

## Artist Kristin Jones Brings New York Enthusiasm to Cleaning Up Italian River

Nancy Greenleese | September 10, 2007

Kristin Jones thinks big. She helped design a massive metronome in New York City and crafted giant mosaics for Tampa's airport. Now she's taking on one of the world's great rivers. She wants to create a piazza, or town square, dedicated to modern art along the Tiber with the hopes that it will prompt a wider cleanup of the waterway.

She remembers when she first saw it. She'd recently received her Master's in Fine Arts from Yale. It was 1983 and she'd arrived in Rome on a Fulbright scholarship, "and as a New Yorker I said to myself, 'Oh my God. There's something parallel here? What is this?'" And then it hit her like a vision from the nearby Vatican. The Tiber could be transformed into a place where Italians could enjoy the pleasures of the countryside while still in the city.

She realized the Tiber was to Rome what Central Park was to New York. "Central Park is really nature in the middle of the city and you walk there and you see leaves tremble and you see real grass and you see a real squirrel. You even can collect mushrooms in Central Park!"

Jones could collect an impressive collection of beer bottles along the Tiber. The smell of urine permeates the air, graffiti mars the stone walls. This is a clean-up project

that might've given Julius Caesar pause, but not the spirited Jones. She's cajoled fellow Americans living in Rome, and Italians to back her efforts, impressive in a country that has no volunteer tradition.

The artist in her is inspired by the river as a symbol of time in the Eternal City, while the activist in her sees its historic worth. "Well, if you think about it," she points out with a laugh, "perhaps you could consider it to be the most ancient monument in Rome."

The city was founded along the banks of the Tiber in the 8th century BC and water has always played a role in the city's history. The Roman Empire's aqueducts revolutionized water transportation. The Coliseum was flooded for mock sea battles. And then there are Rome's fountains... all 280 of them.

"The fountains in – throughout the historic city have always been a sort of showy element of power and exuberance and fun and yet the main artery is completely neglected," Jones laments.

There's little amore in Rome for the Tiber. It frequently flooded the city, prompting the construction in the 1800s of massive walls that now hold (and hide) the river. Jones, however, is exposing it.

On a recent summer evening, with more than 1000 candles flickering on

the river's banks, locals and tourists strolled along the proposed piazza, serenaded by musicians. Jones' river revival charity Tevereterno, or Eternal Tiber, organized this event to promote the area's revitalization. They dream of hosting events with a water theme, from modern art exhibits to conferences, even concerts on a floating stage.

Local arts advocate Luca Bergamo admires Jones' enthusiasm and supports the project, but admits there are sizeable cultural obstacles. "The biggest challenge is that you don't find people investing in risky things in this country," he explains. "This is not risky but it's unknown, not understood."

Change is resisted in Italy, a country that lives on its historic past. Furthermore, politicians can't justify spending money on the Tiber when resources are scarce for more famous monuments.

But the tide may be turning. The city has added the proposed Piazza Tevere to its new city plan. As Jones prepares to return to New York full-time, she says it's time to hand the project over to Italians. "They're all applauding me and trying to get me to keep doing it. And I keep trying to step back and say, It's your river. Hallelujah! See the potential, see the potential! I see the potential."

Others may, too. Jones has surreptitiously posted replicas of the stone signs that mark Rome's piazzas and streets on the river's embankment. They say Piazza Tevere, but they could just as well say Piazza Jones.