

The Floating Seminar

Århus Pilot
August 2019





This photo-essay is intended to stimulate thoughts and discussion. We would be thrilled if it inspired others to experiment with the form themselves. You can contact us at **jbcohen@cas.au.dk** or **amber.abrams@uct.ac.za**.

Layout by **iammartin.dk**

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The Floating Seminar

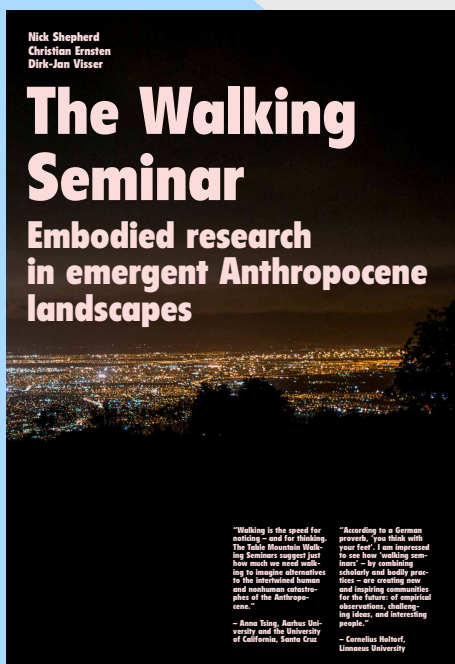


Inspired by Nick Shepherd and his collaborators' walking seminars, we had aimed our pilot floating seminar toward embodied, collective reflection and engagement in emergent Anthropocene waterscapes. Playing with classroom seminar formats,

**Canoes would be our chairs,
Grassy banks our tables,
Aarhus Å* and Brabrand Sø*
our collective concern and
classroom.**

We reasoned, guessed and hoped that such shifts of doing and attending, where water might actually make us wet, could cultivate new perspectives and open avenues towards fresh methods and questions.

*Å means 'river/stream', Sø means 'lake'



Around 10.30

We met, hoping the morning's rain might be coming to an end. All eight of us sat on the comfy benches in the inviting, wooden public interior of Folkestedet - sipping teas and coffees, nibbling on cookies.

Amber and Josh introduced themselves and ideas behind the day.

One by one, each participant shared a little about themselves: interests, disciplinary background, motivations for being involved in this intriguingly odd 'seminar' pilot.

Together, we were: three anthropologists (Pierre, Amber, Josh), a public health expert (Amber), two neuroscientists (Katrin and Isabelle), a surfer (Isabelle), a geographer (David), two heritage studies specialists (David and Martin), a species ambassador (Anna), a social worker (Martin), a scholar song writer (Martin), a material culture educator (Anna).



More specialisms represented than the number of participants, we reflected on water as material-metaphors drawn on in our respective lines of work and experience.

The brain as swirly riverine network in recent neuroscientific models. (*Katrine*)

The bloodstream. (*Martin*)

Warm water's healing capacities. (*Isabelle*)

Young people's energy as a river that social workers learn to channel. (*Martin*)

A river and its soily bank as a life-giving 'kiss' perhaps missing from urban waters like the Aarhus Å. (*Pierre, borrowing from ecological ideas in Cameroon*)

**A mode of transport, and
assemblages of flows, perhaps
echoing how knowledges move.**

**The ways in which human beings
come to their senses in and through
the waters of the womb. (*Martin*)**

**Only Amber and
Josh had been on
the Aarhus River
before. A disconnect
between environment
and people quickly
became a common
point of discussion
and interest, a theme
that re-emerged
throughout the day.**

Before getting on the water, we made lunch together





**After the food-centred
conviviality, we paired
off into our canoes.**

**With little canoeing
experience between
us, wobbly entrances
into waterborne
'seminar chairs'
encouraged rapid
appreciation of, and
bodily adaption to,
Aarhus Å's watery
affordances.**



Nevertheless, for many of us, getting going on the water encouraged feelings of peacefulness.

The cool of the water.

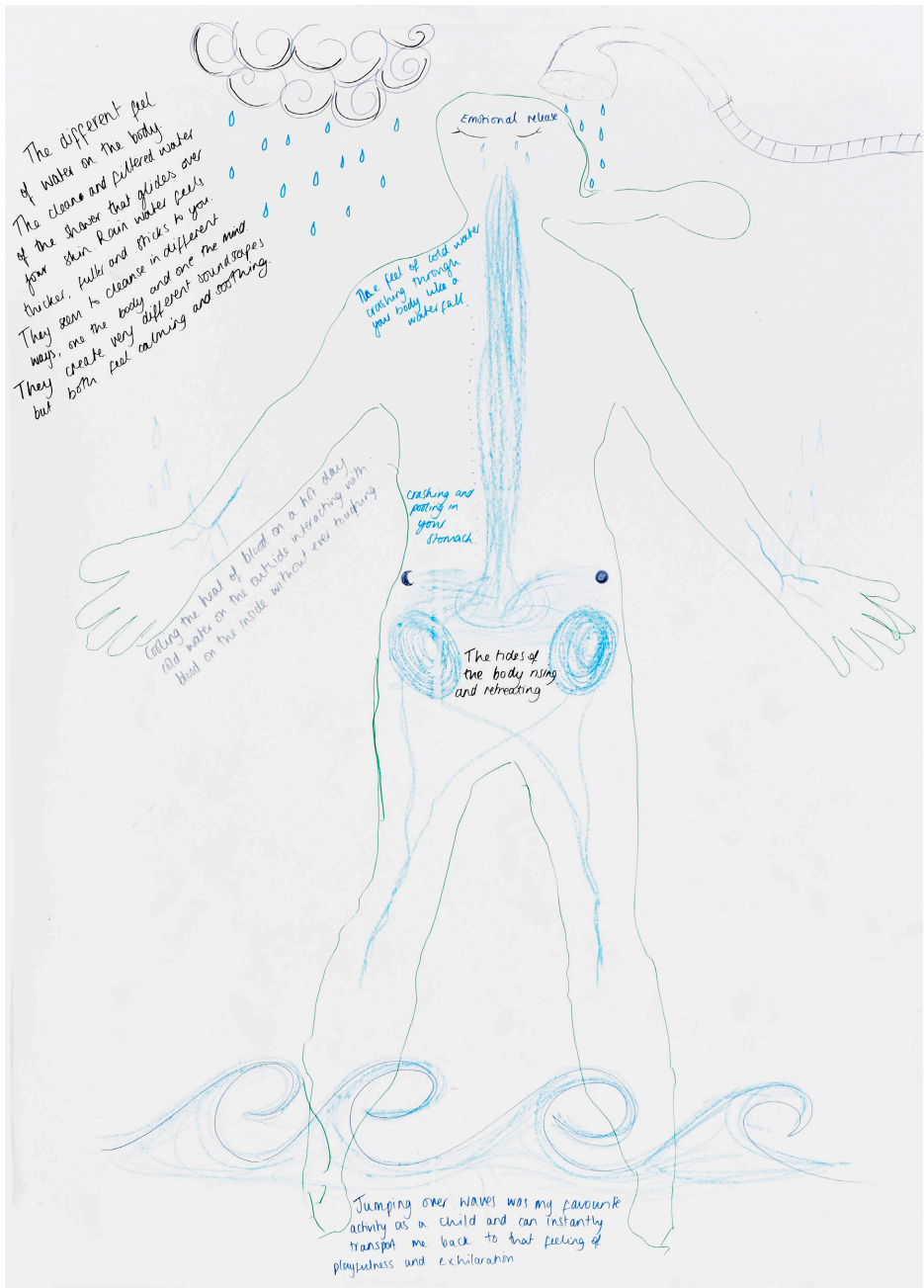
The splish, sploosh, splash of paddles in water.

The slow motion of gliding through.





The following day, some of us reflected on experiences of canoeing down the river, through the medium of body-mapping; this process calling to attention memories of new sensations, the presence of beings and things often less considered...



Isabelle Uren

"At the top, you've got me thinking about the water I interact with on a daily basis. (Pointing to rain clouds drawn). Of course, in Denmark, this is usually a daily basis, this is the rain clouds. But the quality of the water is so different, so the clean and filtered water of the shower just seems to glide off and clean your skin, whereas the rain water it feels stickier and like thick with something... So this one (pointing to a drawing of a shower head), it cleans your skin, but if you are out in the rain, it seems to clean your mind a bit more, so its these different types of water, and the way it interacts differently with your body and the different ways we can use it. And, then at the bottom, you've got one of my favorite things to do, its jumping over the waves, as a kid, but even now...

[I] just think it's really interesting to actually point this out, because [water's] something we interact with everyday and it's so automatic, and yesterday when I got off the river from the canoeing, I went and I had a drink, which was a completely different experience. Then I took a shower and my mind was racing with all the things we had spoken about, and ***just how paying attention to something can completely change the experience of it, and the way you interact with it, and the way you value it especially.***"



Anna Bo

"I experienced the water, in the first place, I think I experienced it through the paddle. The paddle was an extension of my body, like it was also a tool ... So I felt how the water was pushing or I was pushing against the water but I felt, as well, as though it was soft somehow. It was strong but it was soft. ***And the slowness of the movement was doing something with the way I felt and was breathing, so I really slowed down. And I felt this connection as well.*** I wanted to touch what I saw, and being part of it somehow, because it was so close ... And then we came across a place where there was a bridge and the construction where there were spiders that were so close ... and ... 'Wow!' it was almost like a small universe, planets and stars or something ... then when we came back, the water was so still that we could see the reflection of the bridge, the construction in the water and it felt like it was, everything was one piece of concrete... There were the spiders and then there were the swallows having a nest there with their young. But over there was not that many living beings in there, so ... this contrast, was very strong for me, I was thinking about our footsteps, our foot-printing as a human being; I felt that I was stirring in the water, I was getting in touch, it touched me but I as well gave something back and I didn't know if it was good or bad."





**With the sun fully out,
lunch on the grassy banks,
accompanied by the sound
of a ride-on lawnmower and
pupils studying the tinier
creatures of the river and
lake.**

**We reflected on our
experiences so far:**

DISORIENTATION

**Because going down the river
is "like going down a tube"
(David)**

**Because without using your
legs to move, you don't have
the same sense of placement
in the world. (Katrine)**





INTRUSION

On other (non-humans') worlds.

David had never gotten so close to a moorhen. Normally they scam as soon as you approach, but not this one, in its "own" place.

PEACE

As soon as people got on the water, they felt immediately more calm.

ACCESS

Perhaps a floating seminar could be more amenable to the needs of disabled people than a walking one? (David)

Back on the water





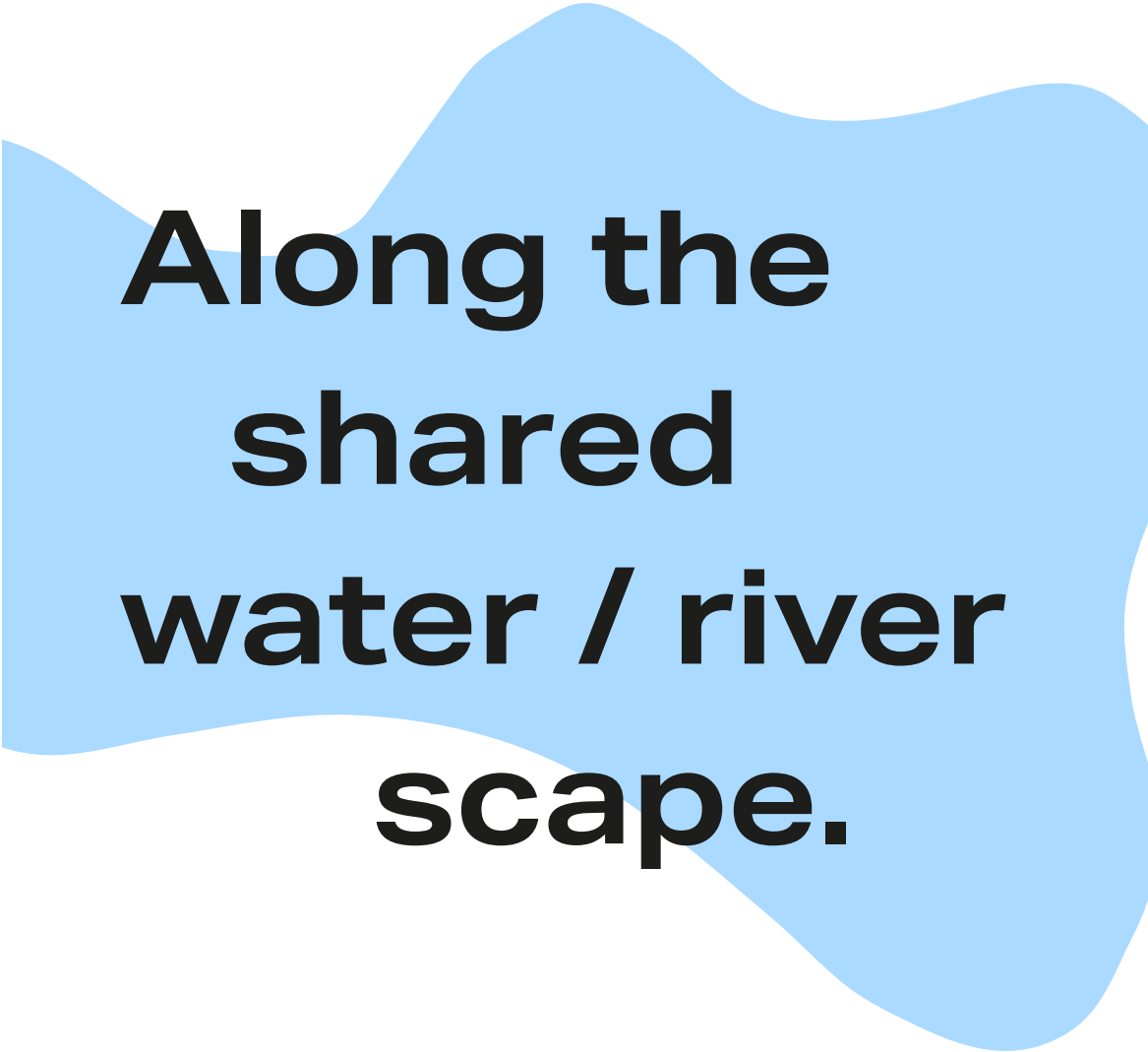


And the open space of Brandbrand Sø



Time to head home





**Along the
shared
water / river
scape.**





Supper time — And reflections

Paddling the river is like going down a tube – floating seminars spark very different insights, sensations, thoughts and questions than walking or cycling seminars might. *(David)*

The water reeds hide the river from the world and the world from the river. You hear signs of the wider world as you paddle, but rarely see them. The 'forced kiss' of reeds stifling the river? *(Pierre)*

I like the world being not for me – it's for the birds or other animals – they don't need a dock, the reeds offer them places to nest and hide. *(Anna)*

Looking up at the world, the red roots of the trees that I would never see otherwise, being on the river offered a different kind of perspective. *(Isabelle)*

The difficulty of getting people to phenomenologically register connections between taps – rivers – waters. Floating seminars as part of a way to perhaps do this. *(Pierre)*

The very high caffeine levels in Aarhus Å. How paddling its waters evokes a sense of the immediacy of the relations between human bodies and water bodies. *(Pierre)*

Riffing off Toby Butler's work on the Thames, how people are bound to the river and how it connects people.

How different forms of water require different kinds of responding to them: The small-scale mildness of Danish and British rivers vs. French or German rivers. *(David)*

How water draws you to it for leisure. Why?

Brains on LSD are like a whirlpool. The continuous system of water between yourself, brain and world. *(Katrin)*

Using our arms for motion is quite different than using our legs.

How the horizon of the river shifts as you move along it.

Suggestions for improvements/changes/additions raised in our discussions around the braai*

- Maybe invite people to prepare a five minute talk and deliver it on the water to stimulate discussion. *(Katrin)*
- Two people in a boat makes it hard to talk to others as in e.g. a walking seminar – switch up the people you are rowing with throughout the journey?
- More time – we only had time to paddle up and down the river
- Give people a topic to explore while in the boat and report back to the group
- Maybe give people some kind of specific assemblage to attend to during their journeys down the river. *(Pierre)*

***South African term for BBQ**



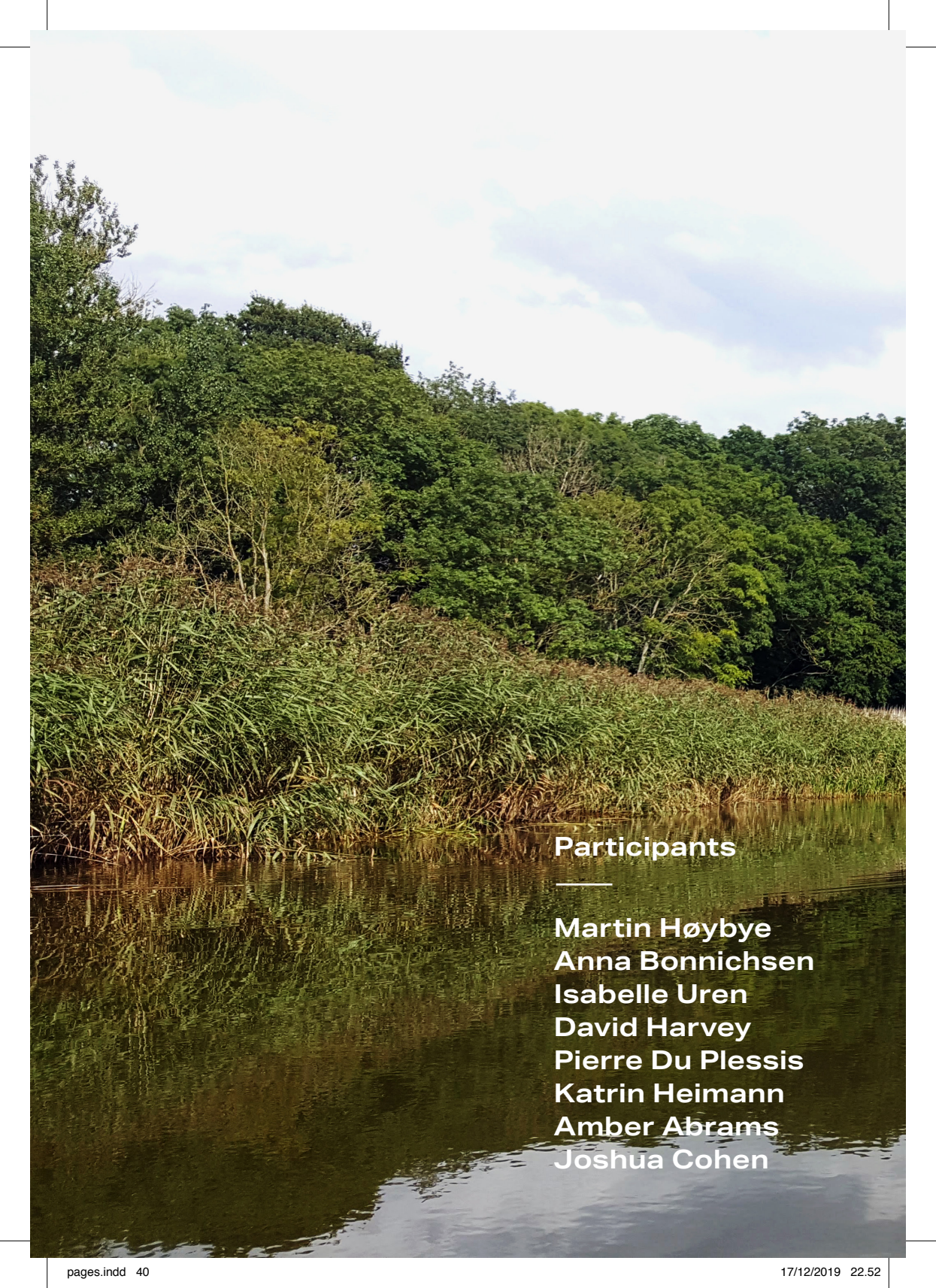
Ideas Amber and Josh have had since the floating seminar regarding developing the method

- Body-maps are a great complement to floating seminars and tie in really well, as Anna's and Isabelle's body-maps show
- Coming together as a 'flotilla' at pre-determined times to share experiences, observations and thoughts.
- A two-day workshop where part of the process is staying/camping on the riverbank.
- Making time to map perceptions of the river before and after the adventure.

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Participants

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