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# We are all tributaries: combining art and science to transform relationship of rivers

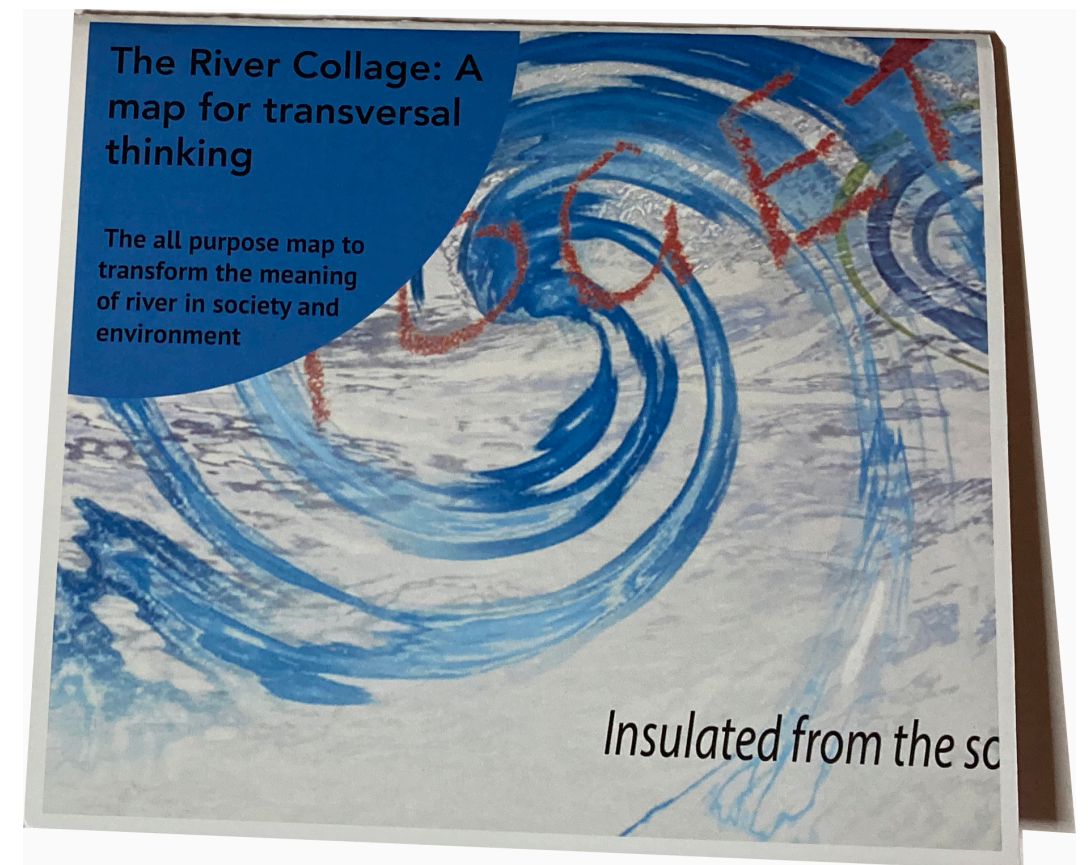
Artworks and Research by Dr Nicole

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# Introduction

This work combines my experience of soil hydrology and flood risk management and my present second PhD where I am using creative practices to reframe the ontology of the very complex issues of water, environment and humanity.

For this piece of work my creative practice approach is a/r/tography; an approach that forms ongoing inquiry to reach new understanding and relationships through knowing, doing and making. Irwin (2013) describes a/r/tography as: “drawing upon the professional practices of educators, artists, and researchers, it entangles and performs what Deleuze and Guattari (1987) refer to as a rhizome, an assemblage of objects, ideas, and structures that move in dynamic motion performing waves of intensities that create new understandings.” These “waves of intensities” are crucial to understanding the form of inter-subjective work, because this is where affective transformation of meaning and understanding happens, through sensing, feeling and

perceiving. The aim of this research is to question our way of living with rivers and flooding.

This artistic transformative approach began with an artistic engagement with the river where I spent time with the river taking underwater film, shown as step 1 in the flow diagram. This film began as a stimulus for creative practice workshops (shown as step 2 in the flow diagram) at the Scottish flood risk management conference 2020, where scientists and policy makers engaged in expressing associations with their work in flood risk management and the underwater film. This process created a series of participant drawings, ideas, poetry and free association of words and images. I then reflected upon the participant responses from Step 2 to create a collage, called ‘the river map’ in Step 3, which brings together, the scientific experiences of the participants, and their creative responses.

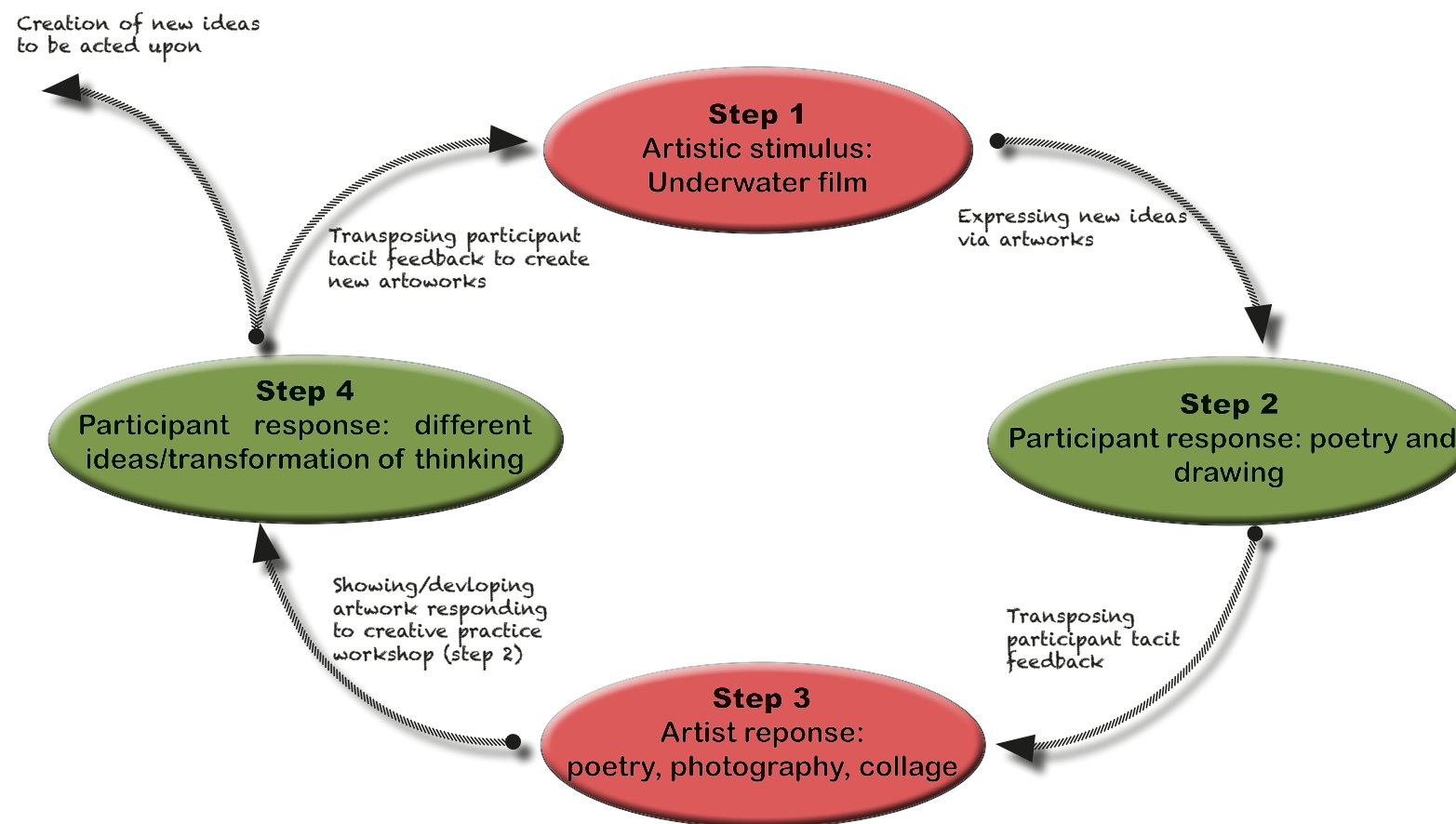
This collage is now in the process of being passed back to scientists and policy makers (step 4). Presently, the 'the river map' is being used to shift dialogue between policy makers and scientists where instead of viewing flooding as a problem to be eradicated, solutions are being discussed to live with the river.

One of the ways forward is considering how we are all tributaries of the river. Thinking in this way is a transformative process where present thinking is challenged, enabling innovative ideas to form. This takes into account the hydrological system and works with how society needs to adapt and become aware of the social constructs that constricts change towards a different way of living. This is where creative practice approaches are necessary to shift everyday thinking.

The following pages show examples of the creative practice approach.

The pages relate back to the flow diagram showing how it is necessary that several steps are required, as it takes time

towards becoming aware of new connections and time is needed to assimilate and reflect on the very complex information that is generated during each step.



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## Step 1: making underwater film

My process of filming underwater has transformed my own relationship to rivers. The more I explore the underwater realm, the more incredible it becomes and the beauty, complexity and the creativity within this world is beyond anything I can imagine. I created the underwater film to facilitate a different way of viewing the river to form a creative process for other. Clips of this film are included in the display material.

Underwater film making during an art residency in July 2019, in the Dee River Catchment, Aberdeenshire. I took underwater film over several days, where I would lie or kneel on the riverbank and submerge my hands in the water, holding an underwater camera in different parts of a river.

I preferred to put my hands in the water to film underwater, as this gave me an extra sense of water movement and temperature as I explored the underwater world. As I gazed at the short film every evening after a day out on the river banks, I was reminded of the Estonian biosemiotician Jakob von Uexküll and his influential work, exploring the life-world, i.e. the (world) of different species, where he suggests that “the task of animals and plants in the meadow is not only to display their colors, sounds and scents. These displays must first appear in the Umwelts of other animals and then be transformed into perceptual signs.” (Uexküll, 2010: 187). Perhaps this is how I feel my underwater film is; another sense that is necessary for the human to understand the vitality of water and the connection of this vitality back to the human.





*The Quioch*, digital photography 2019. Photographed while filming the tributaries of the Dee River



## Step 2: participant response

During the Scottish flood risk management conference 2020, the creative practice workshops provided an experience of the river through presentation of the underwater film on a large screen in the creative practice sessions and introducing a 7m long sketch of a river on paper that was placed in the middle of the workshop room.

The participants who were mainly scientists and policy makers who reflected on the underwater film, using a poetic method described by Grisoni (2017), which allowed the use of metaphor and simile. Drawing and writing words creating free association connected to the participants work with flood risk management and the underwater film The creative works were placed on the 7m sketch of the river to create a large collage of creative expression, that then formed a reflective discussion to generate new understandings and meanings for the participants.



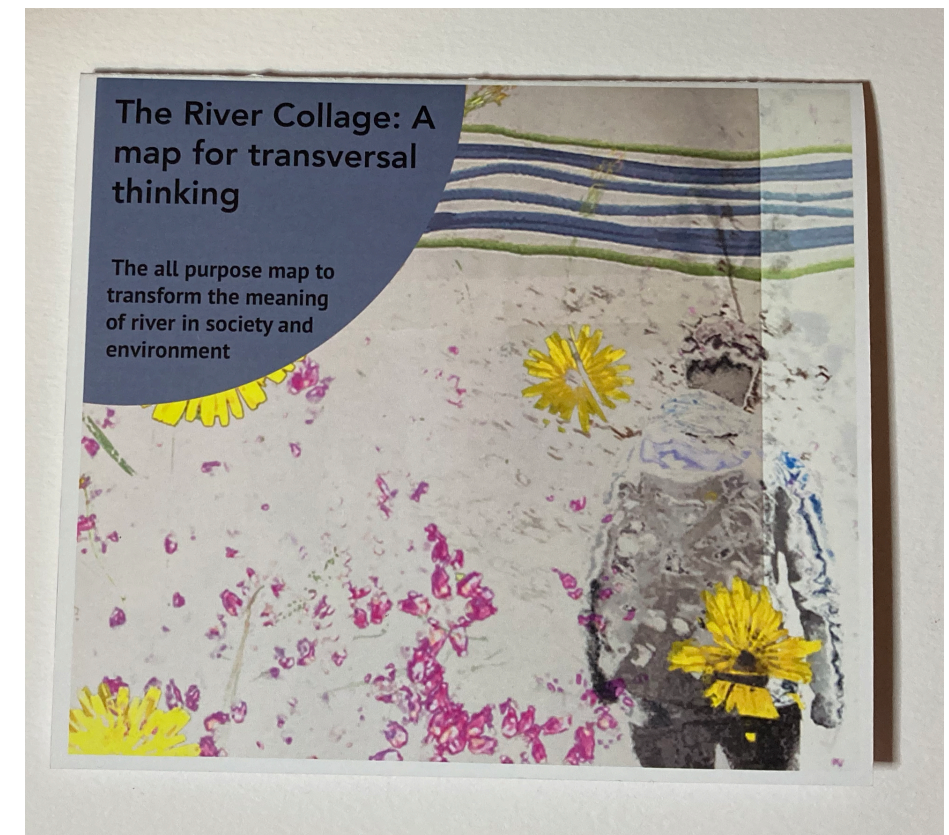


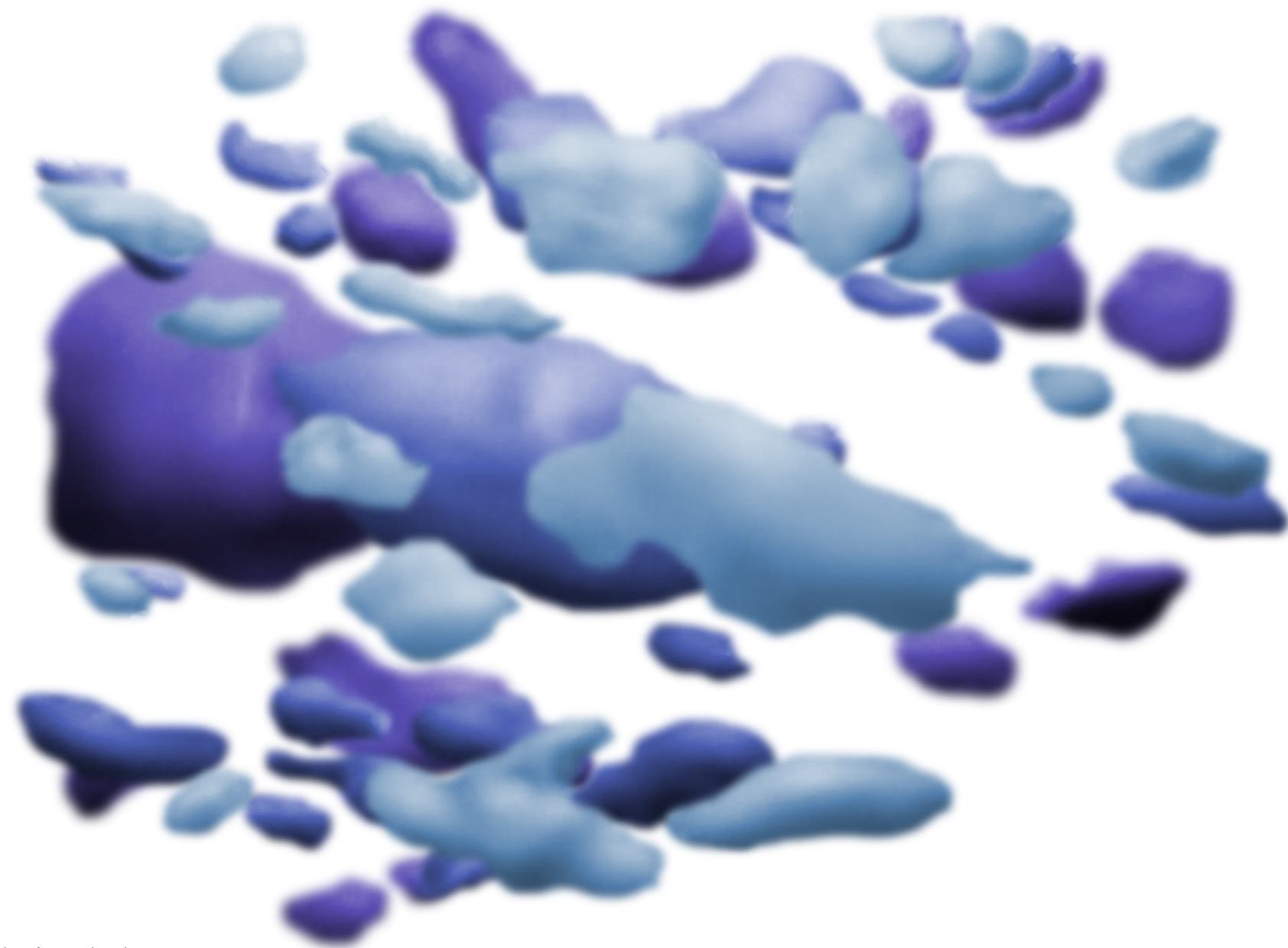
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## Step 3: artist response to creative practice sessions

The poetic expressions and the final collage of drawings and words developed by the participants during the creative sessions were then passed to me, where I reflected upon the discussions and expressive material through my own art-making, by re-creating the poetry into other poetic forms and developing layered digital imagery to explore the movement of the river and photographic prints of underwater sails. Some examples are given here.

The final outcome was a the 'the river map', a collaged artwork, that folds into a map cover and brings together lines of poetry from the creative sessions and reflections of imagery and concepts that were discussed in Step 2.





*'Turbulent transformation'* Nicole AL Manley ©2020

*'Turbulent transformation'* 2020, digital layers of film stills, each one second apart

## Becoming river

Carrying energy with me

Land resistance, I will get through

I am unstoppable, I keep on freely flowing

Coloured weeds are dancing with me

Smooth surfaces are formed, as on my journey I go,

Trying to escape, gasping for air whilst being sucked deep below

Insulated from the sounds of rain, there is peacefulness in my land

Deep with many layers, but a home I still offer

It's when I'm bubbling that I'm breathing

Be connected to the cosmos and see light and spirits

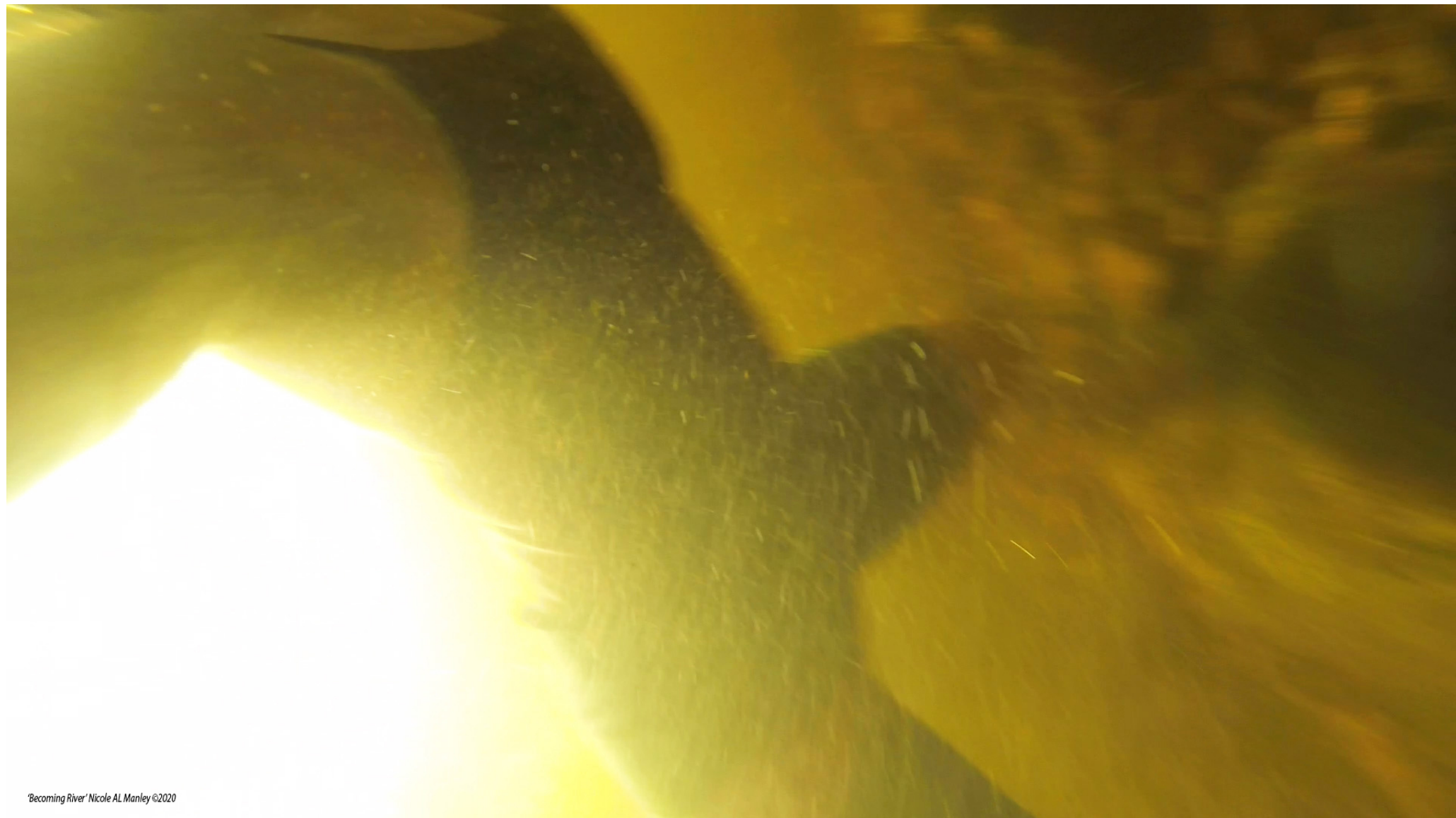
Beyond myself there is space to be

Escape the force, shelter in the eddy

As above, so below, bubbling, full of air, each side a mirror –

My life carries on as normal

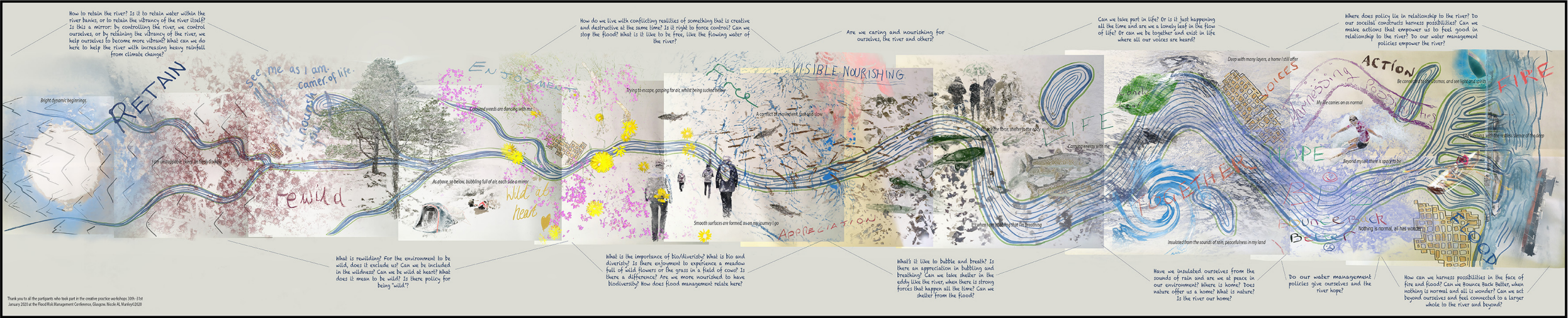




*'Becoming River'* Nicole AL Manley ©2020

*'Becoming River'* digital photography 2020, while filming underwater



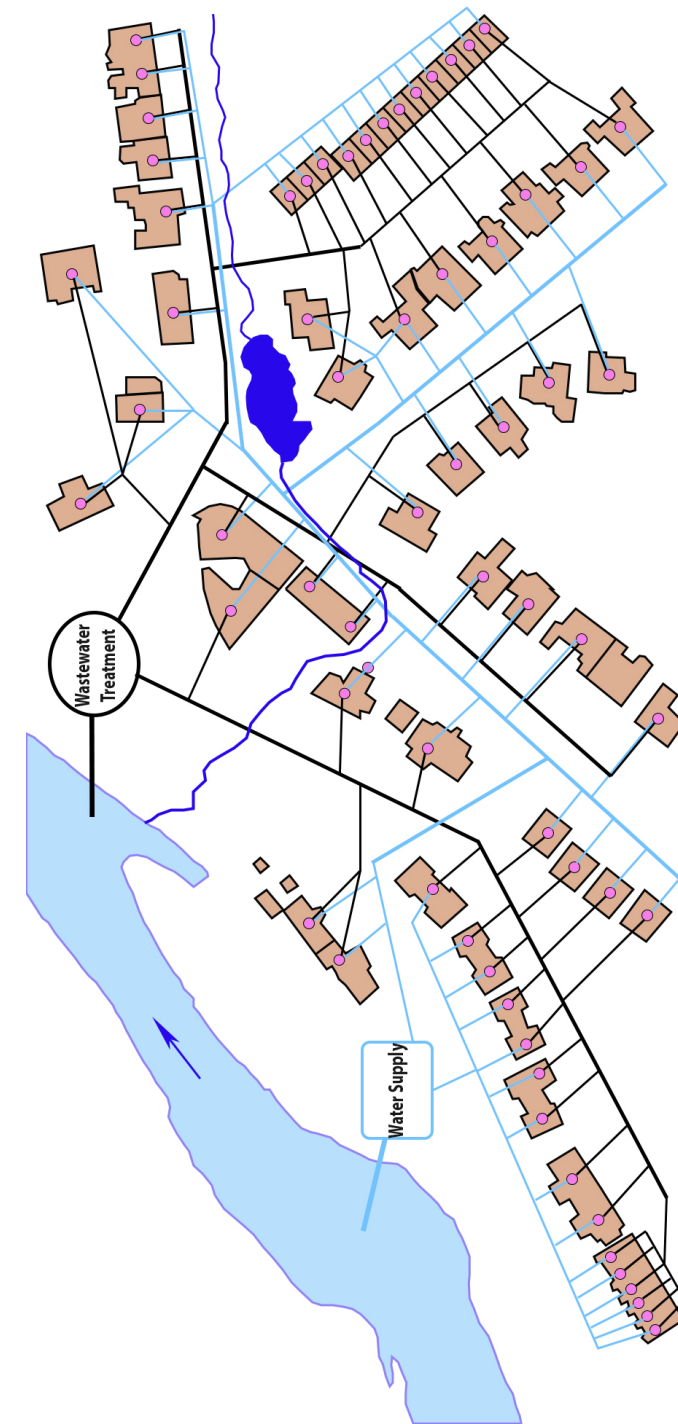


'The River Map' digital collage, 2020 (0.7 m x 0.35 m)

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## Step 4: participant response and transformation of ideas

The 'river map' has been the stimulus for several on-line workshops relating to flood risk management, where scientists have added their scientific viewpoints, such as river hydrology into the map. One of the most recent creative sessions developed the concept that "we are all tributaries". This became of particular interest when discussing how 300,000 homes in Aberdeenshire receive their water from the Dee River. This in effect suggests that these homes are miniature tributaries to the Dee River. When people discussed what meaning this meant for them to feel that they are actually connected to the Dee River, through the water from their taps, they felt a difference towards the Dee River. These ideas are being pursued through developing following creative sessions with local councils using 'the river map' as a stimulus for discussions to re-think how we live with rivers, rather than the river being objectified as a resource to be used and controlled.



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**Thank you for reading**

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