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CLOSE-UP

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New York Artist Wants To Add New Life To Tiber

For the past 18 years, New York artist Kristin Jones has been haunted by a void.

"It has so much potent memory," she says, "and yet it's been ripped out and completely removed from the consciousness of the city."

Jones is referring to the Tiber river, which has essentially defined Rome's history and flooded with devastating regularity late into the 1800s, when Italy's first king, Vittorio Emanuele, built up the embankments — the greatest engineering feat of the day — and the river stopped being so menacing.

Indeed, to some extent it was eventually forgotten.

"The birth of Rome, its mythology, evolved from the Tiber's banks, it is the guardian of 2,800 years of history," Jones says. "So there's a certain sadness to the fact that the river is no longer a part of the life of the city today."

Planning to change all that, she is working on an ambitious installation in a section of the Tiber that runs from Ponte Sisto to the Ponte Mazzini, as it happens to be the only part of the river — which flows down from the Apennines through Tuscany, Umbria and Lazio — that is absolutely straight.

The piece — which she calls 'Teverterno' — would consist of three interrelated elements.

One will deal with sound. She and composer Edmund Campion are creating a series of waves that will recreate the music of water.

The second is a "major technical challenge," so technical that she has asked for help from engineers at the Courant Institute of Mathematical Sciences in New York as well as engineers from Insean in Rome to create a fiber optic school of fish that will be placed under water and, to put it simply, be animated by the river's natural current.

Actually, Ms. Jones has been told by many people that it's crazy to work with water — she's been quoted the examples of the trouble on the sets of the films "Waterworld" or "Titanic" — but she has a vision.

The third element will be a gigantic shadow of a wolf, the "Lupa," a play both on the she-wolf that nursed the legendary founders of Rome, Remus and Romulus, as well as the Lupanare, the brothels of Roman time.

Right now she is looking for sponsors to raise cash for a feasibility study of the project, which she hopes will be the first of many open-air contemporary art installations along that part of the Tiber.

The timing may be right. The recent city administration has been supportive of installations and contemporary art in general.

"When I first came to Italy, 18 years ago, there was no municipal contemporary art gallery, no Palazzo delle Esposizioni, not much happening in contemporary art at all," she says. "The key thing is that this contemporary piece will be outdoors. Otherwise tourists, who spend their time in Rome breathing its history in so many wonderful museums, would miss it because there is so much else to see."