The Intangible Lightness of Being

KRISTIN JONES '75

by Gail Friedman

On an early March morning in New York, the West Village is waking up. The streets are full of movement: pedestrians walk with purpose, shops and restaurants gear up for the day's business. Five steep flights above the activity, Kristin Jones '75 is in her loft having breakfast: a grapefruit, steel-cut oatmeal, and a home-brewed caffé latte—not unlike the coffee she drinks in Italy. She is in Rome so much these days that New York has become her second home.

In Jones' living room, unfinished wood beams, five feet below the ceiling, cut through the open space. A white, circular art work, one of her own, hangs on the faded white brick wall, its recessed "eye" like a crater in the middle. A large collection of plumb-bobs is suspended like jewels near a window. Nearby, two glass eyes peer over a collection of religious icons that might have once adorned a Byzantine church.

Jones' small kitchen is guarded by a mosaic eye—similar to the three hundred eyes that watch commuters in New York's World Trade Center–Park Place subway station. They are hardly noticed in the rush there, but are seeing eyes nonetheless. Beyond the kitchen is an area with two drafting tables and several computers, and, on the wall, more mosaic eyes, multicolored rows of them, made from natural stone, haunting. Andrew Ginzel, who has collaborated with Jones since 1983, appears with two young apprentices, who get to work planning a proposal for the University of Colorado at Boulder's Visual Arts Complex. It's one of many projects in the busy Jones-Ginzel collaboration.

Kristin Jones doesn't see things the way most of us do. Where we see an empty space, she sees opportunity. Where we see a neglected river, she imagines a water theatre. Where we see nothing, she perceives the context as a frame for an art work that can bring meaning to a void. Jones thinks on a grand scale.

The installation artist is behind numerous highly visible public art works—the kind people walk by and notice. She likens art in public space to theatre, but an accessible variety, not destined only for the eyes of the privileged. In her installations, she aims to "nurture and capture the individual's imagination," but also to allow each onlooker to participate.

The Jones-Ginzel Web site (jonesginzel.com) lists more than fifty projects since 1990, from *Polarities*, covering 200,000 square feet of floor in the Kansas City airport, to *Plethora*, an outdoor installation in New Delhi that includes a magnificent, live white bullock; from *Apostasy*, two giant flags and fifteen topiary figures commissioned by Atlanta's Committee for the Olympic Games, to the mirrored *Panopia* in a Chicago police station.

Jones describes herself as naïve, and it must be true. A pragmatist would never attempt what she has, including her most recent project and passion—*Tevereterno*, mean-

Plethora, New Delhi
1991

A live, white bullock (traditionally a draft animal) with gilded horns stands in a circle of dark, fertile earth, encircled by red sand, cobalt blue dust, and white marble powder. A mound of perfect, white marble eggs counterbalances a pyre of charred wood and walking canes, which conceals a corroded copper globe. The work explores the tension between opposites: equilibrium and potential. At right, the artist, Kristin Jones '75.

Diane Roehm

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ing Eternal Tiber. *Tevereterno*, a multidisciplinary project, adopts a single section of Rome's Tiber River and transforms it into an open-air stage for large-scale artistic installations that draw attention to both the beauty and neglect of the river. Jones believes in the artist's role to raise awareness and to celebrate the wonder of nature.

The Tiber first entered Jones' consciousness in 1983, when she was in Rome on her first of two Fulbright Fellowships. She noticed the Tiber was isolated from the city by thirty-two-foot-high embankments, and that Romans, unlike Parisians, hardly know the names of their local bridges. She was drawn to the emptiness of the derelict waterway, abandoned by its city.

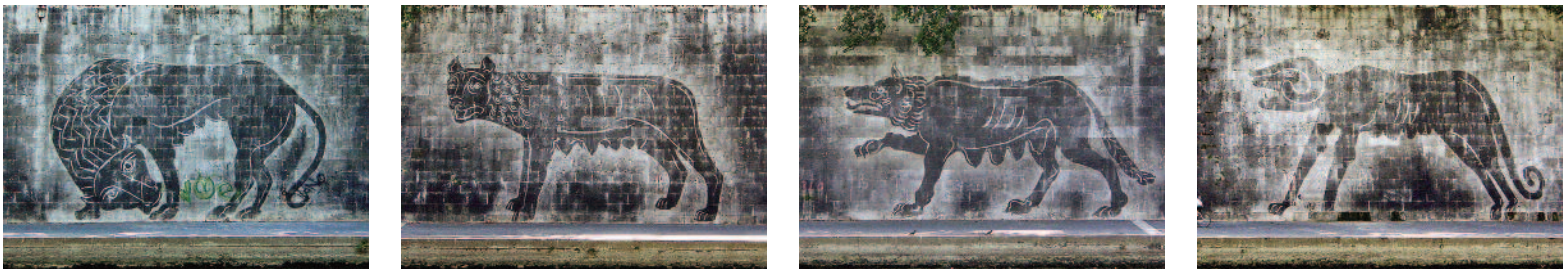
Jones would gaze down the straight strip of river between the bridges Sisto and Mazzini and wonder, "Does anybody see what I see?" She saw potential for a water theatre—"where the river, where water itself could be celebrated rather than neglected." Where others saw murky water, she saw the "crystalline geometry of a parallelogram." When Jones and Ginzel received the American Academy in Rome's prestigious Rome Prize in 1994 and spent a year in the city, Jones sought drawings of the area from the city planning office. It was her first step toward *Tevereterno*.

The goal of the project is to create a lively plaza with programmed contemporary events, a piazza for the Tiber—the Piazza Tevere. According to www.tevereterno.it, the hope is to capture the attention of Rome's public administration and to build enough credibility that international artists could be invited to create innovative, site-specific art installations that would stimulate a dialogue between nature and the urban construct, between history and present. Jones has worked tirelessly with Roman colleagues on the board of the Italian nonprofit cultural association to launch the *Tevereterno* concept and to demonstrate its potential to the city.

So far, Jones has devoted her creative talents to the staging of a series of annual events for the summer solstice, for which numerous composers and visual artists were invited to collaborate. For the first *Tevereterno*

Making the Wolves, Rome 2005

Artists at work are dwarfed by the giant she-wolf, created for Jones' *Tevereterno* project and based on iconic images up to 3,000 years old.



She Wolves, Rome 2005

According to legend, the wild she-wolf rescued infant twins Romulus and Remus and nurtured the founding of Roman civilization. *She Wolves*, commissioned for *Tevereterno*, brought Rome's mythological icon to life on the banks of the Tiber River.

Photos by Dylan Hazelhurst

event, in 2005, on a midsummer's night under a full moon, 2,758 torches burned from sunset to dawn on the Tiber. A choir of more than one hundred harmonic voices sang to the river and to a parade of twelve giant she-wolves—drawings of iconic symbols of the city of Rome, translated by Jones from historic sources that span more than 3,000 years. For another *Tevereterno* event, "*Ombre dal Luper-cale*," Jones invited six visual artists to collaborate with six composers on a 2006 solstice program: projections and high fidelity sound compositions created for the river filled the site and drew more than 10,000 visitors in a single night. In 2007, two musical compositions were written for an ensemble of eighteen musicians who were spread along the 1,800-foot-long embankments of the Tiber, while 1,000 floating torches drew a line of light down the central channel of the river. In 2008, compositions and projections from these Rome events were presented on New York's Hudson River, during the River to River Festival.

Jones has been working with the city of Rome since 2001, taking on the capital's labyrinthine bureaucracy. Thanks in part to her tenacity, the concept of a water theatre is now incorporated into Rome's new city plan, and *Tevereterno* is officially administered as an Italian nonprofit.

In Rome, Jones is committed to yet another grand-scale project, one encumbered by enormous bureaucratic challenges: she has proposed an ephemeral work entitled *Gravity*, made of hundreds of individual elastic threads that would descend from the oculus of the Pantheon toward its domed floor. Jones' Web site describes the project: "A luminous cone of 360 fine, elastic threads will descend from the Pantheon's oculus and come to a single point below, held by a bronze plummet marking the center of gravity. The delicate rays of the ephemeral, volumetric

Marcello Melis / Carlo Maria Ciampoli

Gravity, Rome (proposal)

Gravity would install a luminous cone of 360 delicate threads, projecting downward from the oculus in Rome's Pantheon like rays of light. Jones says the gossamer cone, taut like the strings of a harp, would reflect the precise mathematical properties of the Pantheon that inspire awe in scholars and architects.

drawing will capture the sun's movement as it spirals within the dome. *Gravity* will dramatize the simple power of geometry and light. The gossamer form will be an exploration of the relationship between the physical and the ethereal, the vast infinity of the unknown, and mortality . . ."

Jones said she was inspired while watching rain fall though the Pantheon's oculus, and then drew a cone with 360 threads completing its circle. "There is a magic number to everything," she said. "The building is so mathematically exquisite—essentially the building has designed a piece for me. I'm just the one who perceives it." A pantologist later explained to Jones the relationship between the monument's oculus and the diameter of the dome, likening the proportions to those of the human eye. "The oculus is the iris, and the sphere is the eye," he told her. So far, authorities have rejected Jones' Pantheon installation, but she presses on. "I believe the work was meant to be. The building itself suggests it," she said.

Jones has substantial experience with intricate thread installations—she constructed thousands of individual elastic threads into a work of art within a skylit room in the Cushing Gallery in Newport, Rhode Island, which "depending on the clouds, would completely disappear." And at Yale, her outdoor elastic-ribbon exhibition, *Smoke Hedge*, transformed the Beinecke Plaza. "It revealed the properties of the light and the wind that are there," she said.

Ephemeral, intangible qualities like light and wind are leading actors in Jones' theatre of art. Another recurring character is time, which plays a prominent role in many of Jones' works, including her most controversial, *Metronome*, in New York City's Union Square. "*Metronome* is an investigation into the nature of time," Jones and Ginzel wrote in 1999, when it opened. ". . . This composite work intends to evoke contemplation on the dynamic flux of the city. The elements suggest the instant and infinity, astronomical sequence, geological epoch, and ephemerality. *Metronome* is meant to be integral to the very history, architectural fabric, spirit, and vitality of the city. Ultimately, the work is an ode to mortality and the impossibility of knowing time."

When the project launched, steam consistently

Metronome, New York City
1998

Metronome, on the façade of One Union Square South, was intended to be a geothermal reminder of the physical properties of our planet, but was compromised when the developer deactivated the steam.

David Sundburg (Esto Photographics)

T. Charles Erickson

emerged from the gold leaf and concentric circles on the façade of One Union Square South. "The vapor was intended to emanate around the clock and erupt at noon, "a geothermal reminder that we live on a live planet with physical phenomena," Jones said. But the developer turned off the steam, ostensibly because of problems with icicles and moisture.

Without the steam, Jones said, *Metronome* is not artwork. "The piece is an over-the-top, maximalist work. A sequence of sounds integrates with the steam. The whole notion of *Metronome*, the whole reason for the project, was the fleeting, intangible steam," she said.

The work was commissioned when Jones and Ginzel won a competition run for the building's developer by the Public Art Fund and the Municipal Art Society. "It was an enormous challenge to construct," Jones said. "The brickwork itself is a miracle of craftsmanship." Jones said she and Ginzel had no choice but to work directly with a construction management firm instead of with an art consultant, who might have mediated and "helped defend and guarantee the integrity of the work."

Jones now describes the project as "a classic drama between idealistic artists and pragmatic financiers." It's a familiar turmoil to Jones, yet the idealist in her always perseveres. Today, she simply calls *Metronome* incomplete. She would love to tune the digital clock, light the wall, control the steam, and turn on the sound.

As a ballast to such large-scale projects and the thorny concepts they tackle, Jones also creates a series of studio works—"exquisite little tableaus" of nature. In her *Wind Drawings* series, "the plants actually do the drawings," she said. "I put a drop of paint on the leaf and the leaf makes the drawing. I hold the paper." Her ink drawings and time-lapse photography all reflect motion and change.

Like her art, Jones is frequently in motion. She thinks nothing of biking from her Greenwich Village apartment to the Upper West side. She shuttles between New York and Rome, wondrous at how the two cities complement each other. The daughter of a diplomat, Jones grew adept at adapting. "When people ask where I was born, I respond, "in motion." Still, there is balance. Jones meditates daily,

Marcello Melis

Oculus, New York City
1999

Three hundred mosaic eyes, of stone and glass, peer at passersby in the World Trade Center–Park Place subway station.

Andrew Ginzel

and describes a weeklong meditation retreat she attended where "there were ninety people, and no one said a word." She does not meditate to generate ideas. "It's about being part of a larger whole, listening to the universe. It's an act of respect to yourself."

Jones first began discovering herself as an artist in high school, where she experienced the artist's passion in a Concord Academy class with Teacher Emerita Janet Eisendrath. "She actually managed to bring the entire class into a state of rapture," Jones said. "She's the only teacher in my life who brought a class to tears. That takes a lot of eloquence. Janet shared with us her knowledge and wonder of art; she shared with us the power of art to stimulate an emotional reaction."

Back then, however, Jones was a bit preoccupied. She had learned at age twelve that her diplomat father was a spy, and she was warned never to mention it, though she discusses it openly now. Her heart would quiver if a CA classmate said, "Do you have your CA ID?" thinking she had heard "CIA." Jones had been utterly unprepared when she learned her father's secret, during a memorable family lunch in Norway. "I'm genuinely naïve, to this day," she said.

After Concord Academy, Jones studied ceramics and sculpture at the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD), and spent her senior year abroad at St. Martin's School of Art in London. "I had a powerful reaction to the sculpture department there," she said. The volume of air and light beneath St. Martin's fourteen-foot ceilings inspired her to work in thread. "I kept looking up at the light, thinking, 'If I could only get up there . . .'" Finally, she took a ladder and climbed to the classroom ceiling, constructing a floor-to-ceiling thread sculpture. "It was like a rain of threads," she remembered.

Jones later received her MFA at Yale, where renowned professor Vincent Scully told her, "If you're interested in public space, you must go to Rome." On her first Fulbright, in 1983, she studied the interplay of public space and water there. The Rome Prize allowed her return with collaborator Ginzel in 1994–95. In 2001, she returned to Rome on a senior Fulbright.

And she has returned repeatedly since then. Rome is a muse for Jones and a platform for the ephemeral. "I am interested in light and air and the sheer intangibility of the living moment," said Jones. She is like an interpreter, seeing a space and its context as a medium through which to channel her vision.

Art in Jones' eye is both perception and transmission, an opportunity to convey an essence that is not readily apparent.