



## THE NEW YORKER



THE TALK OF THE TOWN

### ROME POSTCARD DOWN BY THE RIVER



Kristin Jones has a watchword that has guided her long struggle to make public art in Rome: “No” is an inspiration. Until last week, Jones’s Eternaltiber project had endured years of inspiration, dispensed by a wide range of Roman bureaucrats. The origins of the project, which seeks to transform the Tiber River permanently, go back to 1983, when Jones, a recent graduate of Yale’s School of Art, went to Rome and discovered, as many visitors do, that the Tiber is perhaps the most neglected part of the city—confined far below street level in a smelly and derelict stone channel, a forlorn and forbidding place. Jones was then beginning to evolve what has become her mission: making the world better through artistic “interventions.” Now forty-eight, she has created installations and projects in museums and cities around the world, but saving the Tiber (as she puts it) has become her life’s work.

Just because the Tiber is neglected, however, doesn’t mean that it’s unman-

aged. In fact, as Jones found, it is micro-managed. There are various city, state, and regional agencies responsible for the water volume, the water quality, the river bottom, the embankments, the forty-foot-high walls; even the graffiti on these walls is under official control. The result is anarchy. “I once thought it would be interesting to make an organizational flowchart of all the different river authorities and their relationship to each other,” Jones said last week. “But I realized that I could never draw it, because you’d need a dimension that hasn’t been discovered.” The so-called “spontaneous trees” that grow through the travertine at the river’s edge are the only part of the river that is free from management—and, because no one is in charge of them, they can’t be touched, either.

Over the years, “for the sake of the forsaken Tiber,” Jones has met with virtually every important official in Rome, from the mayor, Walter Veltroni, on down. She has the exasperating habit of presenting her own artistic ambitions as a gift to the city, and then haranguing the authorities for not realizing how lucky they are. If she hadn’t been an artist, she’d have made a good missionary, of the flinty New England variety, like Katharine Hepburn in “The African Queen.” Perhaps the authorities were wary of American do-gooders. Maybe they’d heard about “Metronome,” Jones’s notorious 1999 public work in Manhattan’s Union Square, a giant spiral with steam spurting from its center, which Jones describes as “the most unloved piece of public art in the city.” Or perhaps they weren’t sufficiently familiar with Jones’s more successful projects, such as “Oculus,” her installation at the World Trade Center/Chambers Street subway stop, which consists of three hundred eye-shaped mosaics. (Both of these were done with her husband, Andrew Ginzel.)

With each new “No,” the Tiber River project got larger and more elaborate, evolving into a multidisciplinary effort that included underwater ribbons of L.E.D. light, wall-projections of giant she-wolves, and a river piazza. Jones learned Italian and began spending half of every year in Rome. Her marriage broke up. She became a familiar presence on the water, conducting her eccentric experiments and activities (recording the sound of the river, filming its

periodic surges) with a great sense of purpose, her voluminous blond hair contained in a long braid—she looks a bit like a prep-school field-hockey player relentlessly advancing on the goal. She was often trailed by a group of Italian artists, technicians, or students; in spite of the resistance of Roman officials, there is a ready spirit of *volentieri*, or “with pleasure,” among the people.

Last Tuesday, shortly after the sun had set on the longest day of the year, Kristin Jones finally saved the Tiber—or, at least, the quarter-mile stretch between the Ponte Sisto and the Ponte Mazzini. Two thousand seven hundred and fifty-eight candles, one for each year since the founding of Rome, lined both sides of the river, illuminating the she-wolves imprinted on



Kristin Jones

the walls. The wolves are supposed to represent Rome’s mythical mother, although they may also represent Kristin Jones. (To get approval for the wolves, she had asked the city’s anti-graffiti bureau if its workers would selectively clean around her stencils, so that the wolves would emerge out of the grime. Not even *la burocrazia* could say no to that.) A choir of Tibetan-style “intoners” chanted to the amplified sound of the river. Nobody walks along the Tiber at night, but on this night the riverbanks were crowded with Romans murmuring “*Che bello!*” to each other and to the full moon.

Jones, however, seemed curiously uninspired by the whole scene. “It’s a start,” she said with a shake of her braid.

—John Seabrook