

WEBEXCLUSIVE IN CONVERSATION

KRISTIN JONES with Ann McCoy

by Ann McCoy

Kristin Jones came by the Rail to discuss her collaborative project *TEVERETERNO* for the revival of Rome's Tiber River with Ann McCoy. The artist has been working to adopt an 1,800-foot long stretch of the river, and turn it into a site for contemporary art, a first for Rome. Past participants have included an array of national and international artists including Kiki Smith and Jenny Holzer, and composers such as Walter Branchi and David Monacchi. Upcoming is a project entitled *Triumphs and Laments*, by William Kentridge—a procession of more than 80 large-scale figures. It will open with a one-time only, site-specific program, featuring shadow play, projections, and a live musical performance of an original composition with Kentridge's longtime collaborator, Philip Miller. Jones has spent 10 years on this project, producing a wide variety of artistic performances and installations. Jones will have a solo drawing exhibition at ART 101 at 101 Grand Street in Brooklyn this coming April.

Ann McCoy (Rail): You have spent a lot of your life in Europe, because your father was in the diplomatic service. You are someone who can bridge cultures. How did you come to form such a strong attachment to Rome and to the Tiber?

Kristin Jones: I won a Fulbright Fellowship to Rome in 1983, a gift to explore the city for an entire year. Rome became the major source of inspiration. I have a very long-term relationship with the city. In Rome today, there is very little support for contemporary art and architecture; the glory of the past seems to eclipse the present.

Rail: I'm fascinated by your interest in the Tiber. The Tiber was a deity anthropomorphized, like that huge statue in the Louvre of the god with his ore and cornucopia. Here you are an American suddenly resurrecting this neglected deity as a venue for contemporary art—awakening the old god for a new incarnation.

Jones: Rome is called the Eternal City, so I call the project *TEVERETERNO*: “Eternal Tiber.” The project is about time, about the present moment within the past. The central urban corridor of the Tiber, although neglected today, provides a wonderful opportunity in the heart of historic Rome for a contemporary cultural project that celebrates the living city. If you think about rivers metaphorically, in mythology and in literature, the river is not only the present tense, it is also a great source of life and a font for memory.

Rail: Your first project was in 2005, and you made tennis court-size stencils and power-washed 12 she-wolves from the accumulated soot on the 30-foot embankment walls along the river. In 2009 you silver leafed a parade of 200 silver she-wolves drawn from 2,500 years of art history, on the walls opposite the 2,005 figures. You also exhibited your she-wolf prints in an exhibition called “Trilogy: the She-Wolf as Shape of Time” at the Capitoline Museum. Why were you magnetized to this she-wolf image?

Jones: My intention was to celebrate the river and draw attention to a possible river commons that could become a “river theatre,” a stage for contemporary art.



Kristin Jones and Daniel K. Brown, *Luminalia* (2007), created for *TEVERETERNO*'s 2007 *Flussi Correnti* program, Piazza Tevere, between Ponte Sisto and Ponte Mazzini, Rome. Image by Daniel K. Brown and Erika Kruger.



Kristin Jones, *Wild Graces* (2006), Light projection onto the façade of Rome's Capitoline Museum during TEVERETERNO's 2009 *Trilogy: The She-Wolf as Shape of Time* program, Rome, Italy. Photo by Alessandro Penso.

Jones: I was drawn to the mythology of the origins of the city and its river. The she-wolf is the icon of the city but also of nature and of wildness. The wolf is part of a trinity: of Man, God, and Nature. I wanted to symbolize the beginning of a project and to thank the city of Rome for the inspiration it offers to visitors from the entire world. The project is an homage to the city.

Rail: The she-wolf is a complex symbol, a nurturing but fierce form of the feminine. She suckles *two warring brothers*; and Romulus, who commits fratricide, became the first king of Rome. The she-wolf is a dual symbol, both light and dark a symbol of the ancient brothels, and also a Fascist symbol, used by Mussolini. I find it interesting that you come and resurrect the she-wolf with her many forms, power-washed and stenciled 30-foot high on the embankment walls along this straight stretch of the Tiber.

Jones: What's really fascinating is to watch how a myth evolves and how the form of the she-wolf changes as different artists reinvent the story and her image across time. Also, how the story is retold depending on the storyteller. I was very fortunate to have been able to work with a brilliant scholar—

Rail: A scholar whose name was?

Jones: Claudio Parisi Presicce. He's the ultimate scholar of the she-wolf. There's been this debate going on about whether or not the bronze sculpture that became the symbol of the city is Etruscan, or whether she's medieval. She has only recently been proven to be medieval. I had a wonderful opportunity, because Presicce had been working at the American Academy in Rome, where I was a fellow. When I went back to Rome on a second Fulbright in 2001 after the 2000 Jubilee, I thought it was the right time to bring attention to the Tiber and help to create a place for contemporary art. At the time, there was an exhibition at the Capitoline Museum by Presicce, proving that the bronze casting was Etruscan. The catalogue contained many images of the she-wolf, and I thought it would be fantastic to somehow build an animation that traced the evolution of the figure,

drawing from three-dimensional sculptures, tapestries, coins, ivory amulets—from all the images of she-wolves across art history. I love the way things change in time. The idea originally was to create an animation that was the chronological parade of all she-wolves.

Rail: You were, I believe, the first and only living artist to show in the Capitoline Museum where you exhibited 12 she-wolf prints in the room where the "She Wolf" is on permanent display.

Jones: I put myself in the mind of an Etruscan vase-painter, or the painter of Corinthian black figure style vases—I love the grace and the processional qualities, the animation of the celebratory parades of people and legends. I thought it'd be really beautiful to make a parade of all the she-wolf images on the river, parallel to the river, a procession of wolves with the river, a grand parade of time. I was advised by the scholar Presicce, and created the vectorial brush work with the help of a Roman graphic artist named Francesca Fini. We worked for three years, focused on images of she-wolves from museums all over the world.



Kiki Smith (with Joey Köttling and Alex Noyes), *Night Wolf* (2006), one of six sound-video installations from TEVERETERNO's 2006 *Ombre dal Lupercale* program, Piazza Tevere, Rome, Italy. Photo by T. Charles Erickson.

Rail: The first project that you did in 2005 had 12 large wolves, power-washed from the soot on the walls using stencils. The she-wolf reappears over the life of *TEVERETERNO*: in the 2009 Capitoline Museum print project and with the stenciled wolves in silver foil, and again when you had a group of artists, including Kiki Smith, bring she-wolf images from Rome's Tiber in 2006 to New York City's River to River Festival on the Hudson in 2008. I love your revival of outdoor pageantry in a way not used since antiquity, like the Panathenaic, for instance. We don't have *lustra*, or outdoor festivals, the only outdoor festivals we have are things like the Macy's Parade.

Jones: I'm very invested in the concept of commons, in ceremony, and in public gathering places where ideas can be freely exchanged and where collaborative cross-disciplinary works enter into unknown realms. My own projects would not otherwise exist if it weren't for the combination of talents and minds and knowledge.

TEVERETERNO is a collaboration with the City of Rome. The she-wolf is the symbolic beginning of a project, and yes I have had to be fierce to make things happen. The project is about the city of Rome and how we are part of history, but at the same time today the major emphasis is on the NEW.

Rail: It's become really a much bigger venue for other artists like Jenny Holzer, Kiki Smith, and William Kentridge, musicians, composers, and even Robert Hammond, executive director of friends of the High Line. Your role is more of the catalyst.

Jones: The work that I do has never been about me. I am the spirit of the project. It's always been about the place, about the people, the resources, and the context and history. Especially as an American abroad, it's important that the project be both Rome-based and international. I know the archaeologist who's responsible for what's in the mud that flows beneath the Tiber, the eel catchers, the canoe club people, the environmental groups, the various bureaucratic offices that manage, maintain, and also paralyze the management of the river.

Rail: Your work has a dimensionality. For example, *Flussi Correnti* (2007), where you had an enormous snake of 1,000 burning candles floating along the surface of the river. I was thinking of the snakes brought from Epidaurus when the plague broke out in Rome. The snakes supposedly escaped from the boat and swam up onto the Tiber Island, which became the Asklepieion, formed in the shape of a boat. You made this enormous snake of light going up the river, unleashing a numinous, archetypal element.

Jones: The Tiber is a fantastic serpentine meander; it's all curves. And yet in one section, it's straight. I stopped in my tracks when I first saw this site on the Tiber. It seemed so unnatural, so planned, and so full of potential. It was 1983, and I was on my first Fulbright to Rome. I was working at the time for an architectural model-maker, and I was looking at the form of the city. When I saw the site, I thought, "Oh my goodness! This looks just like a New York City block." I discovered that in fact the section that I was looking at is 1,800 feet long; it is essentially the same length as two New York City avenue blocks. It's GRAND. It's more than four times longer than London's Turbine Hall.

Rail: Also the same size as the Circus Maximus! I remember *WaterFire Roma* with thirty bonfires and torches on floating vessels.

Jones: The project began in 2005 with 12 majestic 30-foot high she-wolves, power-washed on the walls, and 2,758 burning torches (one for each year since Rome's symbolic birth) along the riverbanks. We had hundreds of volunteers to light these torches, and live music. Roberto Laneri, who does harmonic overtone singing, brought together five different choirs, including one from FAO. The opening program took place under a full moon on June 21st with these pheno-



Kristin Jones, *She Wolves* (2005), during TEVERETERNO's 2005 *Solstizio d'Estate* program, Piazza Tevere, between Ponte Sisto and Ponte Mazzini, Rome. Photo by Mimmo Capone.

menally beautiful torches that burned from sunset to dawn. The harmonies of the choirs were very primal. So that was the beginning of the project.

Rail: What a beginning! Wasn't it also linked to the Solstice?

Jones: Well, we had applied for permits to produce that program for Rome's birthday on April 21st, but it was not until June 21st that we got our permits. It seemed auspicious that there was a full moon on the Solstice. I believe that alignment happens only every 19 years. There was a clear sky and a beautiful full moon.

Rail: I think it's amazing that you have been able to survive; you're always working on a shoestring. You also deal with the bureaucracy, and all in Italian. I'm impressed.

Jones: We are a 99 percent volunteer team. If we had a larger staff, we could do so much more and more easily navigate the difficult bureaucracies of Italy. I wish we could just afford to pay an Italian curator and public relations staff person. Fundraising is difficult for me. I hate to ask; I would rather give. I wish there was an existing "Friends of Rome," that somehow all the foreign Academies, university programs and international organizations (none of whom pay taxes in Rome), could pool together their resources to support a staff, which would support our shared efforts..

Rail: I'm interested in the upcoming project by William Kentridge, called *Triumphs and Laments*. My students know Kentridge from *The Nose* and from his amazing Norton Lectures at Harvard. Kentridge is now working with *TEVERETERNO* on a multidisciplinary project on the history of Rome, the triumphs and the laments—you have an image of triumphant Cybele together with an image of a dead Pasolini lying on the pavement.

Jones: William and I have had a long dialogue across time. I met him in 2002, but I first met his work at Documenta in 1998. When I began drawing the She-Wolves in 2002, I knew that I wanted to bring them to life, using animation. I was haunted by a beautiful image

of a black panther circling in a cage, by an artist whose work I didn't really know. Then William came to Rome. He was performing *Confessions of Zeno* at the Teatro Valle, and he gave a talk at the future Museo nazionale delle arti del XXI secolo (or MAXXI). I realized that it was he who had drawn the black panther in the cage that I remembered from Documenta. I decided that it was William who was meant to take all these she-wolves and turn them into a parade. He wasn't interested in doing the she-wolf animation [laughs]. I said, "Fine then tell me what you would like to do on this public site on the river." I was convinced he was the right artist to address the intersection of past and present that is Rome.

In 2005 after the triumph of working with Rome's department of sanitation to clean the 30-foot high she-wolves along the Piazza Tevere, the RomaEuropa Festival presented a whole series of William's animated films. I was at a very difficult time in my personal life. I had even contemplated throwing myself in the Tiber. But I delayed my return to New York just to see the films. I was sitting in the audience, mesmerized by them, and words appeared on the screen that literally saved my life. The handwritten word "GIVE" appeared again and again and again, slowly vanishing, and reappearing. Then the word "FOR" appeared. Then "GIVE" and then "FOR" and then the words came together: "FORGIVE." "GIVE" and "FORGIVE," "GIVE" and "FORGIVE." I was in tears, crying in the theater, understanding how powerful how important such words are for the world and for me personally. I was thrilled by the scale of the meaning and sobbing both for the world and for myself. The words changed my life.

I have continued to follow William's work, to show up at conferences, talks, and exhibitions and to remind him of Rome's grand open air arena. I offered him the support of our whole team of believers, who would help realize whatever project he decided on. *TEVERETERNO* is now a great team of believers, but we are not yet an institution, we don't have the supporters of the great opera houses in the world, or museums. Yes it thrills me to dream of William Kentridge's greatest drawing ever—an ephemeral drawing for the Eternal City. A drawing that will have taken more than 15 years to make happen and will vanish in time. The *Triumphs and Laments* frieze will be as impermanent as my own she-wolves that vanished after less than five years.



William Kentridge, *Preliminary Sequence I* (2014), exploratory drawing for *Triumphs and Laments*, ink on paper. Image courtesy of the artist and TEVERETERNO. Photo by Thys Dullaart.

Rail: How many images has he drawn so far for this project?

Jones: William has completed 60 drawings, and there are at least 20 more to go. He still has to figure out the whole sequence.

Rail: Kentridge is adding more dimensions, like shadow play, more subjects, figures ancient and modern. It reminds me of Trajan's column, a ribbon with multiple figures and stories winding up the column.



William Kentridge and Philip Miller, *William Kentridge LIVE a Roma* (2014), MAXXI, Rome, Italy. Photo by F. Leonardi.

Jones: He's been thinking about this project for more than 12 years. Finally, on the day of the last 2012 Norton Lecture, he said to me, "if not now, when?" And so we started working.

We've been working now for almost three years. William has always worked with the extreme tensions of the world, the drama, the political, the tension between opposites, so it's appropriate. This past summer at the magical workshop event we created with William, composer Philip Miller, and a great array of popular Italian and immigrant musicians, the audience was laughing and crying. There is power in the work, much emotion and humor.

Rail: Kentridge shows power and its opposite. Lament is not something addressed so readily today, especially in America.

Jones: Under the leadership of scholar Dr. Lila Yawn, we have conducted this monumental research project, which has provided William with a fantastic history of art full of images of Rome's triumphs and tragedies. Of course, many of the tragedies have to be edited out, in a way, or moderated, because to this day, Mussolini (for example) is a very hot button in Italy. But because somebody is always losing and somebody is always winning, it all depends on one's perspective. We know that it is the victors who write the histories.

Rail: America today is like the end of the Roman Empire, fading with an over extended military abroad. With decay comes a creative energy.

Jones: Rome has always been, until recent time, the greatest stage for art and architecture. Today there's very little opportunity, because there are no emperors and no popes that have as much power as in the past, so very few things can be built. [Laughs.]

Rail: Where are the Medicis when we need them? [Laughs] You've been a participant periodically, but the project has turned into something much larger.

Jones: So many people have contributed to *TEVERETERNO* and collaborated on it over the last decade. I consider myself to be a catalyst—the spark. I'm the muse, the agitator, the animator. I am also the artist—I have produced projects for the site in the past and have drawn up 12 proposals for new work there, but I also want it to be more than that. My work plays a role in the realization of a much larger initiative, which is our long-term vision for the site and its role in the contemporary life and culture of Rome.

I love to see what other people have done and will do. I would love for contemporary Rome to become a destination in the way that ancient Rome is for so much of the world, and I believe that contemporary art can help make this a reality. An internationally-recognized arts festival offers the world yet another reason to come to Rome, the eternal renewal of the Eternal City.

Rail: You did a project for the Venice Biennale in 2010, I believe.

Jones: It was part of the Architecture Biennial; it wasn't the Art Biennial. Luca Molinari, the curator of the Italian Pavilion, presented *TEVERETERNO* as a valid, futuristic, optimistic place-making project. We imagine the Tiber as a grand-scale, public park running the length of the city of Rome, part of the parks system. It is an enormous expanse and it is almost empty. So much can happen there.

Rail: I can't think of any other places where the artists come and do a project that really relates to the history of the place the way your project does.

Jones: It depends on the artist. Many artists just don't do site-specific work. We have applied for a 19-year long permit for the use of the site. If we can get that, it would be wonderful to invite different curators. Inspired especially by Creative Time and the Public Art Fund in New York City, *TEVERETERNO* is aimed at helping artists to realize new work that is site-specific in every sense: looking at the history, the environment (constructed and natural), the local community and tourists that shape the city, the institutions that shape its culture, etc. It's meant to be a meeting place and a laboratory for new ideas—ideas that don't fit within the traditional confines of a museum, gallery, or concert hall.

Rail: It's a delicate balance in a funny way. With a Biennial model, you're bringing in foreign curators who may not share your relationship with the Tiber. The

internationale style, can be anonymous, uprooted, and sort of plopped anywhere.

Jones: I am the Artistic Director for *Triumphs and Laments*, and I have served as Artistic Director of *TEVERETERNO* since its founding. I work with a small, fluid, but very dedicated Artistic Committee. We have articulated a set of shared guidelines regarding the work that we present, but it is also very important to us—especially those of us who are artists in our own right—that those guidelines don't inhibit creativity but ensure the quality and site-specificity of the work.

William is totally committed—there is no larger canvas, in a more public space in a more magnificent city than the 1,800-foot long by 30-foot high travertine wall he is creating the pan historical frieze for. William's commitment has galvanized a dedicated and hard working team, including Lia Rumma Gallery in Italy. I am happy to be working with our new Italian president Luca Zevi and director Tom Rankin. Both Vice President Valeria Sassanelli and Project Manager Damiana Leoni are fierce believers and serious strategists; there is much hope for the future.

Rail: Kentridge has an amazing relationship to history. This is very different in spirit from Claes Oldenburg's Thames proposal, where you have an enormous toilet tank float bobbing in the river, or the recent giant rubber duck on the Nanming River that got swept away.

Jones: The fact that William understands the potential of the site is exhilarating. He also understands that we are not a commercial project; our site is a public space that's pretty fraught with issues. It's a river, which is everybody's and nobody's, and so the management of the site is complicated. There is no single river authority in Rome and the permitting process is very complex. But the Tiber is the only site in the historic center of Rome that is not, in a certain way, precious—in that sense, it contains an unequalled potential, what architects call *terrain vague*.

Rail: I know you are very self-effacing and think of yourself as the muse and facilitator. But, I think of you as the wolf mother of this project and identified with the she-wolf in a positive way, a nurturer of the rough and tumble.

Jones: [Laughs.] It just takes a certain amount of absolute tenacity and fierceness to bring anything like this to the foreground, on an urban scale. It's very challenging. But I am an optimist, and I don't understand the word “no.”

Rail: As artists, when we are working with an image, it becomes part of us. I'm curious about your inner she-wolf.

Jones: That's the problem [McCoy laughs]. I have invested a huge amount of the last 12 years of my life to this dream. It has been a sacrifice, but it has also been a great experience. I have been very fortunate to work

with an extraordinary group of artists, architects, composers, and city planners. I have sunk my “wolf” teeth into a very idealistic project.

Rail: Rome was the first republic but also a huge militaristic body, with thousands of legions going out all the way to Hadrian’s Wall. Yet, you have the she-wolf and all these female deities. When the going gets really rough, they bring the meteor-headed great goddess Cybele from Asia Minor to save Rome.

Jones: [Laughs.] I think that the whole question of our awareness and respect for nature is really part of the issue here. It’s not just homage to the city of Rome. Humanity still has not recognized that we’re part of nature.

Rail: In the ancient world, every aspect of nature had a deity, from the wind to the sea. The river had a deity and one sacrificed to that deity to show respect. . Your project is making an offering to this river god, and that’s wonderful. Most Americans don’t realize how haunted Rome is. When you’re in Rome, the spirit of the place overtakes you. Pan is still dancing in the groves and maenads are running amuck beyond the old wall.

Jones: If you just stand there, by the river, and you watch it go by, you can’t help but think of all of the parades of soldiers, songs, and lives, of the rain and storms and blood and creatures that swim, and have come to drink. It’s so evocative. When you think of any river and why and how it flows, about cycles and gravity, and the planet as a whole and about what we are, about how we are the living evidence of thousands of generations; it’s exhilarating. I’m interested in creating work that would not exist if it weren’t for the conversations between people. I’ve happily worked in collaboration with many people. I am interested in the conversation itself and about addressing a situation with respect. I have an instinct for place; I work and dream collectively to create an “opera,” a work that I hope can resonate and bring new meaning that can magnify a place, and make one’s individual experience of a situation more vital—I am interested in work that awakens an emotional sense of our own present, tense existence.



Nighttime rendering prepared by TEVERETERNO with stills from *Refuse the Hour* (William Kentridge, 2012) of how William Kentridge’s *Triumphs and Laments* might look from Ponte Sisto, Rome. Image by Pippo Marino (2014).