreliable. Is the river still the river when it tastes of the sea? The mouth is not a line; it is a mixing zone. Rights of Nature, if it is to be more than a label, must be able to

live with such instability. Models of personhood that imagine a river as a bounded individual strain here, where the river is relational, dependent on tides, sea level, dredging, shipping, upstream pollution, and the long memory of engineering.

A legibility gap becomes visible here. Multiplicity is materially obvious, yet politically unstable. Rights spoken in a universal idiom do not automatically produce publics capable of sustaining them. If personhood is to move beyond symbolism, it must be accompanied by practices that let the river appear as a political subject in a common world, not by forcing unity, but by enabling translation across enactments and making contestation durable.

I: What would it mean for you to appear here as a political subject?

Meuse: It would mean that your visions would have to admit my limits.

Taken together, these encounters suggest that the task is less to declare the river a subject than to build the conditions in which it can appear and be addressed as one. Presence expands what can count as harm. Multiplicity names how different practices produce different rivers, with unequal power to define reality. Patches show where responsibilities thin out across fences, jurisdictions, and expert codes. In the field, embodiment collapsed distance into nearness, and nearness into responsibility. This shifts the centre of gravity in European Rights of Nature discourse away from drafting better rights and toward shaping the circumstances in which a river can enter public and political life as a claimant. Without such appearance, legal recognition risks floating above lived realities.

The question that follows is therefore not only legal but spatial: how can design cultivate the kinds of encounters through which more-than-human entities can appear, be heard, and be addressed? The next section proposes a design response. It outlines representational and procedural interfaces, evidential devices, meeting formats, and access protocols, through which claims can travel across enactments and conflict can be staged without collapsing the river into a single administrative object.

5 Design as a Political Act, How Rivers are Made to Appear

Back home, the river returns as objects: a plan, a chart, a permit, a risk curve. But what I met on the banks was already formatted long before it reached my desk: access cut by fences, memory held in flood marks, extraction justified as compensation, care translated into project codes, responsibility diluted across borders, the delta reduced to a timetable. These are not metaphors. They are the

conditions under which the river can appear and under which it can be addressed.

Consider the mundane architecture of a typical water governance meeting: a projector, a spreadsheet, a map with colour-coded status classes, a risk curve. These devices do not merely inform decisions. They train perception, distribute authority, and decide who can speak. The political question becomes a question of format: which materials can sit on the table as legitimate evidence.

Boundary objects help name what is at stake. These are shared devices that different communities can use without full agreement on meaning (Star, Griesemer 1989). Water governance already relies on boundary objects – maps, standards, models – but these often privilege expert domains. Rights of Nature requires boundary objects that can travel between expert and everyday worlds, holding different enactments together without claiming to unify them: devices that keep multiplicity present in decision-making without forcing it into a single authorised reality.

In this spirit, an Atlas and Cabinet are proposed as design methods. The Atlas is a representational format that places enacted river realities side by side so they can be argued together without being reduced to one metric [figs 6-7]. The Cabinet is a portable evidentiary assemblage for meetings and site encounters, making room for heterogeneous forms of proof, including sensory cues, local marks, images, and expert measures. Neither aims to represent the river as a whole; both stage what can count.

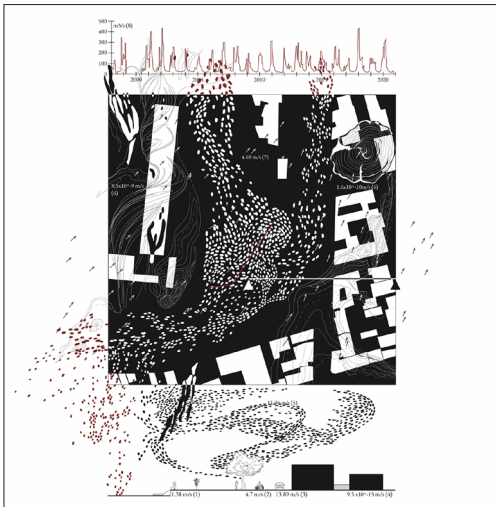


Figure 6

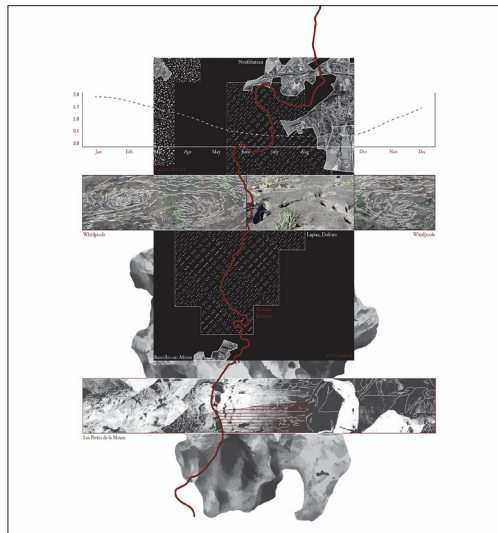
Atlas: Movement Sedan. 2025.

Digital collage.

Space as a choreography of movement. By layering urban structures with flows of water, vehicles, bodies, and more-than-human life, it reveals the city and river as part of a shared rhythm of decay, regeneration, and change.

Image by Author

Figure 7
Atlas: Pertes de la Meuse, 2025.
Digital collage. The Meuse
as a water surface and a hidden
underground system. Geological
layers, disappearing flows,
and visual traces reveal
a landscape shaped as much
by presence as absence.
Image by Author



I: So design is politics because it frames what can be said.
Meuse: And because it frames who can say it, and what is allowed
to count.

An ethical difficulty remains. Any device that claims to help the river speak risks speaking for it. The point is not to authorise a single river voice but to stage situations where the river's consequences can be translated into arguable claims. Here the river 'speaks' through flood marks, sediment change, fish absence, blocked access, odours of discharge, and through plural testimonies entangled with those consequences. The devices do not claim truth but aim to make mediation visible and contestable. This is also where agonism matters. If the Cabinet and Atlas become instruments of consensus, they fail. Their purpose is to make conflict legible – precisely where politics starts.

Talking about 'furniture' is not trivial here. I use it as a metaphor for the material and procedural arrangements through which governance stages what can appear, who can speak, and what can count as binding. Rights of Nature will not become real by declaration alone. It becomes real only if this setup is redesigned so that different enactments of the river can be present, arguable, and consequential.

Formats matter because formats arrange the world so that it becomes arguable. Dominant formats privilege quantification and particular temporalities: some harms become visible while others remain difficult to name. Rights of Nature introduces an additional demand: harms must be arguable not only as system failures but

as wrongs. If law sets obligations, design helps determine whether obligations can be perceived, contested, and maintained.

6 A Method for Political Appearance: Atlas, Cabinet, Nomadic School

If the river returns to governance not as objects on a table, but as a subject sitting around it, then the design task is not to produce a better portrait of the river. It is to redesign the table [fig. 8]. The problem is not a lack of information. It is a lack of formats that can hold multiplicity without forcing it into one authorised reality (Marres 2012). What follows proposes a method rather than a masterplan: an Atlas of River Enactments and a Mobile Cabinet for Counter-Narratives, operated through a Nomadic River School. The aim is to thicken political legibility by assembling heterogeneous materials into shared forms that can travel between riverbanks and institutions.



Figure 8 *Assembly of the Cabinet. 2025.* The topography of the Meuse is displayed in three drawers. The part of the river held in the upper drawer is visible through the transparent table-top. The whole river can be shown at once through extension of the cabinet towards both sides. Photos by Jesse Verdoes

The Atlas is organised reach by reach rather than treating the river as a single site. It holds situated plurality and allows comparability without imposing equivalence. The Cabinet is a portable table and archive that can enter municipal meetings, basin consultations,

educational settings, and sites of negotiation. The Nomadic School is the practice of facilitation and repetition that prevents the method from becoming a one-off event.

A cycle of the triptych has three movements: encounter, assembly, translation.

Encounter: participants go out with the river, guided by prompts about access, smell, sound, barriers, infrastructures, and histories. Detours and fenced edges are treated as data, because they show how encounter is patterned and who is permitted to be near.

Assembly: participants return to the Cabinet and place heterogeneous evidence into shared visibility without forcing commensurability [fig. 9]. A permit excerpt beside a flood mark. A smell note beside a monitoring graph. A sound recording beside a planning sketch. The purpose is not agreement, but arguability. Each cycle is documented in a short dossier and deposited into the Atlas.



Figure 9 *The Nomadic School*, 2025. Findings are assembled into a plural archive and situated on the Cabinet's topography. The archive lends voice to multiple interpretations without a pre-imposed hierarchy. Their coexistence can surface new questions and make conflicts legible, inviting dialogue about which values and whose voices are actively amplified, accepted, or ignored. Photos by Jesse Verdoes

Translation: participants produce outputs that make tensions publicly discussable. Conflict maps, access sketches, soundscape scores, short narratives, or governance prototypes. These remain in the Atlas as a comparative record across sites and over time.

The mechanism is deliberately practical. The method aims to assemble river publics capable of sustaining obligations by altering what can count as evidence in the settings where decisions are made. It gives conflicts durable form and enables translation between expert and everyday domains without requiring full agreement. In the language of boundary objects, the devices are designed to be shared across communities while keeping disagreement visible (Star, Griesemer 1989).

This requires modest but explicit infrastructure: facilitation capacity, storage and documentation, and a commitment to bring the Cabinet into moments where trade-offs are negotiated, such as permit reviews, waterfront plans, flood-safety upgrades, and restoration prioritisation.

7 Implications for Rights of Nature Practice in Europe

This research suggests that Rights of Nature efforts in Europe should treat legibility as a primary political task. Legal drafting needs companion infrastructures of encounter and translation. Otherwise personhood risks remaining ceremonial: declared, admired, and rarely exercised where decisions are made.

Multiplicity should be treated as an asset rather than a problem to be resolved. Rivers will remain plural. Governance must learn to work with coherent plurality rather than enforce artificial unity. This also requires making power visible: which enactments acquire authority, which are excluded, which harms become legible, and which remain backgrounded.

Spatial design can be positioned as public-making infrastructure, not as a communicative afterthought. That requires institutional recognition and resources. Methods must be iterated and linked to decision routines. Without uptake, design becomes theatre: a performance of participation that does not shift what can count.

I: And if nothing changes?

Meuse: Then at least you will know where the refusal sits.

European Rights of Nature practice also needs care with genealogies. Learning from global cases is essential, but legitimacy cannot be borrowed through citation of other cosmologies without relational accountability. European rivers require accountability to histories of extraction, flood safety, industrial permitting, commons, and care; histories that must be confronted rather than bypassed.

The Meuse sharpens an uncomfortable point. Personhood language can be attractive because it promises a clean subject. But European rivers are not clean subjects. They inhabit an altered nature condition in which agency and responsibility are distributed across administrations, infrastructures, and memories. A Rights of Nature politics that insists on a single authorised voice risks reproducing the simplification Scott warned about (Scott 1998); an institutionally convenient river, readable in a single register, while the more difficult multiplicity that composes the river is pushed out of the scene.

I: Yet institutions want clarity.

Meuse: They want clarity so they can act.

Clarity can be provided without flattening. A Rights of Nature institution should not speak as if it were the river in the singular. It should speak as if it were hosting a contested flow-field, and make explicit which enactments are at stake in each decision.

This has consequences for legal drafting and institutional design. Guardianship models may work best when coupled to deliberative infrastructures and evidence devices that keep plurality present in decision routines. Otherwise guardians risk becoming spokespersons for whichever enactment already dominates, often the one most legible to state formats: numbers, permits, and risk curves. The Meuse also shows that legibility is geographically uneven. Where encounter is mediated by distance, security, or scale, obligations diffuse. Design interfaces therefore need to be calibrated to the scale at which trade-offs are negotiated, such that responsibilities can be gathered into arguable form.

8 Epilogue as the Conversation Continues

Meuse: what will be carried onward?

At Hoek van Holland, the river disperses into tides. Rights, too, are not endpoints. They are ongoing enactments, and they require maintenance: of attention, of institutions, of publics, and of the material settings that allow a river to appear [fig. 10]. A river can be injured quietly: by routine, by administrative smoothness, by numbers that remain within limits while the living texture thins.

The question that remains is not whether a river can have rights in principle. It is whether a river can appear, again and again, as a political subject where decisions are made, and whether those settings can learn to host its plurality. This is where spatial design matters: not as representation alone, but as a practice that gives durable form to encounter, evidence, and translation.



Figure 10 *New Beginnings*. 2024. The source of the Meuse, Pouilly-en-Bassigny, France.
Photo by Author

Authorial Note on Voice and Fieldwork

This paper is written through a situated narrative voice and a dialogue form. The cycling journey and interviews were conducted and translated into a design proposal by Julia Schasfoort. The conceptual framing, analysis, and theory were developed collaboratively by both Authors. The text is written as a dialogue, not to ventriloquise the river, but to refuse the convenience of speaking about it while pretending the relation is neutral. The river's voice appears only where it is anchored in material cues, interview discourse, and infrastructural realities. The dialogue functions as a constraint: it holds open the gap between what can be said in a statute and what can be encountered on the bank, long enough for another legibility (and another politics) to become possible. The journey is one body following one route in one season; the interviews are a small sample. The claim is not completeness, but accountability for the position from which the river was encountered and transparency about what that position makes visible and what it cannot.

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