

# VISIBLE FLOW

## Geo-photography as a methodological approach for the investigation of the Retrone River

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Chiara Spadaro

Università degli Studi di Padova <chiara.spadaro@unipd.it>

Andrea Rosset

Independent photographer, Vicenza <info@andrearosset.it>

**ABSTRACT:** This integrated article and photographic essay have been developed from a shared experience of one year along the banks of a short stretch of the Retrone River, in Vicenza (Italy), between a geographer and a photographer, merging these disciplines into a single reflection on inhabiting and understanding the margins – the riverbanks. The proposition of geo-photography as an interdisciplinary research method situated at the intersection of science and art, is put forward, in the wake of creative geographies. This approach, which is rarely adopted in the geographical academic world, aims to raise awareness and cultivate sensitivity towards waterways. However, it is of significant value in the investigation of the ongoing transformations in the urban landscape where the river flows and it appears to hold great promise in opening new perspectives, especially in the capacity of exchange and communicating with other ongoing initiatives for the protection of the riverscape. This approach involves a repositioning of the focal point to encompass the intricate interplay between water and land. The objective is to transcend the conventional anthropocentric and exploitive paradigm on waterscapes in favour of an egalitarian interspecies research approach within this landscape.

**KEYWORDS:** Retrone river; Vicenza; geo-photography; urban river; creative geographies.

### 1. Riverine geo-photography

The International Conference on Inland Waterscapes, hosted by the University of Udine in May 2024,<sup>1</sup> provided a valuable opportunity to present preliminary reflections on a collaborative project in its initial stages to an academic audience. This project, in its nascent phase, focuses on an inland watercourse, the Retrone River, and the city of Vicenza (Italy), located in the Veneto region, where the present authors reside. The project is shared between two disciplines, geography and photography, and between two researchers and a wider community of inhabitants. Spadaro is a geographer who has resided along the Retrone River,

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<sup>1</sup> The conference was held in Udine, Italy, from 22 to 25 May 2024 and was jointly organised by the University of Udine, Ca' Foscari University of Venice (Italy), River Cities Network (Netherlands) and *Shima* (Australia).

in the Ferrovieri neighbourhood of Vicenza, in the west of the city, for ten years. Rosset is a photographer who, since March 2024, has been conducting a photographic investigation of the short section of the Retrone that runs through the Ferrovieri neighbourhood.

The present text is a collaborative effort, born from the recognition that the confluence of our initial perspectives – geographical and photographic – could facilitate a deeper understanding of the river and its significance. The purpose of our study (in which the photographs are an integral part and of equal value to the written word<sup>2</sup>) is to assert the value of geo-photography as a novel method of studying watercourses. This approach involves a sensitive observation of river micro-histories and their subsequent narration, with the primary objective being to raise awareness of the water landscapes that are a part of our everyday lives. The study commences with a critique of the extractivism that is pervasive in much geographical and indeed photographic research and advocates an inter-species perspective on watercourses through the collaboration of science and art, in favour of a mutual exchange with the river.

## 2. Retrone: the river and the park

The Retrone river originates in western Vicenza, in the municipality of Sovizzo, and traverses the city of Vicenza for approximately ten kilometres before confluenting with the more renowned Bacchiglione river. The Retrone river is a brief resurgence river that meanders at a gentle gradient, depositing sediment. Prior to its artificialisation, its course was characterised by a more sinuous trajectory. However, following the process of artificialisation, the river has been straightened, with its banks being raised to the same height, thus transforming it into a man-made watercourse. Nonetheless, in certain sections, the natural state of the river remains dominant, in contrast to the human intervention that has forced its regularisation. This is characterised by spontaneous vegetation and fallow land, which periodically restore a sense of naturalness and freedom to the river.

Prior to crossing the historic centre, the Retrone skirts the Ferrovieri neighbourhood for a distance of approximately two kilometres, demarcating its south-eastern periphery. From the Ferrovieri neighbourhood, situated on the left bank of the river, one can observe a 40,000-square-metre park known as the Parco Retrone. This park serves as an intermediary between the artificial and natural elements in the riverscape, representing the city's inaugural experience in participatory construction and management of a public park. Currently, the park is under the stewardship of the environmental association, Legambiente Vicenza. In the mid-1990s, while the municipality was considering the possibility of cementing the riverfront fields in order to construct a road, a group of volunteers residing in the Ferrovieri area contacted Legambiente Vicenza with the objective of establishing the park. In 1996 a coordination committee was established that oversaw the project in collaboration with the municipality. Construction commenced in February 1998. "We initiated the planting of trees. I distinctly recall the location of the first holes that were drilled, as well as the placement of the initial two persimmon trees", recounts Mario Felisi, a volunteer at the time.<sup>3</sup> The following month, a day was held with the primary and middle

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<sup>2</sup> Consequently, the decision has been taken to incorporate images within the article's sequence, rather than allocating them a static position within the text. A wider section of the photographic project is available on the website [www.andrearosset.it](http://www.andrearosset.it).

<sup>3</sup> This, and subsequent quotations from local park activists, are taken from the podcast *Storie di fiumi e di alberi*.

schools to plant the park, and Paolo Ruzzene, a volunteer from the neighbourhood, states that he remembers the whole Retrone Park, which was 40,000 square metres divided into rectangles of 40 metres by 40, with white and red tape, and that they had dosed the seeds for the lawn; in each square, five children were sowing. The initial phase of the project was completed within a span of two hours, with the assistance of 400 volunteers, resulting in the sowing of four hectares of lawn. This was followed by the planting of trees, hedges, and the creation of flower beds. The outcome of this project was a visually appealing park, and over time, the satisfaction derived from observing its popularity and frequent use was particularly gratifying, as Beppe Provasi, the designer of Retrone Park, further elaborated.

Valentina Dovigo of Legambiente Vicenza posits that the creation of memory is predicated on the provision of opportunities for other groups and territories to retrace this experience in different locations. The park was not created for the benefit of the individuals who established it; rather, it was conceived with the intention of benefiting the city as a whole. The aspiration is for experiences of this nature to emerge in other locations. As geographer Francesco Vallerani wrote in 2019, “starting from riverine scenarios represents a convenient operational choice for crafting narratives that counter the numerous ongoing hydraulic injustices, but more importantly, to propose viable alternatives” (2019, p. 115), thereby fostering conscious communities capable of “developing a genuine empathy towards the environment”, beginning with water landscapes (2019, p. 209 – author’s translation).



Figure 1 – March 19, 2024.

### 3. Waves from literature

It is necessary to return to the banks of our river with some instruments. In her 2015 publication *Yearning: Race, gender, and cultural politics*, bell hooks explores the concept of the “politics of position”, proposing an invitation to readers to adopt a different perspective, with the objective of “beginning a process of re-vision in (2015, p. 128), indicating an area

characterised by a sense of instability and the necessity for a community to act as a form of resistance. This concept is further elaborated by the anthropologist Tim Ingold (2021), who posits that a shift from interaction to correspondence is pivotal in this process, signifying a re-orientation from between-ness to in-between-ness. Ingold employs the metaphor of a river and its banks to illustrate this transformation, likening the flow of water between the banks to a lateral, perpendicular movement. He further elaborates that perceiving things as being in-between is to align one's awareness with the water, and to correspond with the water is to unite this awareness with the flow.

As Annalisa Metta (2023) observes, if the river is conceived as the shape of the space that contains the water, rather than the water itself, embankments alter our perception of the boundaries between land and water, transforming them from passable thresholds into closed borders. Furthermore, Eugenio Turri's assertion in his 2015 publication, *Diary of a Geographer*, emphasises that "a dike evokes a phenomenon that is distant in time, beyond our recollection, independent of our contemporary moment" (2015, p. 65). A simple search for the term geo-photography yields a paucity of scientific literature on the subject. However, the term is defined as a branch of geology that involves the use of photography to record processes of geological significance.

In this fluvial exploration, we also drew upon the insights of another geographer, Francesco Visentin (2024), who emphasised the importance of considering the land-water relationship as an assemblage, a concept that helps to transcend a binary interpretation of the fluvial landscape, which is often perceived as comprising opposing and irreconcilable elements, such as nature/society, water/land, organic/technological, spontaneous/artificial, and human/animal.

It is important to note the link between this dichotomous view, which must be overcome, and the issue of extractivism in social research and photographic practice, which has been discussed. "The substitution of landscape photography for landscape painting has resulted in a state of cognitive dissonance, characterised by the intermingling of subjectivity and objectivity, reality and representation" (Borgherini & Sicard, 2020, p. 14). In the book *PhotoPayasage* (2020) the "processes of photographic and landscape co-construction" (2020, p. 7) in France and Italy are investigated. With regard to Italy, the image of the Italian landscape develops from the Grand Tour and the iconography this phenomenon produces, and the subsequent consolidation of the photography of the Italian landscape as a "multiplicity and stratification of traces" (2020, p. 12) brought by different civilisations. The issue is also addressed by Theo Reeves-Evinson in his review of "visual culture between extraction and speculation" (2024), which demonstrates how images have historically facilitated colonial expansion and resource extraction. Furthermore, the author questions the role of visual culture in justifying such extractive practices and their possible subversion. The author suggests adopting a "visual prospecting" perspective to pluralise the modes of visual culture that prospecting can be seen to employ (2024, p. 620).

Drawing upon these reflections, the research undertaken in the designated area of the river Retrone employs a methodology known as "deep mapping" (Roberts, 2016), which integrates elements of ethnography and visual art to create a multifaceted spatial narrative. This approach aims to encapsulate the temporal dimension and the sense of the places experienced. The subsequent section will present the river research methodology.



Figure 2 –May 24, 2024.

#### 4. Geo-photographical research methods

This geo-photographic research is congruent with the theoretical framework of creative geographies (Hawkins, 2015, 2019), that “re-cast geography’s interdisciplinary relationship with arts and humanities scholarship and practices and its own intradisciplinary relations” (2015, p. 263). In the discourse surrounding the utilisation of novel visual research methodologies in geography (see Bignante, 2011; Rose, 2001), the audio and/or visual apparatus has emerged as a catalyst for the exploration of hitherto unexplored avenues for scientific communication, especially on environmental issues (Boccaletti, 2021; Latini, Maggioli, 2022).

The photographs under consideration were taken by Andrea Rosset between March 2024 and the present (December 2024). The project, spanning a duration of one year, commences in March 2024 and concludes in March 2025. The Retrone river was captured through a 28 mm lens mounted on a full-frame digital single-lens reflex (SLR) camera. Given this camera’s configuration, the lens possesses a field of view that extends to a width of 75.4°, marginally exceeding the central region of the human binocular field of view, which is approximately 60°. This riverscape is distinguished by a scarcity of open spaces and a preponderance of relatively closed spaces, either characterised by tree rows or embankments. In order to address these varied spatial requirements, a lens was selected that could effectively capture both open and closed scenes. This focal length was determined to provide an optimal field of vision, encompassing a sufficiently large portion of the landscape to maintain a constant relationship with the totality of the environment, while minimising perspective distortions when shooting in confined spaces. The majority of photographs were captured freehand, in a standing position, with the camera held at eye level. The camera was leveled horizontally and front-rear, and with closed apertures to extend the depth of field.

These choices are closely related to the type of equipment used. In the context of landscape photography, the use of large format cameras can be traced back to the 19th-century, when pioneering photographers such as Timothy O'Sullivan (1840-1882) and the modernist photography of Edward Weston (1886-1958) employed such equipment. This tradition has continued right up to the present day, as evidenced by the work of contemporary photographers such as Mark Ruwedel (1954). The employment of such equipment facilitates enhanced definition of detail, whilst simultaneously enabling the rectification of framing through decentering the focal plane and optics. Conversely, the substantial weight and unwieldiness of large format cameras renders them less conducive to a photographic practice that involves traversing challenging terrain. In this regard, technical limitations emerge as a pivotal metric for evaluating the work, with the view at eye level, the camera consistently aligned horizontally and vertically, underscoring both the human element of vision and the mediating influence of the technical medium.

Departing from the photographic studio where Andrea had been working until then, he began to traverse the riverbanks and embankments, observing and documenting potential points of intersection between his work, characterised by a controlled environment and an intimate relationship with the subjects and co-authors of the photographs, and the open space of the river, which was inhabited by a plurality of subjects. This transition was facilitated by a contemplation of the essence of images and landscape photography, complemented by firsthand experience in this hydro-geography. The Canadian photographer Jeff Wall, in his reflection on landscape photography, identifies “a certain distance” from the scene as the optimal vantage point for shooting (2007, p. 171). This distance, as Wall asserts, enables the photographer to “detach ourselves from the immediate presence of other people (figures), but not so far as to lose the ability to distinguish them as agents in a social space” (2007, p. 171).

The area surrounding the Retrone has been significantly impacted by human activity, with the river's banks being modified to accommodate human activities. The left bank of the river is characterised by residential buildings, agricultural land, a park, the ruins of an ancient villa, a school, sports facilities, and, in the distance, industrial buildings. In contrast, the right bank, situated between the river and the initial offshoots of the Berici Hills that border the city of Vicenza, is characterised by agricultural fields interspersed with ditches and rows of mulberry trees. The banks and the Retrone park area are popular destinations for individuals seeking walks, sporting activities, or moments of respite amidst the ambient sounds of the diverse non-human animals that inhabit the river. This area functions as a social space and an urban landscape, rather than a natural landscape, in which the natural component almost always manifests itself in planned and controlled forms. Conversely, its urban component is shown to be precarious and equally fragile in its intermingling with the river course, subject to anthropic transformations. The question therefore arises of how to establish that “right distance” to which Jeff Wall refers in his encounter with the river.

In the context of the Retrone riverscape, which is entirely man-made, the human presence and its shaping activity are pervasive, both visually and aurally, even in the absence of human presence. Consequently, the photographic documentation of human figures, which sporadically enter the field of vision, appears superfluous, as the human presence is already embedded within the area. Consequently, Andrea found it challenging to observe the “separation” between the photographer and the other individuals present, a concept that Wall asserts is essential for the creation of a landscape image.





Figure 3 – March 19, 2024.

From a visual perspective, the artificial and highly structured aspect of this river landscape, shaped and designed by human intervention, is characterised by a series of “obligatory shots” and “inevitable” photographic compositions, which collectively guide the viewer’s gaze. These elements also stem from our cultural preconception of a river as a linear entity, “to simplify and regulate the perpetual negotiation between water and land”, as noted by the architect Annalisa Metta (2023, p. 97). The research was thus not primarily concerned with refuting the “pre-seen” perception of the river; rather, its objective was to raise awareness of this perception, enabling its deconstruction and relativisation. The aim was to identify images that more accurately represent the diverse agencies, forms of life and the collaborative creation of the Retrone landscape, which are continually subjected to human attempts at control. The absence of such control is not simulated in this procedure, which is built through frequent visits to the waterscape and long walks taken by the photographer in different seasons and at different times. Rather, it confronts the non-existent naturalness with other designs beyond the human one, including those of vegetation, animals, wind and water itself.



Figure 4 –May 28, 2024.

This critique of the control exerted over the landscape through the construction of the photographic image has been identified as a key focus of the study. The approach adopted has been described as a “fluid gaze,” which is characterised by its ability to traverse, flow over, and penetrate the culturally determined visual pathways that delineate the landscape. The waterscape has been identified as the subject, rather than the object, of this vision.

From a formal perspective, the criteria adopted drew upon the tenets of documentary photography, a term that emerged in the realm of photographic literature during the late 1920s, signifying an artistic investigative approach (Lugon, 2001). The documentary style, as defined by Walker Evans (1903-1975) – a seminal figure in that realm during the 1930s and 1940s – encourages the dissolution of the author's presence, or more specifically, his expressive withdrawal. By virtue of its neutrality, this style facilitates the formation of structures that exhibit a relationship of equivalence with their referent (Poivert, 2002, p. 145). This approach, therefore, can be considered an ‘anti-style,’ which is apt for reflecting on the power relations between the artificial and the natural in the Retrone riverscape. Additionally, there are certain visual clichés that can be chosen to be followed or disregarded at one's discretion. These clichés, perhaps, represent the transposition into the imaginary of that hybridity of waterscapes. In her work on the Vietnamese jungle, entitled *Cliché of a landscape, Jungle* (2017), the German artist Inga Kerber identifies that she utilises an “extreme ease of recognition and a sense of the familiar” to counteract the idealisation of nature”. Photographs are considered to be “simple” and “familiar”: “the forest is so familiar it is self-evident, self-evidence requiring no consciousness, no observation, because of an ability to recognise the familial between forest and human equipped by a side-by-side process of existence”.

The term *cliché* is of French origin, referring to a letterpress printing plate or a stereotype. Unlike its usage in other languages, which have acquired it as a loan word to refer to over-familiar terms or concepts, in French it also refers to a photographic negative and the act of



taking a photograph. Kerber plays on these semantic differences. Drawing parallels with the documentary photography of the 1930s, Kerber's collection of analogue negatives is meticulously organised according to well-established classic categories, including landscape, still life and portraiture. The work involves a photograph being selected from her archive and printed multiple times, utilising a range of techniques and settings that vary slightly. These prints are then presented in a sequential manner. In the Retrone riverscape, based on these considerations, slight variations in the point of view were observed in two photographs taken in sequence. This procedure simultaneously acknowledges the subjectivity of the photographer and the medium when two almost identical images are reproduced using the cliché method.

In the wake of the aforementioned reflections, this photographic project engenders an anti-spectacularity, a suspension of judgement, formal rigour, and attention to detail and singularity in the acquisition of the image.



Figure 5 – December 7, 2024.

## 5. Dives into the river, keys to interpretation

As the project evolved, a series of walks, photographs, readings, and conversations contributed to the emergence of preliminary interpretive frameworks – metaphorically, immersive explorations of the metaphorical river – that we seek to articulate in this section. The initial reflection pertains to visual hierarchies. The perspective of a river as observed from an elevated vantage point, offering a three-quarter view from an as yet undefined height, devoid of visual impediments, evokes the 18th century Enlightenment vedutism that was subsequently adopted by photography. In this representation, the gaze assumes a dominant position over the landscape, achieving a state of satisfaction through the act of rational comprehension, thereby rendering the space perceivable and manageable.

Within the historical discourse of Western thought, the notion of a place that is open to view, spacious and well-lit has been identified as a suitable environment for humankind, in contrast to the closed, dark and irrational forest, which is regarded as hostile to human. This hierarchy encapsulates the notion of the human right to exist above all else. In the context of photographing the Retrone riverscape, it was decided that a focus on panoramic views from above would not be the most effective approach. Instead, the decision was taken to shoot from vantage points where the presence of vegetation obscured and disturbed the view, thereby allowing the manifestation of the otherness that distinguishes the human experience. Furthermore, the gaze did not follow pre-determined routes, but rather, often traversed the shoreline at eye level. These routes were often challenging to access due to the influence of vegetation growth cycles, weather conditions, river flow, and the maintenance of riverbanks. These constraints led to the emergence of a novel concept of the “right distance”, which was negotiated in a gradual and interactive manner with the surrounding environment. A secondary facet pertains to the hybrid nature of this watery landscape, between diurnal and nocturnal perspectives. In Andrea Rosset’s images, space is compacted and condensed into contrasting patches, thanks to the close viewpoint and a use of natural light that, instead of favouring legibility, prevented a unified reading of the landscape. Rather than seeking the optimal vantage point, the photographer allowed his position in the aqueous landscape to determine the point of capture.

In order to interpret the Retrone riverscape as a set of evolving relationships and connections, the photographer’s gaze also focused on the transitional zones: the cultivated areas and the Berici hills to the south-east, the Retrone park and its social dimension, the public and private buildings overlooking the park, the industrial areas and the sports facilities. While in some images the watercourse assumes a dominant role, exuding a sense of tranquil power over the surrounding environment, in others it appears constrained and confined by elements in the background, such as buildings, roads, and other constructions, effectively colonising its visual space.

During nocturnal visits to the riverbank, accompanied by the sonorous resonance of local amphibians, the photographer’s ability to discern the river’s true form was impeded by the pervasive artificial illumination of the surrounding area. This illumination was meticulously installed along river pathways and bridges, ensuring the safety of individuals traversing these waterways. The introduction of artificial lighting in the 19th century, a period concomitant with the European colonial expansion, has been the subject of scholarly discourse, particularly with regard to the concept of night as a frontier and the colonisation of darkness (Melbin, 1987). The advent of photography coincided with the emergence of artificial light, marking the start of a new era. In the nocturnal landscape depicted in these photographs, the river and vegetation are rendered visible only through the illumination of electric lighting, thereby subjecting the natural environment to the dominion of artificial light.

A third reflection pertains to the sinuous shape of the river in space. The Retrone originally exhibited a meandering course, but this was straightened by various human interventions. A map of 1774 depicting the area that currently corresponds to the Ferrovieri district clearly shows that the Retrone followed the same canalised course at that time as it does today.<sup>4</sup> However, the relationship between land and water remains an unstable one, with water exhibiting perpetual movement in a vertical/circular direction, both in a material and symbolic sense, in contrast to the human need to maintain separation between water and

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<sup>4</sup> The map that was consulted is kept in the library archive map of Biblioteca Bertoliana, in Vicenza (“Coltura dei santi Felice e Fortunato”, inventory number 141186).

land, and to regulate this separation. In the images presented, an attempt was made to transcend linearity, thereby tracing circularity in this river environment, while also directing the gaze upwards and sideways with respect to the river's course. A heightened awareness of these aspects has led to a shift in our perception of phenomena such as the partial flooding of the river towards the Parco Retrone and the cultivated areas. This event, from the perspective of human activities, was a conflictual and traumatic occurrence, while from the perspective of water, it was the norm. Even the fog that envelops the banks, the river and the surrounding fields on many mornings appears to expand the Retrone. As research continues, the landscape is increasingly characterised by sinuous lines, curves and ambiguous directions, giving rise to apparent and illusory paths, deformed spaces and a lack of central focus. These lines evoke the river's original tortuous shape.



Figure 6 – April 19, 2024.

In relation to the theme of margins, as proposed by bell hooks (2015), riverbanks can be considered the spatial boundaries of the river; when viewed from a distance, they obstruct the view of the water. When following the course of the Retrone river on foot, it is imperative to acknowledge its embankments, which are composed of earth. Their inverted trapezium shape creates two 'steps,' one at the top and the other near the water. These embankments, in their inverted trapezium configuration, not only provide a means for traversing the river but also offer a unique vantage point for observing its course. In photographs taken from the lower level and captured from a frontal and parallel perspective to the river's trajectory, the top of the embankment frequently creates a diagonal line that intersects the image. This visual configuration serves to symbolically and materially delineate a division between the river and the surrounding landscape.

It is important to note that access to the riverbanks is not always possible, particularly when vegetation is too dense and overgrown with brambles, or when the ground is saturated and muddy. In such cases, movement within this environment is facilitated when it is managed, for example, through mowing of the grass or removal of obstacles. The concept of walking along the river banks, or the impracticality of doing so, thus prompts a fundamental question

regarding our human right to exist within the river environment. The recent floods in Vicenza, for instance, have obliterated reference points, fractured our perspective, and confounded the boundaries that we have delineated, which nature appears to disregard. In the case of the Retrone river margin, the community is no longer exclusively human. The river is inhabited by a multitude of living beings that possess the ability to sense human presence from great distances, with a high degree of precision, thanks to their developed hearing. On occasion, the human presence is also perceived by these beings, usually in the late hours, as the sound of a dive, a flap of wings, or the cry of a bird serves as a warning that the river's inhabitant has moved on.<sup>5</sup>



Figure 7 – October 20, 2024.

## 6. An uncertain waterscape

We mentioned the subject of transformation of the river landscape, with reference to the factors driving this transformation, namely climatic, environmental and social dynamics. The north-west border of the Ferrovieri district is delineated, in a manner analogous to the

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<sup>5</sup> In approaching the riverbanks, an increased focus on the auditory dimension became evident, particularly in relation to non-human animal interactions. Frequently, the question has been posed: is it feasible to establish a novel, non-anthropocentric language through which to engage with the river and its denizens? From a geographical perspective, there is an increasing interrogation of animal and plant languages. However, contributions concerning the languages of other mobile natural beings remain scarce. The question thus arises: does a river speak? The following questions were posed to initiate the investigation: how should the subject be listened to, and is it possible to understand it? It was hypothesised that the search for a common language would begin by coming into direct contact with the subject at the centre of the investigation, namely the river. This listening relationship, as well as the visual one, is based on continuous renegotiation. The human presence in the landscape is a fundamental aspect of this investigation, and it is important to consider how, even when marginal, it imposes itself on the scene from both visual and sonic perspectives.



river, by the railway that connects the city of Verona (from the western side) to Padova and Venice (the eastern side). This railway element is of particular significance as the neighbourhood is set to undergo substantial changes due to the construction of a new high-speed rail line (known in Italian as *Treno ad alta velocità* or *Tav*). It is anticipated that this new railway will effect a profound transformation of the area's appearance within the next decade.

In addition to the contentious topic of the railway construction site and related works, other transformations in the sign of the Anthropocene are taking place on the river and in the neighbourhood landscape. From a spatial perspective, the rivers have become visible as a result of increasingly frequent flooding phenomena, as evidenced by the Bacchiglione river overflowing in November 2010 and causing significant damage to the city's microcosm. More recently, at the end of February 2024, a minor flood occurred due to the overflow of the Retrone. By the end of May 2024, the municipality had already issued several alerts, instructing residents to avoid entering basements, move cars away from the riverside, limit their movements, and leave the roads as free as possible to allow emergency vehicles to intervene promptly. Residents have been apprised of the areas where sandbags can be distributed to protect their homes from the water, but these measures are often short-lived, with residents quickly returning to their former lives. The river continues to flow within the established limits, instilling a sense of safety in the community, and this pattern of alert and response is likely to persist until the next emergency occurs.

In 2022, Davide Papotti, a geographer, published an article dedicated to the Po River in an opposite condition – drought. In this article, he observed that the media visibility of the Po river is historically linked to extreme events and emergencies, which have a tendency to distort our representation of waterscapes. In consideration of the socio-environmental and climatic crises that also affect the Retrone, the following question was posed: how, in its geo-photographic representation, can our gaze and narration be freed from the emergency approach? In the previous section, a concise exposition was provided on the subject of river narratives that have been developed within the framework of "normality" and quotidian interactions with the river.

## 7. In-between: the project continues

The geo-photographic project has sought to illuminate the intricate relationship with a segment of the Retrone that has recently gained visibility. This development cannot be solely attributed to climate change but rather is also a consequence of the endeavours of local citizens and associations. In recent years, these entities have directed attention towards the river, prompting a revitalised focus on its role within the cultural landscape of the city. A salient example of this phenomenon is the Vie d'acqua initiative, which was spearheaded by eight local associations in April 2024.<sup>6</sup> On that occasion, a travelling and interactive conference was organised, with the aim of learning about the role of rivers in the history and geography of Vicenza. The conference also presented data and evidence on the current state of the rivers, as well as a non-competitive descent for canoes and kayaks along the Retrone and Bacchiglione rivers. This descent started from the park and ended in the Berici hills. La Piccionaiia, Vicenza's independent theatre, periodically organises sound walks along the

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<sup>6</sup> See: [www.velocitta.it/news/vie-dacqua](http://www.velocitta.it/news/vie-dacqua).



city's waterways and in its parks. In the previous year, the focus was on the Retrone river, which led to the creation of the aforementioned podcast, *Racconti di fiumi e di alberi*.

In September 2024, the UBIF (the acronym of the Una breve indagine fotografica) association, in collaboration with the social cooperative Insieme curated the event 'Un fiume l'attraversa' for the Di Sana Pianta festival. This event was set in the Ferrovieri neighbourhood and consisted of two workshops – one photographic, the other sonic – to explore the river over the course of a day, using a variety of artistic methods.<sup>7</sup> It is also noteworthy to mention the ongoing mobilisation of citizens, which includes initiatives such as the campaign against the contamination of waters in Vicenza territory by Per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (Pfas), a class of synthetic chemicals, and the opposition to the construction of the high-speed train line, which is situated in close proximity to the river.

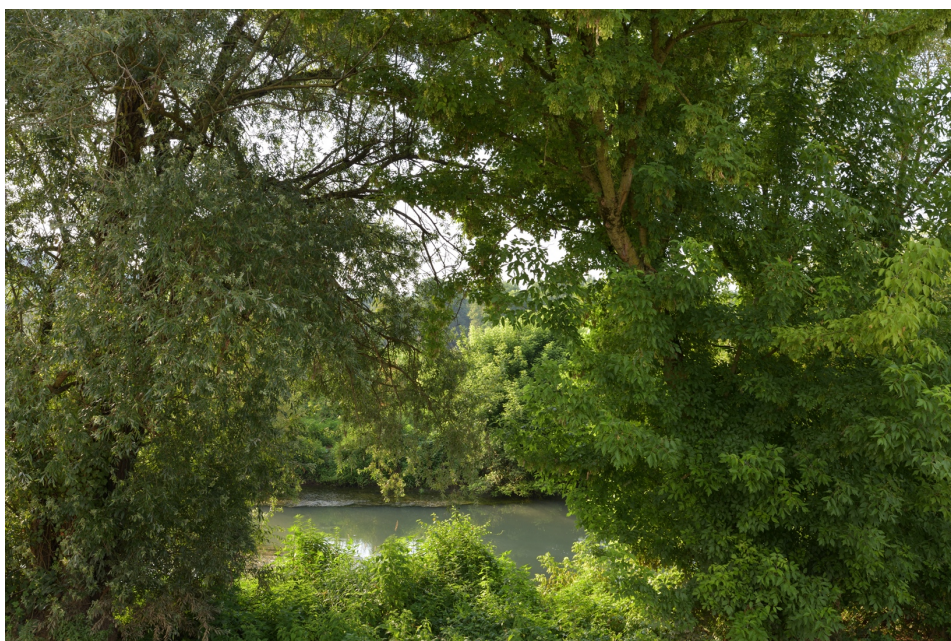


Figure 8 – July 12, 2024.

The practices observed in the riverscape evince a sense of affection for the environment, while simultaneously underscoring the imperative of maintaining a sense of engagement in the face of transformations that impact our daily landscapes. According to Francesco Vallerani (2013, p.31), the presence of small rivers in our daily life offers “valuable opportunities to develop a proficiency in escape, that is, the ability to situate oneself in marginal and alternative contexts”. As bell hooks asserts, the margin signifies “a place to inhabit, to remain attached to and faithful to... a place capable of offering us the possibility of a radical perspective from which to look, create, imagine alternatives and new worlds” (2015, p. 128).

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<sup>7</sup> See: [www.ubif.it/un-fiume-lattraversa](http://www.ubif.it/un-fiume-lattraversa)

In the light of these perspectives, our geo-photographic research endeavours seek to continue while engaging in discourse with these concomitant urban initiatives. This would be an opportunity (unprecedented, for the Retrone) for interdisciplinary exchange between science and art. As Hawkins (2015) argues about creative geographies: “just as geographers turn to creative practices as research methods, so artists are in turn adopting social science research methods within their own creative practice” (2015, p. 263). We have argued that this methodology is innovative in the study of the Retrone river and is useful in raising awareness of the transformations taking place in the urban landscape, in particular with respect to the little-explored themes of the hybridity of the river landscape, the right distance for analysis, the controversial relationship between human beings and natural spaces, and the margins as imposed boundaries to be rethought. The geo-photographic research on this river has only recently been initiated; it is imperative that this research is pursued in order to facilitate a more profound examination of a number of subjects that have hitherto been disregarded. Among these subjects, the focus will be directed towards soundscapes and animal geographies in the forthcoming period, with the objective of further enriching the project.

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