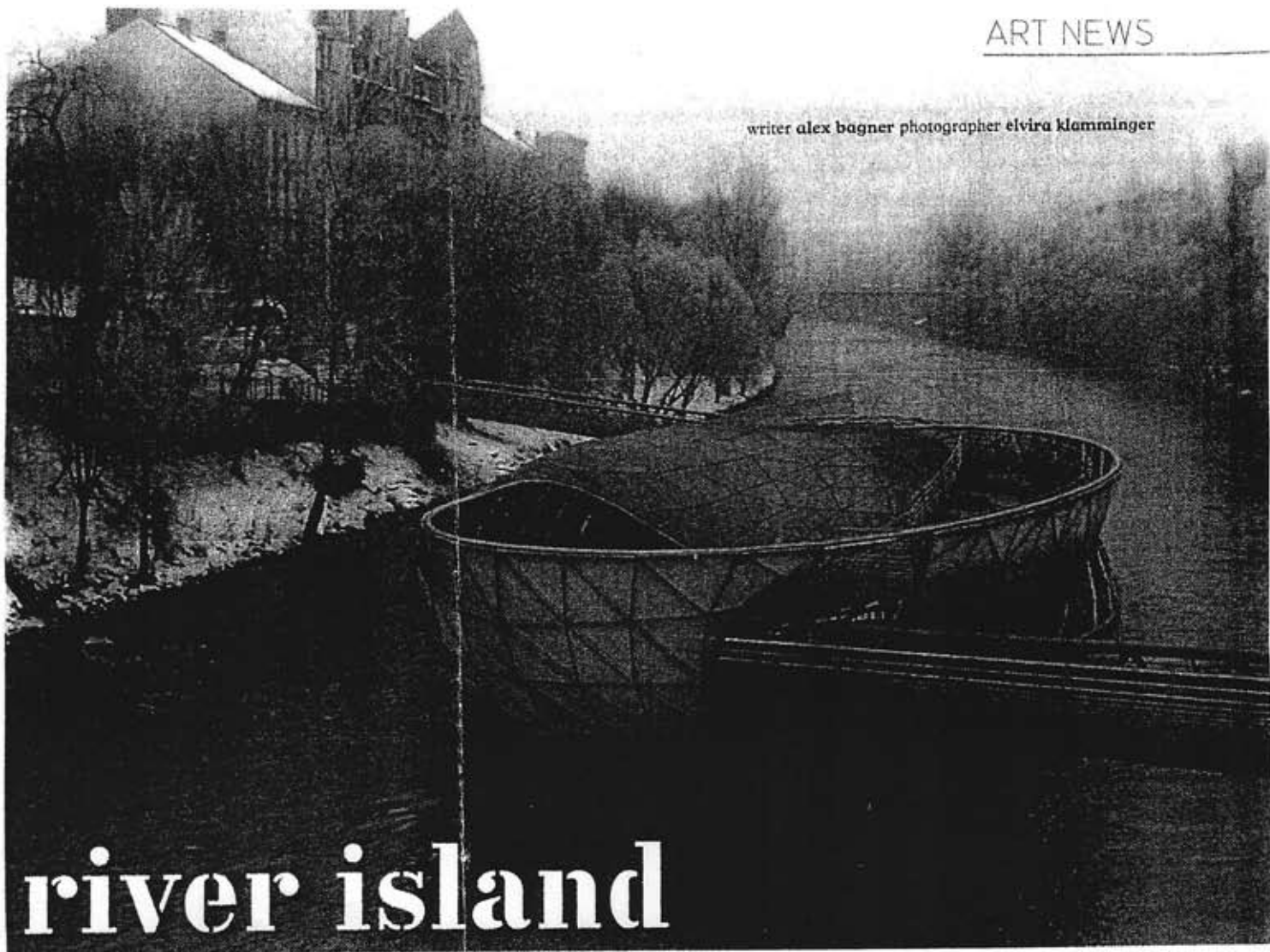


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# river island

Floating in the middle of the Mur, the Austrian city of Graz's new open-air café and theatre is bringing the arts flowing into the 2003 Cultural Capital of Europe

Let us begin, about 100 years ago, when the Mur river was a bustling thoroughfare, central to the lives of people in the southern Austrian city of Graz. Reaching almost street level, the river not only divided the city, but also connected it. Today, in contrast, the water level has fallen dramatically and, while still a striking feature of the city, has lost its purpose. That is, until now.

Located neatly between the Mariahilferplatz, an up-and-coming neighbourhood, and the historic city centre, passers-by are invited to get closer to the water by entering the striking steel and glass structure – complete with open-air theatre, café and children's playground – which floats in the river. Welcome to the Mur Island.

One of the highlights of the Graz 2003/Cultural Capital of Europe arts festival, the concept took shape out of a union between Graz-born curator Robert Punkenhofer and New York artist-turned-architect, Vito Acconci. The island's unique, organically twisted combination of two shell-like forms blur the boundaries between interior and exterior allowing the spaces to flow into each other. 'A dome twists and turns upside down to become a bowl, while the bowl twists and turns upside down to become a dome. The dome functions as the café, the bowl as the theatre and the twist in the middle as the playground,' says Acconci,

who adds that he wanted the architecture to be as fluid as the water surrounding it.

Technically speaking, suspending a 320-tonne man-made floating island is no mean feat. Endless drawings and models were discussed among city officials, engineers and experts. Secured in the water by the two hinged footbridges on either bank, as well as anchored to the river bed via a cable, the island has its own buoyancy, capable of adapting to ebbs and flows in the river. Acconci and his five-man studio struggled with restrictions imposed on them. Legally, the island fell in a grey area subject to both shipping and land laws, while financial limitations forced Acconci to abandon his original idea of pedestrians entering and leaving the island from a tube under the water.

After almost three years of planning and building, the Mur Island opened on 11 January this year, with 13,000 local people and invited guests turning up to celebrate the unveiling. 'Even the sceptics now admit it is a huge success for the city,' says Manfred Gaulhofer, executive director of the Graz 2003 project. So while the resistance and practical restraints may be water under the bridge, Acconci's 'spaceship of water' has turned the Mur river into a showpiece for the city. ★  
[www.graz03.at](http://www.graz03.at)

**centre stage:** two hinged footbridges on either side of the river bank lead into the island, where the dome functions as the café and the bowl as the theatre