

Hybridity in the city. Conflicts about water, space, and the reactive embedding of a rainwater retention basin in Berlin-Kreuzberg

Lucas Beseler, Antonia Bloch, Akira Schroth

ABSTRACT: *This paper explores the concept of emerging hybrid urban realms by capturing a notion of hybridity. The focus is on a rainwater retention basin that has been transformed into a space for events and workshops by the Floating e.V., an artist-run association. Using a more-than-human perspective, this work highlights the importance of understanding the relational networks that shape our world and adopting a humble observing position to comprehend emerging modern categories in spaces like this. The hybrid spatial perspective offers an alternative to the divisions created by the poles of modernity, emphasising the interconnected system of relationships and responses. In this context, the paper discusses the Floating e.V.'s utilisation of the "three-way hybrid" and the concept of "response" in line with the perspectives of Whatmore and Latour on hybridity. The paper concludes by emphasising the need to acknowledge that conditions are continually evolving due to the actions of all participants, and a hybrid understanding of these realms offers a valuable lens through which we can better understand the complexities of our changing world.*

KEYWORDS: *Rainwater retention basin, Floating e.V., three-way hybrid*

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Floating into a hybrid space

Conflicts over space are intensifying in Berlin as the city experiences increasing urbanisation after years of population decline (Amt für Statistik & Berlin-Brandenburg, 2021; Arandelovic & Bogunovich, 2014). One place where this conflict becomes evident is the subject of this paper: a rainwater retention basin that has recently been occupied by the Floating e.V., an artist-run association that rents out the space around the basin to hold events such as workshops, lectures, and films in and around a constantly changing human-built structure, acting as part of a hybrid along with the existing flora and fauna.

"On the site of the Floating, the rainwater collection basin serving the former Tempelhof airfield, a diverse range of animals, plants and algae have taken root and given birth to a unique landscape: a man-made environment reclaimed by nature where polluted water coexists with the relatively new presence of the Floating e.V. association (...)" (Floating e.V., 2022b)

In 2011, Tempelhof Projekt GmbH was established by the Berlin Senate Department for Urban Development and Housing to preserve and develop the former airport site, which includes a nearly century-old airfield and reception buildings, as well as an isolated rainwater collection basin that was previously used as a firefighting reservoir. As the rainwater retention basin is located within the former airport site, Tempelhof Projekt GmbH serves as the landlord and rents out the space around the basin to the Floating e.V. on short-term contracts that must be renewed annually. Due to this planning uncertainty, the Floating e.V. is required to create its projects and installations in a way that allows for them to be dismantled and rebuilt every year, resulting in a constantly changing urban landscape. The association behind the Floating University e.V. is made up of individuals from diverse backgrounds, including artists, researchers, and entrepreneurs, all working together to open, maintain, and care for this unique public urban infrastructure and its multispecies environment, while offering non-disciplinary, radical, and collaborative programmes to the public. Their aim is to "open, soften, maintain, and take care of this unique public urban infrastructure, its human culture and its multispecies overlayers while bringing non-disciplinary, radical, and collaborative programmes to the public" (Floating University e.V. association, 2022a). The interview with a (then) member of the association took place in summer 2021. Since then, a lot of the things have changed: the site changes dramatically since, and in particular the reed bed eco-system was removed by the landlord for "maintenance".

To understand the association's perspective on their environment, this paper applies the concept of hybridity, introduced by Latour and Whatmore. The analysis will explore how the Floating integrates non-human elements, such as water and reed, to create a hybrid space.

Managing Water and Navigating Conflict

As an active rainwater retention basin, water is the key element in this space. The Floating e. V. recognises the importance of water and seeks to emulate mother nature's water cycles instead of following the linear sewer systems of conventional urban design. As the Floating e. V. states, "water will not fall beneath the streets like garbage into landfills. Rather, water flows down the drain, undergoes organic filtration, and flows back out the spout" (Floating University e.V., 2022d). To achieve this, the association has developed a system for managing four different types of water, which are used in various ways. Rainwater, which starts out clean but becomes polluted as it travels from clouds to soil, is collected and reused by the Floating e.V. after undergoing filtration. The pool water, which is already polluted, flows into the catchment basin and wraps around the structures of the Floating e. V. before being discharged into the River Spree. This water serves as a resource for the association. Even if the basin water is polluted and not suitable for use, it still plays a vital role in the system. Grey water, which is produced from human activities such as hand washing or cooking, is another type of water that the Floating e.V. utilises. Finally, black water is a by-product of toilet water and human waste, which can be converted into gas or used as fertiliser. This approach to water highlights the association's commitment to hybrid uses and versatile treatment, reuse, and recycling of urban water that is contaminated (see Floating e.V., 2022d). While water plays a significant role in the structure of the Floating e.V., it is just one aspect of the many conflicts that take place on its site. These conflicts involve various stakeholders, including developers and community groups, who have differing

views on land use and development. Some may advocate for the construction of new buildings, while others prioritise the preservation of historical or cultural sites. Meanwhile, conflicts may also arise among different levels of government over the control and jurisdiction of urban spaces, with disputes between the federal, state, and local governments. Residents' needs and desires can often be at odds with the goals and priorities of planners and policymakers, adding another layer of complexity to these conflicts. Furthermore, issues related to pollution and waste management, as well as the conservation of green spaces, conflict with the demands of urbanisation. Balancing these competing interests and finding ways to collaborate across diverse groups remains a significant challenge for those invested in the future of urban spaces.

Hybridity from the perspective of Floating e.V.

"The Floating is a three-way hybrid. It's a fully functioning rainwater retention pool, so an urban infrastructure. It's an ecosystem, it's a natural ecosystem that has taken over and took root here for several reasons [...] and an artist-run organisation. So it's this three-way hybrid that we perceive Floating to be." (conversation with a member of Floating e.V. on 29-09-2021)

At first, the notion of a 'three-way hybrid' seemed like an anthropocentric categorisation of the fragments involved in the space of the Floating. However, it soon became clear that this trinary labelling of spheres was a tool to make the messy space-making relations understandable to human outsiders. Our research recognises the 'three-way hybrid' as a cognitive tool for human communication, that allows an entry point to engage thoughtfully with hybrid spaces, but not as a rigid, norm-inducing labelling practice. The description of some manifestations of the Floating as a 'three-way hybrid' was also provided from the standpoint of human artists and used the human-made structures as a point of access. Our interviewee is a former member and program director at Floating e.V. and portrayed the association's experiences since they entered the space of the rainwater retention basin in 2018 and started erecting annually changing architectures. Our interviewee explained how the newly-built structures changed water flow patterns in the basin, leading to different sedimentation processes and different manifestations of flora and fauna and emphasised the notion of "response" to describe the agency of human and human-built structures. The association did not try to rigidly appropriate the basin according to their own set ideas, knowledge, and norms. Instead, they entered the space by responding to what was already given and understandable, trying to adjust a few ends of it for their own use, while acknowledging the messiness, seeming endlessness, and impossibility of grasping the relational network of the parts continuously involved in (re-)making the space. Consequently, human action within the space is not meticulously set and permanent in its patterns but responds and continuously evolves according to the altering relational network. Thus, not only are the human-built structures seen as reactions towards other parts of the space, but so are the artistic and knowledge-producing practices. Knowledge, especially about this space and the association, is made accessible to all through workshops or events. From this, it became clear that the Floating e.V. understands itself as no unified entity. Each human and their collective or personal actions and practices are integrated into the relational network of the Floating e.V., containing all parts of all the three described spheres standing in intermingled relations with each other.

Understanding emerging categories in hybrid spaces

The dilemma that arises can be seen through two dichotomies: the 'in-betweens' of the poles and the actual hybrids that encompass 'everything'. However, the lack of understanding of the relational networks that fabricate our world prevents us from grasping emerging modern categories in spaces like this. By letting go of the poles, we can also let go of the valuations attached to newly formed categories, such as nature, human, or progressive-ness. Looking at the 'in-betweens' means taking up humble observing positions to regard the networks that form our more-than-human world. Latour (2015, p. 11 ff) uses the term 'collective' to describe a network consisting of humans and non-humans or 'multispecies' partakers (Kirksey & Helmreich, 2010). The becoming of this world is formed by the 'collective praxis' of the partakers in it. Whatmore (2002) introduces hybrid geographies to present an alternative view to the divides undertaken by the poles of modernity. She criticises modern logic and tendencies of postmodern exercises to merely increase categories based on the assumption of a nature-human divide without overcoming it. She points out discourses where 'nature' is anthropocentrically seen as a mere product of human imagination and does not obtain any own agency. Attuned analyses are then only interested in the human representation of nature but nothing further. However, Whatmore (2002, p. 1 ff) also defines fault projects that aim to articulate distinctions between the spheres of 'nature' and 'human'. Although these analyses aim to examine 'material processes and relations' by dragging 'nature' out of the sole position as a human imaginary, these also deepen the presumption of an existing human-nature divide. Generally, hybrid geographies ought to focus on the relations of every partaker in the more-than-human world-making process. Upon entering the Floating e.V.'s narrative of hybridity, we encountered the concept of the 'three-way hybrid', which ostensibly raises questions about sphere separation and how the division into the 'technical rainwater retention basin', 'natural ecosystem', and 'artist collective' contributes to a hybrid, networked spatial understanding. At first glance, this tripartition seemed akin to the 'modern' poles that Latour (2015 p. 18 ff) describes in the 'double dichotomy' model or the 'subject-object binarity' that Whatmore (2002) refers to in her introduction to hybrid geographies. Both authors criticise polarised thinking and aim to adopt a perspective that includes all participants. Contexts then exist in the mode of 'collective practice' or through 'fabric-action'. However, the spheres of the Floating e.V.'s tripartition have rather permeable boundaries, which allow the parts assigned to a specific pole to still stand in all kinds of relations with and respond to all participants in the context, including those assigned to other spheres. The naming and narrative of the 'three-way hybrid' seems more like a mental tool for a better understanding of a networked realm for people previously used to polarised thinking. In line with Whatmore's (2002) hybrid geographies, the people of the association who describe the context in the tripartite are aware that they themselves cannot perceive all parts of the context they are part of. This distinguishes them from representatives of modernity, where the explicable modern human is clearly separated in time from the 'non-modern' past and separated by poles from the 'non-modern' present (Latour, 2015 p. 18 ff, p. 90 ff). The Floating e.V.'s use of 'response' in its transcription is used to describe relationships between participants and aligns with Whatmore's (2002) and Latour's (2015) understanding of nuanced contexts. In this sense, 'response' describes the mode of human actions and connects with Whatmore's (2002) call for a shift from understanding social agency as 'affective' rather than 'intentional' when regarding it in line with hybrid geographies. Whatmore (2002) uses the term 'fabric-actions' similarly to Latour's (2015) 'collective practice' to describe the set of

bonding relations between and the modes of existing with each other of the partakers in world-making. Both Whatmore's (2002) and Latour's (2015) understandings of hybrid realms require the assumption of allegedly more or less stable conditions that exist for a certain period of time to be set aside, and to be aware of the context's constant evolution formed by the activities of all participants.

"(...) because everything about this site, there's movement. The water comes in and it rotates. It goes away, it goes up, it goes down. Yeah, this side is ever in movement (...)" (conversation with a member of Floating e.V. on 29-09-2021)

This also suggests that the site is not just a passive object, but an active participant in the network of relationships that constitutes the context. The movement of water is one example of this agency, as it contributes to shaping and reshaping the site and its surroundings. This aligns with the Floating e.V.'s understanding of the context as a complex, interconnected system of relationships and responses, where no element can be fully understood in isolation. Overall, it seems that the Floating e.V.'s approach to hybridity and spatial understanding aligns with the perspectives put forth by Whatmore and Latour in their respective works on hybrid geographies. While acknowledging the limitations of any single practice or perspective to fully encompass a context's complexity and evolution, the concept of 'response' and the idea of the context as a constantly evolving network of inter-related parts allow for a more nuanced and fluid understanding of hybridity.

Contested Boundaries

The Floating e.V.'s approach to defining the boundaries of space is not based on geographical staking out or assignment to one of its three spheres, but rather on the shape of its relational network. This approach aligns with what Whatmore (2002) suggests for hybrid geographies, where boundaries of spaces are not drawn by geometrical horizontal lines but rather by the topology of the network of the context. In other words, spaces are defined by the shape of certain relationships, such as contracts with landlords and power-related questions of agency. This networked definition of space challenges traditional notions of space and highlights the importance of relational networks and hybridity. It also demonstrates the potential of topological mapping practices in rethinking how we understand and define spaces.

The relationship between the Floating e.V. and Tempelhof Projekt GmbH is fraught with tension, as evidenced by the former's claim that the latter has chosen to position themselves as outsiders. This is largely due to the fact that the landowner has refused to communicate with the Floating e.V. and has imposed their own idea of the rainwater retention basin's future on the space. By framing their plans as a "renaturalisation" of the basin, Tempelhof Projekt GmbH has effectively labelled the current occupants of the space as obsolete and likely to be excluded in the near future. This logic of exclusion is predicated on a nature-human dichotomy that sees the mingling of human-made structures, non-human species, and human actors as illegitimate. The attribution of belonging and non-belonging is thus contested from at least two directions: the Floating e.V. association's idea of a "three-way hybrid" and Tempelhof Projekt GmbH's notion of renaturalisation. To truly embrace the concept of hybridity, the Floating e.V. must acknowledge that their understanding of the context can never be complete or universal. While they have attempted to

include non-human actors in their spatial reflections, the examples they have selected are still mostly filtered through a human perspective, although they also were already looking at the reed bed through satellite imagery and have many projects that are testing the soil, the reed roots, the water for pollution and toxins. As Whatmore (2002 p 5 ff.) argues, we must be more "attentive" to the context and to the imperceptible partakers who "speak" for themselves by being in relation and responding to other participants. One possible way to achieve this attentiveness is to use satellite imagery to map the reed belt, as seen in Figure 1. This allows for a more "senseable" concept of the non-human actors in the space, while also highlighting the need for ongoing reflection and engagement with the context. Ultimately, the notion of the "three-way hybrid" is a human construct, and there may be

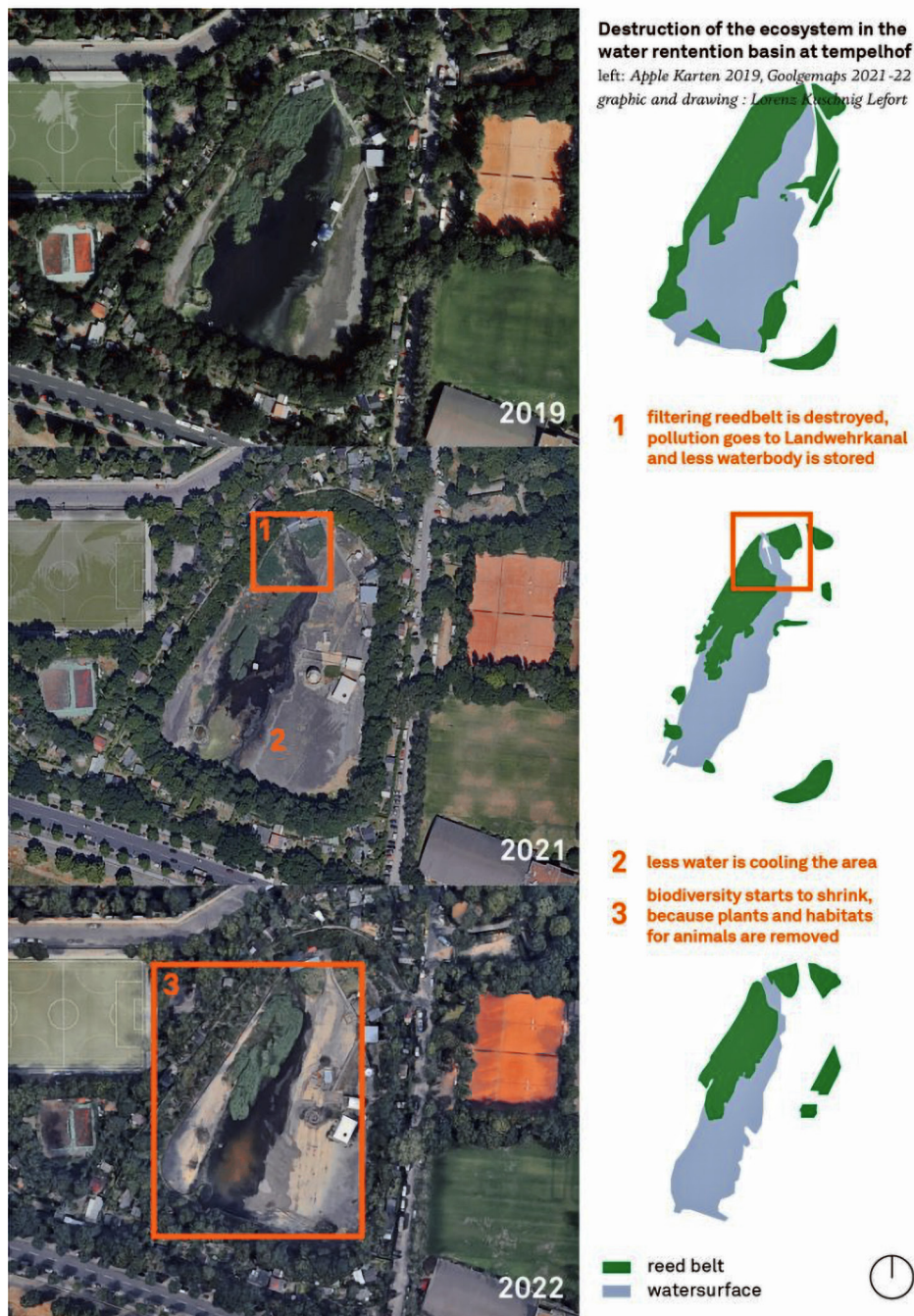


Fig. 1. Floating e.V. (2023): Archiving Workshop. Interspecies living archive.

other hybrid entities at play that we are not even aware of. As Latour (2015) suggests, these "monsters" may only become visible when they strike, but it is important to remain open to the possibility of their existence and to engage with the context in a more inclusive and attentive way.

Speculative Outlook: A Hybrid Perspective

Satellite imagery was used to gain a broader understanding of the reed bed or "Green Belt" and a more-than-human perspective was employed to offer a speculative outlook. The reeds established themselves in response to the concrete structure of the basin and began entering the space in the late 2000s after the closure of the Tempelhof Airport. The reeds' presence and actions have a continuous impact on the concrete structure, although there was a possibility that they may vanish if the habitat no longer suits them.

The dynamic process of parts entering and leaving the space and thus modifying the relational network is ongoing, and it provokes constant responses. For example, the sedimentation is enhanced by the architecture the association builds that give anchor to the dirt in the water (and not, as is erroneously claimed, the sedimentation process is enhanced by the association entering the space to stimulate the growth of the reed belt and other species. The members of the association have been told they cause disturbances to the eco-system by walking in the mud – and due to this false statement they are fighting this claim.). As a result, the space transitioned from a "wetland" to a "grassland". However, the grassy areas and the root belt were subsequently removed for maintenance purposes. On March 27th, 2023, heavy machinery removed the reed bed in the rainwater retention basin due to the presence of sewage water, posing a health hazard and potentially resulting in a fine of €15,000. This action has profoundly impacted Floating e.V., and they emphasize that a purely technical approach fails to address the complexities of natural and urban spaces.

"This destruction is profoundly shuddering the roots of our association's work in the basin since 2018 and shows once more that a purely technical point of view isn't capable of handling the complexity and entanglements of natural and urban spaces." (Floating e.V, 2023) Nonetheless, adopting a hybrid spatial perspective aids in understanding the basin's evolution over the past five years. This paper explores the concept of emerging categories in hybrid spaces, which presents a challenge between the "in-betweens" and the encompassing hybrids. Grasping the interconnected networks that shape our world is crucial for comprehending the emergence of modern categories within spaces like this.

To do so, one must relinquish the poles and valuations associated with newly formed categories and adopt a humble observing position to consider the networks that shape our more-than-human world. Moreover, the paper explores hybrid geographies and how it provides an alternative perspective to the divisions created by the poles of modernity. The Floating e.V.'s utilisation of the "three-way hybrid" and the concept of "response" aligns with the perspectives put forth by Whatmore and Latour in their works on hybridity. In this context, the interconnected system of relationships and responses is considered complex, and every participant plays a role in the world-making process. It is essential to recognise that a hybrid understanding of these realms requires acknowledging that conditions are not stable and static, but rather continually evolving due to the actions of those involved. Ultimately, the hybrid spatial perspective offers a valuable lens through which we can better understand the complexities of our changing world.

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Figure

Fig. 1. Floating e.V. (2023): Archiving Workshop. Interspecies living archive. <https://floating-berlin.org/site/spatial-experiments/spatial-experiments-2022/3-archivingworkshop/>, last accessed on [05/12, 2022]