



## Water Bodies

Anna Positano, Nuvola Ravera and Gaia Cambiaggi, June 2022

The port city of Genoa is dominated by water. A complex system of subterranean torrents traverses the fabric of this north-western Italian capital, rendering its territory prone to severe floods and landslides. Yet these underground rivers represent a world in their own right – hidden ecosystems that run in parallel to life above. Photographers Anna Positano, Nuvola Ravera and Gaia Cambiaggi here present 'Water Bodies', an extension of a wider project that explores the unfamiliar traits of this submerged world.

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One of the three most industrialised cities in Italy, Genoa, is the result of a constant battle against a peculiar morphology. Its dense urban fabric inhabits a thin area constricted between hills and coastline, while a number of streams, rivers and brooks carved into this fragile territory, greatly reduce the city's convenient building sites. It is for this reason that, since the Middle Ages, the Genoese have been covering rivers with the aim of creating new building plots in the scarce flat areas of the city.

This has been a constant practice of confrontation with the land, exacerbated by capitalist industrialisation and

property speculation in the twentieth century. Today, 30% of Genoese rivers run underground.

Yet, despite the supposed urban benefits that result from these morphological interventions, this river covering can also be considered an urban trauma. Communities and local ecosystems have been severely affected, not only because of the deprivation of natural areas but also due to the recurring floods and landslides which, despite all the precautions, continue to damage the inhabited territory.

Visit [www.animaloci.org/water-bodies](http://www.animaloci.org/water-bodies) to watch the video.

In the last 50 years, there have been numerous torrential floods. The most dramatic was on the 7-8th October 1970, when the Bisagno, Leira, Polcevera, Cantarena and Chiaravagna torrents burst their banks almost simultaneously. Almost 1m of rainwater accumulated in 24 hours. The flooding affected Genoa and several neighbouring towns and villages. The death toll was 43 with 2000 people displaced.

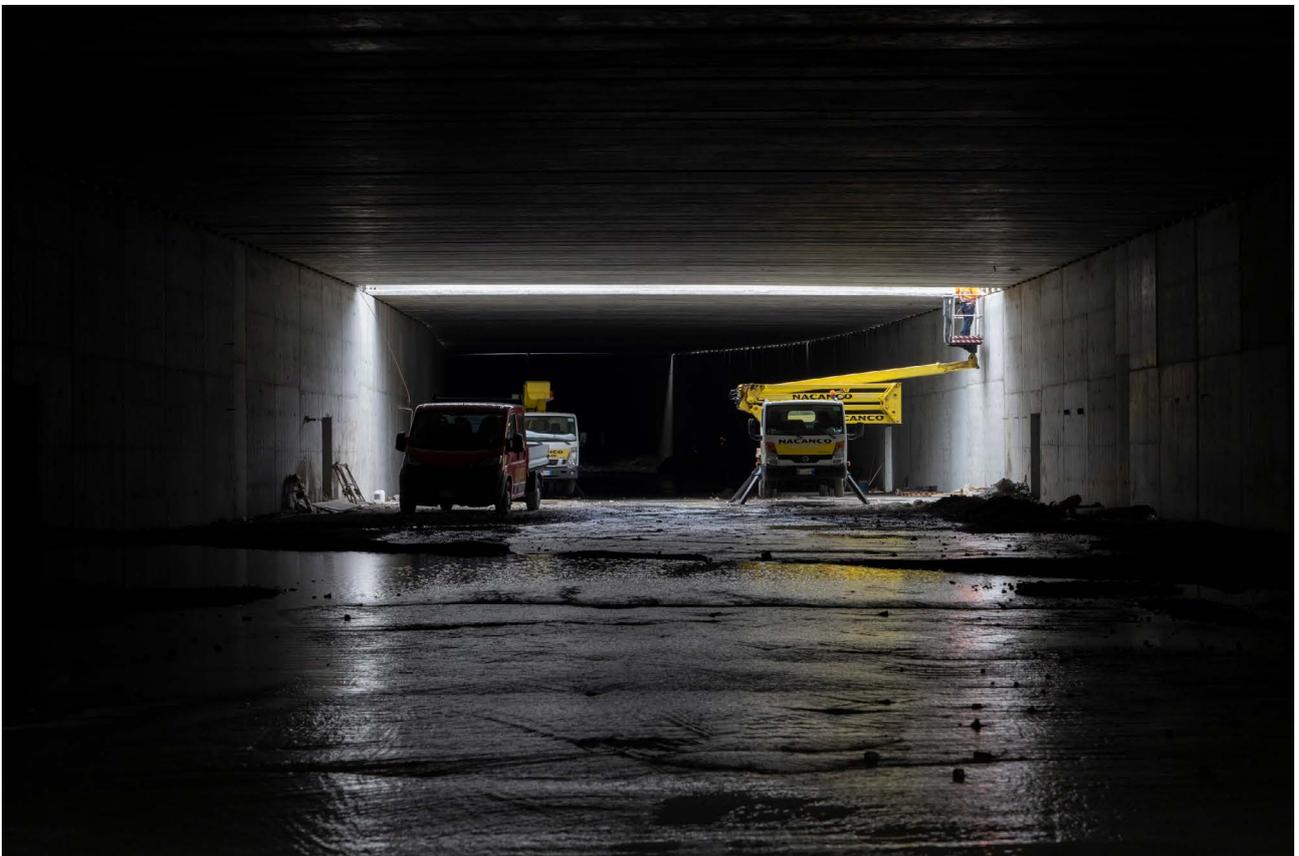
Increasingly frequent floods have also generated an acute sense of danger within citizens towards certain places. The only form of resistance is the use and dissemination of information. The city's authorities have increased their focus on risk prevention and mitigation, particularly after another severe flood in 2014. Through meteorological and land monitoring, the city has developed a system of colour-coded alerts that indicate the safety and accessibility of various parts of the city.

Citizens have become accustomed to being in constant alert and are generally cautious. Unfortunately, however, some past and current urban planning decisions have contributed to soil sealing. With floods having become a constant feature of the city, Genoa, as we know it today, is also the result of a compound set of disastrous practices that has rendered its urban structure fragile and in need of constant maintenance.

We decided to access these underground areas, invisible to the eye, and yet so significantly affecting our city. What we found was different from what we expected. Before we explored these places, we imagined dark and damp caverns; we feared we would be walking through dirty, polluted, repulsive territories. Instead, upon closer inspection, we

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realised that nature was reclaiming these hostile man-made places, populating them with algae, ferns, fish, spiders, as if all this were almost a form of resistance. Accessing the underground tunnels is like being in a parallel world that functions according to its own logic and balance. A world in which time and space work almost independently from the surface.

The first watercourse we explored was the Fereggiano river spillway, in the northeastern Quezzi district of Genoa. The place is totally inaccessible to the population and can only be visited in certain weather conditions. We gained access thanks to the engineers who were working on the construction of the spillway at the time.

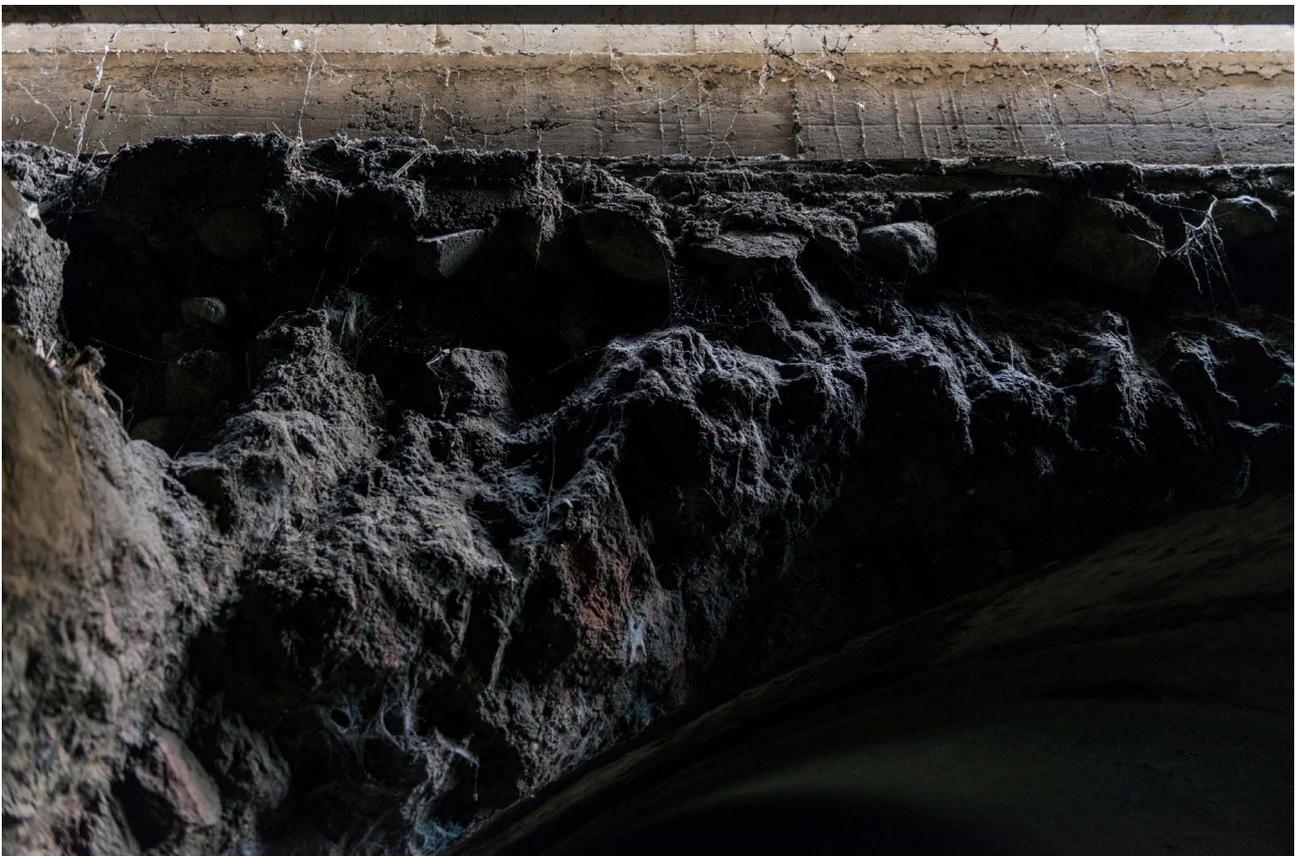
Unexpectedly, the opening of the reservoir at a depth of thirty metres proved to be less claustrophobic than the neighbourhood above it, marked by dense urban planning that makes it look painfully jammed into the surrounding landscape. It was a minimal but highly expressive landscape. Apart from the grey infrastructure, the only colours were variations of white limestone and the orange concretions exuding from the walls of the spillway.

The tunnel is only illuminated in the initial portion, then, in total darkness, it continues its course under the city, until it reaches the sea. As you walk into the tunnel, light ceases to exist, except at the edges or in dappled form. At the point where it is no longer illuminated, a colour appears – an almost tactile blackness generated by emptiness and absence, yet physical. Darkness prevents us from understanding what time of day it is, but above all, it affects our perception of space. Physiological mechanisms come into play whereby, when sight is reduced, other senses come to the fore. To interpret space, touch is heightened – much more reliable than sight. Distances and proportions that visually appear large turn out to be small; the shapes of things change as we approach, become ambiguous, unsettling.

Accessing the Molinassi stream, which straddles the district of Sestri Ponente and Multedo, happens through a small pit, next to a congested road. We climbed over a small wall and descended along the stream, walking until we reached

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its mouth into the sea. We passed through covered parts, under the road and the shipyards, through some cracks where we could see industrial warehouses. In other places the stream is uncovered and has lush, wild vegetation, a deceptively natural landscape with only the sounds of the road and the shipyard to remind us of the city's presence.

The variety of underground waterways is wide, ranging from a small concrete pipe to a flood-preventing reservoir, or simply a stream covered with roads and factories. Although neglected and difficult to access, drained rivers can be a place for the development of new ecosystems, shelters for life that thrives in such conditions. They are landscapes at the limit, which help shift the debate away from the outdated dichotomy between nature and human-altered spaces in favour of a biological and aesthetic complexity.

This work aspires to build a possible collective imagery of these underground worlds. In an attempt to build a micro-geography of the covered rivers of Genoa, we aim is to shed light on the processes that have led to an increasingly serious environmental crisis, not forgetting that deep underground in the darkness and concrete, nature still thrives.



## About the authors

**Anna Positano** is a photographer and an independent researcher with a background in Architecture and Photography. Her work explores the relationships between landscape, architecture and society. Her projects have been exhibited internationally at events such as La Triennale di Milano, La Biennale di Architettura di Venezia, Unseen Photo Fair, Camera Torino, Cornell University, and MAO Ljubljana. In 2019 she was the recipient of the production grant of Graham Foundation. Alongside her artistic and research practice, she undertakes commissions for architects and magazines, and teaches Photography at IED Florence.

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**Nuvola Ravera** is an artist and researcher whose research ranges from artistic disciplines to anthropology, psychology, and pedagogy. Through exploring ethno-clinical mediation at the Sagara Study Centre in Pisa, she investigates artistic practice as a means to reconfigure social alienation and subjection. She works with psychotherapists, anthropologists, biologists, and architects and proposes a hypothesis on the psychic residue of places through practises of cohabitation between natural world and man-made landscapes. She has exhibited her work and collaborated with institutions such as Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo Turin, Macro Rome, Transmediale Berlin, Villa Croce Genoa, World Social Forum of Inhabitants Tunis, Ex Lanificio Naples, Atelierhaus Salzamt Linz, Fabbrica del Vapore Milan.

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**Gaia Cambiaggi** is a photographer whose varied portfolio includes portraiture and commissions to document architectural projects and man-made landscapes. Her work has taken her across Europe, Asia and Central and South

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America. As a long-standing digital refusenik with an analogue heart, she prefers to shoot on film. Her photographs have been widely exhibited and published internationally in magazines, books, newspapers and art reviews including The New York Times, The Guardian, Domus, Abitare, Rolling Stone and Tank. Gaia holds an MA in Photography from the London College of Printing.

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## Notes

Originally conceived as part of an interdisciplinary performance commissioned by Fondazione Feltrinelli in Milan, 'Water Bodies' is a project by Anna Positano, Nuvola Ravera and Gaia Cambiaggi conducted in collaboration with local collectives that fight to preserve local watercourses, curator Anna Daneri, researchers Elisa Giuliano and Juan Lopez Cano, and musician Matteo Manzitti.