

Jun 8th, 9:00 AM - Jun 12th, 5:00 PM

‘Wet’ policymaking: exploring the potential of open-water swimming in agonistically designing affective environmental policies

Kseniia Obukhova

R4D Research group, School of Social Sciences, Hasselt University, Belgium; Civic & Policy Design (part of Arck) Research group, Faculty of Architecture and Arts, Hasselt University, Belgium

Jan Boon

R4D Research group, School of Social Sciences, Hasselt University, Belgium

Liesbeth Huybrechts

Civic & Policy Design (part of Arck) Research group, Faculty of Architecture and Arts, Hasselt University, Belgium

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dl.designresearchsociety.org/drs-conference-papers>



Part of the [Art and Design Commons](#)

Citation

Obukhova, K., Boon, J., and Huybrechts, L. (2026) ‘Wet’ policymaking: exploring the potential of open-water swimming in agonistically designing affective environmental policies, in Simeone, L., Gray, C. M., Verhoeven, A., de Götzen, A., Bakırlioğlu, Y., Zohar, H., Stead, M., and Buwert, P. (eds.), *DRS2026: Edinburgh*, 8–12 June, Edinburgh, United Kingdom. <https://doi.org/10.21606/drs.2026.1877>

This Research Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the DRS Conference Proceedings at DRS Digital Library. It has been accepted for inclusion in DRS Biennial Conference Series by an authorized administrator of DRS Digital Library. For more information, please contact library@thedrs.org.

‘Wet’ policymaking: exploring the potential of open-water swimming in agonistically designing affective environmental policies

Kseniia Obukhova^{ab}, Jan Boon^a, Liesbeth Huybrechts^b

^aR4D Research group, School of Social Sciences, Hasselt University, Belgium

^bCivic & Policy Design (part of Arck) Research group, Faculty of Architecture and Arts, Hasselt University, Belgium

*Corresponding author e-mail: kseniia.obukhova@uhasselt.be

doi.org/10.21606/drs.2026.1877

Abstract: In the dryland of environmental governance, design can help cultivate what we call ‘wet’ policymaking: an approach that embraces affect, emotional engagement, and more-than-human (MTH) relations as integral to ecological decision-making. Drawing on fieldwork with open-water swimming collectives and policy initiatives in Flanders, Belgium, we explore swimming as an agonistic inquiry into wet policy futures, revealing the tensions between the prevailing dryness and the potential wetness of environmental—particularly water-related—governance. Theoretically, the paper weaves together affective agonistic democratic thought, political design, and MTH perspectives to articulate wetness as both a political and design orientation. We argue that open-water swimming in Flanders exemplifies a practice of political and ecological attunement that offers valuable insights into how to design wetly for ecological policymaking—immersing bodily in policy concerns and engaging affectively with MTH worlds.

Keywords: wet policymaking; agonistic design; more-than-human; open-water swimming

1. Introduction

“I stripped off and ran naked into the water, screaming inwardly with the sudden agony of it.” (Roger Deakin, 2011)

It was mid-August in Belgium, eight months after my relocation from Italy. I had been warned about the country’s relentless rain and lack of sunlight, yet, contrary to these warnings and in line with the growing climate unpredictability, the weather has been surprisingly generous. I found myself eagerly anticipating long summer days by (or *in*) the water. After all, Northern Belgium is permeated with rivers, canals, and creeks. However, the reality that awaited me was unexpectedly dry.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International Licence](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).

Open-water swimming (OWS) in Flanders is generally prohibited, unless explicitly allowed. Despite neighboring regions where this practice is widespread and encouraged, it remains a “local challenge” in Flanders (Symons et al., 2025). At the same time, many still advocate for the right to swim. There are several reasons, but many of them converge into one: viewing water as a commons, a public good, and waterbodies as an extension of public spaces that should be accessible to everyone, provided they are respected and properly cared for (Lebbe, 2020). Democratizing access to water and acting against its privatization become matters of citizens’ rights, and consequently, engaging with water in Flanders becomes a political practice. However, in times of environmental crisis, any engagement with nature comes with its own challenges.

As a designer and researcher exploring democratic relations within environmental governance, I approach these encounters with more-than-human (MTH) entities, particularly water, as sites of design inquiry. Water sits at the heart of several governance-led initiatives in Flanders: from the ecological restoration ambitions of the Masterplan Binnendijle to Water-Land-Scape’s efforts to promote resilient agroecological systems (*Samen denken Binnendijle*, n.d.; *Water-Land-Schap*, n.d.). This is unsurprising in a region facing increasing water stress and marked by events such as the disastrous 2021 “water bomb,” which heightened a sense of environmental urgency (*Belgium - European Commission*, n.d.; Weerbaar Waterland, 2022).

These events further intensify an already hostile relationship with water in Flanders—one rooted in fear of its force and an urge to control it within an increasingly complex climatic context. The Flemish government started acknowledging water’s vulnerability and recently positioned it as a collaborator in decision-making rather than a problem to be solved (Blue Deal 2025-2029, 2025). Yet, this shift unfolds within a broader depoliticized context of environmental politics—largely guided by bureaucratic and techno-solutionist logics (Hajer & Oomen, 2025)—making it increasingly difficult to envision alternatives that engage affectively and relationally with water.

The times of crisis that we face demand, instead, approaches that engage more critically with the dominant “dry” ways of environmental policymaking. These “dry”—or affectively disconnected—approaches to policymaking risk demobilizing broader society concerning environmental topics, leading to a struggle in identifying with ecological issues because of their apparent irrelevance (Mouffe, 2022). In alternative, I propose to embrace a “wet” approach: one that expresses interest in the struggles, affects, and passions of the communities they serve (human and MTH). The policies emerging from it should also create conditions that empower people to engage politically with environmental topics, actively extending their influence to MTH domains.

In my case, wet policymaking is not only a political aspiration but also a design concern that prompts me to ask: how might I, as a designer, contribute to revealing wet—emotionally affective, materially situated, and MTH—dimensions of environmental governance? Rooted in design’s long-standing relationship with the political, I claim that design can be seen not as a mere instrumental tool at the service of policy, but as a generative means capable of re-envisioning policymaking as a whole (Richardson et al., 2025; DiSalvo, 2010). In the theoretical framework, I position the wet policymaking within the affective agonistic theory, exploring dissent and frictions, emotions, and embodiment as materials of governance

themselves. Design, in response, becomes a form of mediation between human and MTH bodies of water (Neimanis, 2017) and the institutions that currently govern them.

In this paper, I draw on OWS as a practice of affective, agonistic engagement with water-related concerns and reflect on how it can inform the design research field in supporting a transition to wet policymaking. This work is situated within the broader PhD research on the intersection of political design and MTH governance and is based on fieldwork conducted between August and September 2025. The paper draws on conversations, shared swims, and encounters with activists and politicians in the cities of Kortrijk and Mechelen, who advocate for accessibility of this practice despite numerous challenges. OWS could inform design experiments in civics (DiSalvo, 2022), as it intimately explores democratic conditions in local, everyday contexts, creating caring and engaged communities around this practice, and allowing for a deeper ecological awareness and an enhanced sense of ecological responsibility (Eckersley, 2004; Lysaker, 2024) on individual, collective, and institutional levels.

In the following sections, I first trace the conceptual shift from dry to wet policymaking. Afterwards, I explore the role of political design in enacting this shift. I then turn to OWS as an embodied inquiry into wet policymaking, before reflecting on how it can inspire and *wetten* design research methods, opening up space for more ecologically attuned democratic design experiments. As the first author and a PhD researcher, I write from within my own empirical explorations. My co-authors and supervisors have guided and influenced this inquiry, contributing to the shaping of the theoretical and methodological frameworks.

2. From “dry” to “wet” policymaking

Environmental governance today often—rather unconsciously—takes a depoliticized, affectively disconnected (Mouffe, 2022), ecomodernist and techno-solutionist approach (Hajer & Oomen, 2025). I refer to it as *dry*. Ecomodernism understands all natural processes as no longer independent of human actions, an idea referred to as the ‘end of nature’ (Arias-Maldonado, 2015). In line with the modernist tradition of dualistic separation between nature and culture—ingrained in principles of domination and mastery, where nature is seen as inferior (Plumwood, 1993)—this thesis empathizes with ecomodernists, who use it as a prevailing storyline in declaring nature's subordination to technological rationality and reducing the condition of crisis to a technical matter of expertise (Fremaux, 2019, p. 85; Hällmark, 2023). They also refer to the ‘good-Anthropocene’ as an era in which humans deploy “social, economic, and technological powers” to mitigate ecological crises, while rejecting the need to adapt societies to ecological limits (Asafu-Adjaye et al., 2015; Karlsson, 2025). Such strategies stem from a Promethean desire to control nature—the very impulse that produced the current crisis. They frequently ignore the uncomfortable legacies of environmental degradation rooted in colonialism, capitalism, and extractivism (Salleh, 2025). As Fremaux (2019, p. 91) notes, the ecomodernist ideal ultimately adopts a “post-nature narrative” that justifies “a(n) (anti)politics ‘without nature’,” redefining ecology as technological optimization by “economic and scientific experts,” and removing ecological issues from broader democratic contestation (Ibid.). Scholars have described this orientation as environmental democracy, or simply ‘business-as-usual’ (Dryzek & Pickering, 2018; Lysaker, 2024).

The Anthropocene—defined as an era in which human activities significantly (and, often, catastrophically) impact the Earth system—is at the center of these dry environmental politics, as it is often framed through the hard sciences narrative (Fremaux, 2019; Dryzek & Pickering, 2018). This research aligns with a more humanities-driven—“stretched”—understanding of the Anthropocene, one that exposes the unequal entanglements of human and nonhuman life and resists the narrow, human-centered, and technopositivist narrative of planetary mastery (Tsing et al., 2017, 2020). Modernity’s illusion that society operates independently of the Earth’s ecosystems is no longer tenable, as it risks further undermining the very conditions of life and turning any intervention, technological or otherwise, into further unsustainability (Tønder, 2025). This MTH Anthropocene requires ecocentric politics ‘with nature,’ placing the intrinsic value of the Earth system and MTH actors at the centre of governance logics. Ecological democracy, in this sense, offers an alternative to environmental democracy by questioning neoliberal institutional logics and promoting a more grounded, ecocentric approach (Eckersley, 2020, 2004; Lysaker, 2024; Pickering et al., 2020).

This raises the question of what political institutions are required to sustain such an ecological democracy. Representation and participation become central. Here, dominant ontological understandings of nature are challenged, and democratic representation is extended to “all that exist,” living or nonliving (Lysaker, 2024; Pickering et al., 2020). Institutions are no longer “purely human assemblages” but entanglements of MTH actors participating in decision-making (Tønder, 2025, p. 18; Lysaker, 2024). This requires a profound shift in governance logics. As Machin (2019) notes, governing in the Anthropocene presents fundamental challenges not only because of the complexity of ecological systems, but also because democratic institutions are not automatically progressive or ecological. On the contrary, they are often shaped by conservative forces that work to maintain unsustainable systems (see also Di Paola, 2015; Blühdorn, 2015). An attempt of anthropocentric governance to reshape the idea of the environment to fit its own managerial logic (Hajer & Oomen, 2025; Warde et al., 2018) has led to today’s destabilized relations with the MTH world, resulting in a profound ecological and social crisis.

Lysaker (2024), drawing on Eckersley (2004, p. 107), argues that ecological democracy depends on ecological freedom—a form of freedom that respects the limits of the Earth’s systems. He insists that governments have a primary role in fostering ecological responsibility, particularly by cultivating sensitivity to the risks posed by the disruption of these systems. How, then, can policymakers inspire this responsibility in local communities? In the dryland of environmental politics, where emotions and affective attachments are dismissed as irrational (Mouffe, 2022), agonistic democratic theory could provide an answer. It calls for embracing the power of affects to foster solidarity and animate a democracy that redefines liberty and equality across human and nonhuman worlds. Agonistic theory builds on troubling emotions and their emergence—often through conflict—as the very conditions of democracy (Mouffe, 1993, 2013). In her most recent work, Mouffe (2022, p. 26) critiques environmental politics for limiting citizen participation to forms that do not allow emotional identification with ecological concerns, as it lacks “practices that make possible the creation of democratic citizens.” Here lies the potential for what I call ‘wet’ policymaking: approaches that invite affective and embodied engagement with environmental policy matters, enable

local forms of ‘social frictions’ (Tsing, 2005), and demand agonistic participation rather than smooth technocratic management.

Driven by a desire to stimulate ecological responsibility, wet policymaking has agonistic participation at its heart. In contrast to controlling, top-down approaches, wet policymaking diversifies the political landscape by forming alliances around alternatives (Machin, 2019), where MTH entities are agonistically involved in imagining ecological and democratic futures. Planetary survival cannot be decided merely in policy circles; it must be understood as a shared condition that demands collective engagement. Wet policymaking stimulates citizens’ affective and emotional participation in this collective action. It is a reciprocal process, because passions and affects are themselves employed in the re-envisioning of the environmental governance processes—a necessary act to embark on a journey of transition to ecological democracy.

3. Design at the service of wet policymaking

Design holds strong potential for ‘*wetting*’ the policy processes that shape environmental governance. Its entanglement with the political has been widely discussed—from design’s capacity to “prescribe politics” into materials, environments, and bodies, to its role in broadening the very understanding of the political (Domínguez Rubio & Fogué, 2017). Margolin (2012) emphasized the importance of design in influencing existing governance structures, anticipating a new field of the discipline—design for policy—a concept later popularized and developed by Bason (2016). Yet, when absorbed into bureaucratic frameworks, design often becomes depoliticized—reduced to an instrumental tool for efficiency rather than a means of democratic imagination (Durose & Richardson, 2015; Brinkman et al., 2023).

However, design can still be a political agent. Bailey (2017) criticizes the tendency to view design solely as instrumental to policy processes and calls for moving “beyond usefulness.” DiSalvo (2010) distinguishes between design for politics—serving established agendas—and political design, which creates conditions for agonistic engagement and plural democracy. Later, through the notion of adversarial design, he demonstrates how design can enact agonism by materializing disagreement and prompting critical participation (DiSalvo, 2012). Similarly, Richardson et al. (2025) differentiate between design acting for, with, or against policy, emphasizing design’s regenerative potential to surface alternative rationalities and reconfigure governance itself.

In recent years, there has been increased attention on the design’s role in the socio-environmental politics. Fry (2011) exposed design’s complicity in “unsustainability”—a condition of a profound crisis of the global environment and its ecologies, urging a radical redefinition that “makes design a politics.” While still largely unsustainable (especially industry), design is still considered a well-suited practice for ecological transformation towards more sustainable futures (Boehnert, 2018). Huybrechts et al. (2022) ground the complex role of design in mediating the ecological drama, calling for a reframed, more careful politics of design, in line with the new capabilities the discipline can deliver, with an ambition to “reweave the web of life.” The recent MTH turn is also a demonstration of a shift in the focus from a human-centered perspective, positioning design as a mediator

between multiple ontologies (or relational ways of making the world) and as a practice that, once again, reconsiders politics itself (Heitlinger et al., 2025; Light, 2024; Poikolainen Rosén et al., 2024; Akama et al., 2020; Escobar, 2020).

In this light, design mirrors the distinction between dry and wet policymaking. Design often aligns with the rational and managerial ethos of contemporary governance. At the same time, it can generatively rethink the political from within, by embedding dissent and emotional investments that inevitably accompany ecological and democratic change (Coops et al., 2025). Drawing on agonistic and MTH approaches, design could make the processes of environmental governance more wet, emotionally affective, and responsive to the entanglements that constitute the MTH Anthropocene.

4. Exploring wet policymaking through OWS

To illustrate some of the above theoretical considerations on wet policymaking, I ‘dive’ into the practice of open-water swimming (OWS). In many European countries, people seek ways of “reconnecting with nature” in their daily routines, making OWS (also known as outdoor or wild swimming) increasingly popular. OWS is attractive for many reasons. Kate Rew (2022, p. XII), founder of the Outdoor Swimming Society, poetically describes swimming as not about “passively consuming the landscape,” but rather “being pulled into it,” becoming one with the surrounding environment. The communal dimension of swimming is an appealing reason for others, who claim that “swimming is a leveller,” making it a relational practice where to share “their love of the water with others” (Jones, 2023, p. 6).

Swimming *in* the water inevitably makes one think about what else is in that water. This is why many engaged in this movement campaign for better water quality and the well-being of aquatic ecosystems (Ibid.). In Switzerland, civil society has long taken the lead in safeguarding rivers from pollution and defending the right to swim, pushing for more collaborative policy decisions shaped in dialogue with local communities (Ruby & Shinohara, 2019). In the UK, swimmers are well-known for actively advocating for the health of their local waterbodies (Rew, 2022; “Right to Swim,” n.d.). Even the *Outdoors Swimmers’ Code* (“The Outdoor Swimmer’s Code,” 2021) begins with a principle of environmental care, reminding swimmers to be conscious of their impact.

Swimming is a form of relating to the MTH. Through the lens of hydrofeminism (Neimanis, 2017), it can be seen as an embodied practice of entering into relation with other bodies of water. While human experience is central to OWS, the practice—if done respectfully and consciously—grounds a sense of human responsibility towards the waterbodies one engages with. As noted earlier, OW swimmers become campaigners for aquatic wellbeing and challenge dominant narratives that frame water as dangerous or polluted. This alternative understanding recognizes water as something to be respected and approached with care, yet also as relationally rich and capable of helping us “cultivate better ways of living with water *now*” (Ibid., p. 21). Such embodied encounters can help us relate to local waterbodies “more ethically and less anthropocentrically” (Oppermann, 2023, p. 45).

There is no doubt that OWS is an affective practice: it drives emotional engagement with oneself, fellow swimmers, local waterbodies, and the wider environment. In Flanders, these affects are often conflictually rich. Outdoor swimming is largely confined to pools or

controlled reservoirs, where access is surveilled and often paid (see the map on *Outdoor Swimming Belgium vzw / Meer open zwemwater*, n.d.). For many, however, this does not represent what OWS is about: instead, locals “escape chlorine captivity” and swim in rivers, lakes, and even canals despite restrictions. They also continuously negotiate with policymakers over their right to access water (*Outdoor Swimming & Water Quality*, 2024; Symons et al., 2025). While permission to exercise this right is still pending, they organize trips to neighboring countries to experience swimming (Antonissen, 2025). I suggest that OWS exemplifies an agonistic relational practice of political engagement—one with strong potential to mobilize affects into people’s relationships with water, foster distributed forms of environmental responsibility, and contribute to a more responsive ecological democracy. As will emerge from the fieldwork, OWS is a form of embodied inquiry into wet policymaking.

5. The agony of swimming

To explore the potential of OWS in enacting wet policymaking, I spoke (and swam) with representatives of two Flemish initiatives. The two cases illustrate how this wetness emerges from different directions: one bottom-up and insurgent (Kortrijk), one institutionally led but affectively driven (Mechelen). In Kortrijk, I encountered LZSB—a collective of activists who embrace what they call “guerrilla” swimming to resist the idea that water must remain under strict control. It exemplifies a bottom-up, dissent-driven struggle and deliberate risk-taking. In contrast, in Mechelen, I met the policymakers behind a city-led ecological restoration initiative that explicitly positions water accessibility—and the right to swim in the Dyle river—among its official objectives. This top-down, policy-led attempt to institutionalize more affective engagements with the MTH confronts the dry bureaucratic traditions. Together, these cases illustrate the two paradigms of emerging wetness—one arising from localized civic action that challenges constraining policies, the other from governance attempting to soften itself.

5.1 Kortrijk: on water activism



Figure 1 Sign prohibiting swimming in Kortrijk. Photo: First author.

It was the last weekend of August when I met with Simon Verschelde from the LZSB in Kortrijk. Swimming was not on the agenda, as we were preparing to canoe the Lys River to the historical center of the city, where others were already waiting for us. We were part of a local action in support of the Global Sumud Flotilla¹, co-organized by LZSB—another sign of how water becomes a political arena. One thing had to be done: bring the canoes from a shed approximately 10km upstream to Kortrijk. It turned out to be the perfect moment for conversation: paddling down the Lys while reflecting on what it means to engage with water politically.

Simon told me that Lys used to be called the ‘Golden River’—the name associated with the unprecedented prosperity of the region alongside this waterbody, given the high profits from the flax industry for linen textile production. For decades, industrial discharges flowed into the Lys, making the river extremely polluted. Although the industry is long gone, and the river is much healthier, for many, it is still hard to imagine immersing themselves in it.

LZSB’s campaign for OWS in Kortrijk began from a personal place: Simon himself remembered swimming as a child in local ponds with his friends, and he wanted to revive that experience. During their first “guerrilla” swim, more than twenty people showed up—a

¹ Global Sumud Flotilla is an international solidarity action, a nonviolent fleet sailing the Mediterranean in August-September 2025 to break the siege and provide humanitarian aid to people in Gaza strip, Palestine. More information can be found on the website <https://globalsumudflotilla.org/>.

sign that others cared, too. Soon after, they created a private messaging group to organize and swim together. Nowadays, they meet on special occasions, for example, every full moon. In his words, swimming with the moonlight carries something special, almost spiritual, and opens another way of relating to water: "There is a sort of spiritual dimension. You kind of reconnect with nature, and you add another level of relation to water."

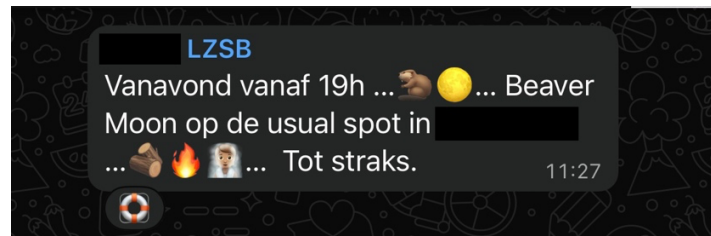


Figure 2 Invitation to participate in the LZSB full moon swim in the private messaging group.

As we paddled, he shared other stories about the river: he mentioned the old arms lost during the straightening of the river, and how its right bank was covered with stones to protect against erosion—something that made many birds nesting there lose their habitat. He said that being on water shifts your perspective: "It feels like you are part of it." OWS, in fact, taught him a lot more about rivers, water ecosystems, other species, and even about the moon and its phases. He believes that this practice requires a lot of knowledge and responsibility, but it also exposes you to that knowledge, because "when you see things from the water, you recognize them differently."

LZSB believes people will not be stopped from swimming, especially with rising temperatures. Yet while rivers in Kortrijk open up to profitable activities—with motorboats and cruise vessels occupying water spaces—OWS is still prohibited or heavily controlled. The next morning, after our canoe trip, I joined some of the group's enthusiasts for a swim. One of them told me, "When I'm inside the water, I really feel like I'm part of nature." In Kortrijk, to swim is not a simple recreational activity. Here, engaging with water is a political act because it involves reclaiming one's connection to nature and demonstrating that it cannot be restricted from above.



Figure 3 Open-water swimmer in Kortrijk. Photo: First author.

5.2 Mechelen: on governing through affects



Figure 4 and 5 Swimming area in Keerdok, Mechelen. Photos: First author.

Another heatwave in Flanders. Early September, and the thermometer climbed to 28°C. I was walking along the Dyle River in Mechelen, heading towards Keerdok. The area had been set up for a public event organized by the local administration to showcase progress on Masterplan Binnendijle—a project that brings the river and its ecosystems to the center of local decision-making. For the first time, Dyle was officially recognized among the project stakeholders, even in the official documents.

OWS is one of the fifteen guiding principles of the masterplan, identified together with local residents through citizen assemblies (*Samen denken Binnendijle*, n.d.). Mechelen is among the pilot cities in Flanders exploring legislation to promote swimming in public waters. For several years now, swimming in the Dyle has been allowed—both in surveilled and unsupervised areas—while monitoring has been in place to define the criteria for future swimming spots. The ambition is to turn swimming into a regular, year-round possibility (*Mechelen*, 2024).

To swim in the dedicated area on that day, one had to book a slot on the official website. The process was quite immediate, and in return, I received a list of guidelines for the swimming session. Among those, a requirement to be a “strong swimmer” (able to swim at least 100m), to “respect the environment” and to swim only if “you are familiar with the risks.” OWS is indeed not for everyone, but I felt I could check these boxes and enter the swimming area.



Figure 6 Entrance bracelet for swimming in Keerdok, Mechelen.

After briefly refreshing in the waters of Dyle, I met two representatives of the local administration responsible for the project and the participatory processes behind it. I wanted to know why swimming had become so central to their agenda. It became immediately clear that seeing things *from* the water helps shift one's perspective. Immersing in water, they said, makes one feel “really in nature,” allowing one to notice the “small things” and emotionally engage with the surrounding environment.

The project, in many ways, seeks to connect citizens to ecological concerns by “speaking their language”—the one of emotions and lived experiences. In Flanders, as one of my interviewees explained, people carry a “strange connection with water”: one defined by fear. If authorities say that swimming is dangerous, most people will not question this interdiction. In Mechelen, the municipality sees its role as creating conditions for safe encounters with the river, mediating between human needs and those of other species. However, this work is far from straightforward; instead, it is marked by internal tensions and conflicts. Functional thinking, my interviewees assert, oftentimes dominates the political arena, reducing understanding of nature to maps, charts, and plans. Still, feelings are just as important, as they become a gate to empathizing with another, MTH way of being in the world. This is why, apart from OWS, they organize participatory activities with citizens, where affect can emerge (often using creative methods), such as nature walks or discussions, in which citizens are invited to represent another local species (*Mechelen's River Project*, n.d.). In Mechelen, OWS is part of an institutional action that slowly but steadily confronts the functionalist logics of governance, allowing for affects to be part of policy processes.

6. Discussion and conclusion

6.1 Swimming as an embodied inquiry into wet policymaking

One of the people I met in Kortrijk reminded me that our connection to water is not something new: “it’s part of us,” it has always been there. What feels new, they said, is the growing realization that “we cannot fight nature, we have to live together,” and this understanding should be supported by policy decisions that accommodate a more sustained and affective relationship with local waters—the one I previously described as wet.

Both Kortrijk and Mechelen mobilize affective, embodied relations with water, treating OWS as a means to unsettle dominant, dry framings. While Kortrijk disrupts environmental governance from the outside by being openly agonistic, Mechelen experiments with wetness from the inside—incorporating affective agonism within the institutional. In Kortrijk, OWS unfolds as an agonistic relational practice of political engagement, where water becomes a site of struggle. Here, swimming is about reclaiming nature as part of oneself, where humans swim “to be in between the ducks.” This opposes the controlling, anthropocentric view of nature as something that must obey humans, acknowledging the nonhuman as an equal. Guerrilla swimmers materialize dissent through bodily engagement and refusal of managerial water logics, connecting with local waters affectively (and even spiritually), and acknowledging their own role in safeguarding them.

In Mechelen, this happens from within, with the local administration seeking to mobilize passions and emotions towards ecological concerns by legitimizing Dyle as a stakeholder and inviting citizens to engage with its waters. Years of working with local inhabitants showed them that “people react on emotions.” However, this wet approach—while obvious in its aspirations—is confronted by procedural dryness (booking systems, risk-prevention mechanisms). The regulated spontaneity limits the affective potential of OWS. These tensions reveal an institutional attempt to be more affective, while simultaneously reproducing functionalist logics that limit opportunities for people to fully identify with MTH struggles and stimulate a sense of responsibility towards environmental well-being.

OWS is not a panacea. In a brief, informal conversation with a member of a Flemish organization advocating for better water quality, it emerged that OWS is often instrumentalized to enhance a city’s image or attract more tourism. Moreover, swimming in open waters does not automatically lead to ecological attunement. It is, nonetheless, inspiring to observe how swimming might foster a caring environment that cultivates both community and personal responsibility (i.e., in Kortrijk). The open question that remains is whether such genuine, citizen-driven engagement can be translated into broader policy action, or whether the institutionalization of similar principles would ultimately constrain the very forms of individual and communal involvement that make them effective (i.e., in Mechelen).

6.2 Future opportunities for design research

Swimming and designing might seem like two very distant practices. But with this exploratory work, the opposite is claimed. OWS itself—wet, affectively engaged, and centered on MTH relations—becomes a civic design experiment (DiSalvo, 2022). According to DiSalvo, design can be understood as a form of democratic inquiry that cultivates

pluralistic and caring relations through collaborative, just, and agonistic practices. He explores this through design experiments “in small”—in *civics*—seeing their role as “practices and discourses that blend imaginative making and politics” (Ibid., p. 16). By staging what is not yet available, design takes care of the present by experimenting with possible futures. Hence, swimming, through its localized, embodied, and emotional engagements, materializes alternative relations with water bodies and the bodies that govern them today, rendering viable the futures currently “captured” by bureaucratic and technocratic constraints (Hajer & Oomen, 2025).

There is a lot of potential in swimming as a research method, yet it remains largely underexplored. Scholars such as Denton et al. (2021) propose the ‘swim-along’ as a form of inquiry, where research happens through an *actual* immersion. Their work challenges the idyllic portrayals of OWS that often overlook the discomforting aspects of swimming, such as cold temperatures, the need to stay alert, the effort of controlling one’s body, or the vulnerability of exposure. From an agonistic perspective, however, it is precisely these challenging aspects that help emerge the affective and contesting sentiments, the *agony*. Water itself becomes an agonistic space that does not need to be staged or designed.

This work is a speculative exploration of how the agonistic richness of OWS can be employed in politically engaged design research and practice. For example, in how and where participation happens, and who gets to participate. Among these concerns: what role do waterbodies play in relation to policies and governance actions that regard them, who has access to water (skilled swimmers or those who do not know how to swim, other species), who manages this access, from where and in what form (waterbodies, policymakers, private companies or inhabitants, in the field or from the office, affectively or technocratically), how current engaging with water happens (directly through embodied immersion or from afar). What if research sessions exploring environmental policies actually happened in the water, while swimming?

OWS offers a glimpse into how encounters with water might bring emotions, frictions, and caring responsibility into governance. Translating such practices into the domain of design suggests a shift from designing instrumentally for policy to designing with MTH amidst the complexities of the Anthropocene. This approach is in line with a MTH turn in design referred to earlier in this paper. Wet policymaking thus asserts itself as both a political and a design challenge. In this sense, designing wetly is not merely instrumental, not about creating better policies. It is about enabling the conditions for ecological democracy through which we can collectively, agonistically, and more affectively inhabit environmental futures.

Acknowledgements: I would like to thank the River Lys and the River Dyle for allowing me to engage with their waters; the members of the LZSB guerrilla swim club in Kortrijk; and municipal actors in Mechelen for sharing conversations and swims, as well as Louise Mazet and the anonymous reviewers of the paper for their thoughtful suggestions. This research was conducted as part of the FWO-funded project *Redesigning Democracy*. This paper used AI-assisted technologies for language editing; all ideas and analyses are the authors’ own.

7. References

- Akama, Y., Light, A., & Kamiyama, T. (2020). Expanding Participation to Design with More-Than-Human Concerns. *Proceedings of the 16th Participatory Design Conference 2020 - Participation(s) Otherwise - Volume 1*, 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3385010.3385016>
- Antonissen, P. (2025, June 6). *Sigrid Spruyt: "We mogen op straat lopen, tussen het fijnstof? Laat ons dan ook in open water zwemmen."* De Standaard. <https://www.standaard.be/binnenland/sigrid-spruyt-we-mogen-op-straat-lopen-tussen-het-fijnstof-laait-ons-dan-ook-in-open-water-zwemmen/70568474.html>
- Arias-Maldonado, M. (2015). *Environment and Society: Socionatural Relations in the Anthropocene*. Springer International Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-15952-2>
- Asafu-Adjaye, J., Blomqvist, L., Brand, S., Brook, B., Delfries, R., Ellis, E., Foreman, C., Keith, D., Lewis, M., Lynas, M., Nordhaus, T., Pielke, R. Jr., Pritzker, R., Roy, J., Sagoff, M., Shellenberger, M., Stone, R., & Teague, P. (2015). *An Ecomodernist Manifesto*. <http://www.ecomodernism.org/>
- Bailey, J. (2017, June 15). *Beyond Usefulness: Exploring the Implications of Design in Policymaking*. Design + Power - 7th Nordic Design Research Conference, Oslo, Norway. <https://doi.org/10.21606/nordes.2017.002>
- Bason, C. (2016). *Design for Policy*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315576640>
- Belgium—European Commission. (n.d.). Retrieved August 25, 2025, from https://environment.ec.europa.eu/topics/water/water-wise-eu/belgium_en
- Blue Deal 2025-2029: Kompas voor een waterwijs Vlaanderen (p. 49). (2025). Vlaamse overheid.
- Blühdorn, I. (2015). A Much-Needed Renewal of Environmentalism? In C. Hamilton, C. Bonneuil, & F. Gemenne (Eds.), *The Anthropocene and the Global Environmental Crisis: Rethinking modernity in a new epoch* (pp. 156–167). Taylor & Francis. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315743424-13>
- Boehnert, J. (2018). *Design, ecology, politics: Towards the ecocene*. Bloomsbury Academic, An imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc. <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781474293860>
- Brinkman, G., Van Buuren, A., Voorberg, W., & Van Der Bijl-Brouwer, M. (2023). Making way for design thinking in the public sector: A taxonomy of strategies. *Policy Design and Practice*, 6(3), 241–265. <https://doi.org/10.1080/25741292.2023.2199958>
- Coops, F., Schröder, A., & Hamilton-Jones, D. (2025, August 6). *Exploring affective dimensions of the ecological crisis in design: A reflective manifesto writing workshop*. Nordes 2025: Relational Design. <https://doi.org/10.21606/nordes.2025.76>
- Deakin, R. (2011). *Waterlog: A swimmer's journey through Britain*. Vintage Digital.
- Denton, H., Dannreuther, C., & Aranda, K. (2021). Researching at sea: Exploring the 'swim-along' interview method. *Health & Place*, 67, 102466. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.healthplace.2020.102466>
- Di Paola, M. (2015). Virtues for the Anthropocene. *Environmental Values*, 24(2), 183–207. <https://doi.org/10.3197/096327114X13947900181310>
- DiSalvo, C. (2010, July). Design, Democracy and Agonistic Pluralism. *Design and Complexity - DRS International Conference 2010*. Design and Complexity - DRS International Conference 2010, Montreal, Canada. <https://doi.org/10.21606/drs.2010.31>
- DiSalvo, C. (2012). *Adversarial design*. The MIT Press. <https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/8732.001.0001>

- DiSalvo, C. (2022). *Design as Democratic Inquiry: Putting Experimental Civics into Practice*. The MIT Press. <https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/13372.001.0001>
- Domínguez Rubio, F., & Fogué, U. (2017). Unfolding the Political Capacities of Design. *Diseña*, 11, 96–109. <https://doi.org/10.7764/disena.11.96-109>
- Dryzek, J. S., & Pickering, J. (2018). *The Politics of the Anthropocene*. Oxford University PressOxford. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198809616.001.0001>
- Durose, C., & Richardson, L. (2015). *Designing public policy for co-production: Theory, practice and change*. Bristol University Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1t896qg>
- Eckersley, R. (2004). *The Green State: Rethinking Democracy and Sovereignty*. The MIT Press. <https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/3364.001.0001>
- Eckersley, R. (2020). Ecological democracy and the rise and decline of liberal democracy: Looking back, looking forward. *Environmental Politics*, 29(2), 214–234. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09644016.2019.1594536>
- Escobar, A. (2020). *Pluriversal Politics: The Real and the Possible*. Duke University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1215/9781478012108>
- Fremaux, A. (2019). *After the Anthropocene: Green Republicanism in a Post-Capitalist World*. Springer International Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-11120-5>
- Fry, T. (2011). *Design as politics*. Berg. <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781474293723>
- Hajer, M. A., & Oomen, J. (2025). *Captured Futures: Rethinking the Drama of Environmental Politics*. Oxford University PressOxford. <https://doi.org/10.1093/9780198955382.001.0001>
- Hällmark, K. (2023). Politicization after the 'end of nature': The prospect of ecomodernism. *European Journal of Social Theory*, 26(1), 48–66. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13684310221103759>
- Heitlinger, S., Light, A., Akama, Y., Lindström, K., & Ståhl, Å. (2025). More-Than-Human Participatory Design. In R. C. Smith, D. Loi, H. Winschiers-Theophilus, L. Huybrechts, & J. Simonsen (Eds.), *Routledge international handbook of contemporary participatory design* (pp. 77–108). Routledge Taylor & Francis Group. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003334330>
- Huybrechts, L., Devisch, O., Tassinari, V. (2022). *Re-Framing the Politics of Design*. Public Space.
- Jones, R. (Ed.). (2023). *Toes in the water: Stories of lives changed by wild swimming*. Vertebrate Publishing.
- Karlsson, R. (2025). Ecomodernism. In A. Machin & M. L. J. Wissenburg (Eds.), *Handbook of environmental political theory in the Anthropocene* (pp. 120–128). Edward Elgar. <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781802208955.00019>
- Lebbe, H. (2020). *Zwemmen in de stad: Waterwegen als publieke ruimte*. KU Leuven.
- Light, A. (2024). More-than-Human Participatory Approaches for Design: Method and Function in Making Relations. *Participatory Design Conference 2024*, 1–6. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3661455.3669862>
- Lysaker, O. (2024). *Ecological Democracy: Caring for the Earth in the Anthropocene*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003305842>
- Machin, A. (2019). Democracy and Agonism in the Anthropocene: The Challenges of Knowledge, Time and Boundary. *Environmental Values*, 28(3), 347–365. <https://doi.org/10.3197/096327119X15519764179836>
- Margolin, V. (2012, April 11). *Design and Democracy in a Troubled World*.

- Mechelen. (2024, March 1). Water As The Source of Urban Public Space. <https://www.urban-initiative.eu/ia-cities/mechelen/home>
- Mechelen's River Project: An Example of Inclusive Design Using Layered Participation Speak Up / Interreg North Sea. (n.d.). Retrieved November 14, 2025, from <https://www.interregnorthsea.eu/speak-up/news/mechelens-river-project-an-example-of-inclusive-design-using-layered-participation>
- Mouffe, C. (1993). *The return of the political*. Verso.
- Mouffe, C. (2013). *Agonistics: Thinking the world politically*. Verso.
- Mouffe, C. (2022). *Towards a green democratic revolution: Left populism and the power of affects*. Verso.
- Neimanis, A. (2017). *Bodies of water: Posthuman feminist phenomenology*. Bloomsbury academic. <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781474275415>
- Oppermann, S. (2023). *Blue Humanities: Storied Waterscapes in the Anthropocene*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009393300>
- Outdoor swimming & water quality. (2024, March 8). POOL IS COOL. <https://www.pooliscool.org/news/2024/3/11/outdoorswimmingwaterquality>
- Outdoor Swimming Belgium vzw / Meer open zwemwater. (n.d.). Outdoor Swimming. Retrieved August 28, 2025, from <https://www.outdoorswimming.be>
- Pickering, J., Bäckstrand, K., & Schlosberg, D. (2020). Between environmental and ecological democracy: Theory and practice at the democracy-environment nexus. *Journal of Environmental Policy & Planning*, 22(1), 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1523908X.2020.1703276>
- Plumwood, V. (Ed.). (1993). *Feminism and the mastery of nature*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203006757>
- Poikolainen Rosén, A., Salovaara, A., & Søndergaard, M. L. J. (2024). *More-Than-Human Design in Practice* (1st ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003467731>
- Rew, K. (2022). *The Outdoor Swimmers Handbook*. Rider.
- Richardson, L., Durose, C., Kimbell, L., & Mazé, R. (2025). How do policy and design intersect? Three relationships. *Policy & Politics*, 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.1332/03055736Y2025D000000072>
- Right to Swim. (n.d.). *Outdoor Swimming Society*. Retrieved August 28, 2025, from <https://www.outdoorswimmingsociety.com/category/right-to-swim/>
- Ruby, A., & Shinohara, Y. (Eds.). (2019). *Swim City*. Christoph Merian Verlag.
- Salleh, A. (2025). *DeColonize EcoModernism!* Bloomsbury Publishing Plc. <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781474277662>
- Samen denken Binnendijle. (n.d.). Mechelen. Retrieved March 16, 2026, from <https://www.mechelen.be/wonen-en-verbouwen/stadsvernieuwing/masterplan-binnendijle/samen-denken-binnendijle>
- Symons, L., Loosveld, E., & Thys, S. (2025). *Inspiratiegids—Zwemmen in open water*. Waterland vzw.
- The Outdoor Swimmer's Code. (2021, March 19). *Outdoor Swimming Society*. <https://www.outdoorswimmingsociety.com/outdoor-swimmers-code/>
- Tønder, L. (2025). *Power in the anthropocene*. Edinburgh University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781399541916>

- Tsing, A. L. (2005). *Friction: An ethnography of global connection*. Princeton University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780691263526>
- Tsing, A. L., Bubandt, N., Gan, E., & Swan, A. H. (Eds.). (2017). *Arts of living on a damaged planet: Ghosts and monsters of the Anthropocene*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Tsing, A. L., Deger, J., Saxena, A. K., & Zhou, F. (2020). *Feral Atlas: The More-Than-Human Anthropocene*. Stanford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.21627/2020fa>
- Warde, P., Robin, L., & Sörlin, S. (2018). *The Environment: A History of the Idea*. Johns Hopkins University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1353/book.99575>
- Water-Land-Schap*. (n.d.). Vlaamse Landmaatschappij. Retrieved January 20, 2025, from <https://www.vlm.be/nl/projecten/vlm-projecten/waterlandschap>
- Weerbaar Waterland: Ons voorbereiden op wat al gebeurt. Advies van het expertenpanel hoogwaterbeveiliging aan de Vlaamse Regering*. (2022). <https://www.vlm.be/nl/SiteCollectionDocuments/Water-Land-Schap/advies-weerbaar-waterland.pdf>

About the Authors:

Kseniia Obukhova is an interdisciplinary researcher and practitioner exploring the intersection of participatory design and more-than-human governance. With a background in visual and eco-social design, she is currently a PhD candidate at Hasselt University in Belgium, researching new approaches to ecological democracy through the lens of critical design studies and the environmental humanities.

Jan Boon is an Assistant-Professor in Public Administration and Democracy at the School for Social Sciences at Hasselt University (research group R4D - Research on Digitalization, Diversity and Democracy). He contributes to R4D's research line on 'Democracy', which performs (inter)national research to understand and improve the legitimacy and functioning of our democracy and its institutions.

Liesbeth Huybrechts is a Professor and works in the areas of participatory design, design anthropology, and socio-environmental transformation processes in the research group Arck, Hasselt University. She has developed a research interest in the design for/with participatory exchanges and processes of capacity building between human and the material/natural environment, and the "politics" of designing these relations.