

# LONDON WATERWORKS

**Agnieszka Gratza**

*Thames Water*, a live art piece staged in Potters Fields Park by Tower Bridge as part of *A River Enquiry* at the Mayor's Thames Festival, London, September 11–12, 2010; *Walbrook*, included in Artsadmin's Two Degrees Festival, June 19, 2009; *Drift* at Battersea Park boating lake as part of Battersea Arts Centre's BURST Festival, May 21, 2009. All three works by Amy Sharrocks.

London comes as something of an afterthought in Roger Deakin's *Waterlog: A Swimmer's Journey through Britain* (1999), inspired by John Cheever's short story "The Swimmer" and its film adaptation starring Burt Lancaster. By his own admission, urban swimming is not high on Deakin's agenda, and the capital of Britain has little to offer an advocate of wild, fresh-water swimming. Deakin notes in passing that the Port of London Authority strictly forbids swimming in the Thames. "Apart from the danger from constant river traffic," he writes, tacitly condoning this state of affairs, "the water itself, although not as polluted as it used to be, can still seriously damage your health." London-based live artist Amy Sharrocks sets out to challenge assumptions such as these in her latest piece, *Thames Water*. Together with playfully reflective offerings by Tim Etchells and Search Party, and commissioned by *home live art* for the Mayor's Thames Festival, Sharrocks's

*Thames Water* was one in a trio of new works made in response to the River Thames, jointly titled *A River Enquiry*.

The piece was a bid to bring Londoners closer to their river, or rather to bring the Thames closer to Londoners. A human chain of volunteers carried plastic buckets filled with Thames water from the river's pebbly shore by Tower Bridge, up some steep moss-covered steps in the Horsleydown Old Stairs leading to the Thames, and a few yards down a crowded cobblestone passageway running alongside the river all the way to Potters Fields Park, on the other side of the Tower Bridge. It took ten people or so almost two hours, the duration of a performance repeated on two consecutive days, and considerable effort to half fill an inflatable paddling pool of rather modest proportions. Members of the public were then given a chance "to wade through the water of the city" in the paddling pool. Barring children and

artists, few appeared to be tempted by its murky waters.

The Thames is purportedly one of the cleanest rivers in the world, though when you examine it at close range, sitting in a paddling pool, this defies belief. Its turbid brown color, according to a *home live art* representative, is not due to pollution but to the silt churned up by the ebb and flow of the tide; it would have looked much the same in Roman times. A cow's bone polished by the waters, rusty nails, pottery shards, seaweed, and bits of refuse emptied out of the buckets, were carefully removed and displayed like so many trophies at a nearby table. Volunteers from Thames21—a charity dedicated to keeping London's network of waterways clean—were on hand to demonstrate that the water's pH and oxygen levels are ideally suited to support plant and fish life. Some one hundred and twenty fish species, freshwater and marine alike, have been recorded in the river over the last twenty-five years, including salmon, which returned to the Thames in 1974. So why shouldn't Londoners follow suit?

This is precisely what Amy Sharrocks invites them to do. Having drafted fifty people to join her for a group swim across the capital's public baths, ponds, and lakes in *SWIm* (2007), Sharrocks used *Thames Water* at last year's Thames Festival to enlist public support for another art swim, one that would see a hundred hardy souls cross the river beneath Tower Bridge in the year of London's upcoming 2012 Olympics. The petition-*cum*-manifesto for *Swim the Thames 2012*, which all interested parties were given to sign, does not propose to flaunt the Port of London Authority measures in a guerilla-style

swim, but simply to draw attention to the Thames as a shared public waterway, asking who controls it and what are the public's rights to it.

*Thames Water* is Sharrocks's most recent addition to a body of work investigating "how contemporary Londoners connect with water."<sup>1</sup> In a series of one-on-one and collective live art pieces, the artist has tapped into the liquid element in its many guises: natural and artificial, hidden and apparent, indoors and out-of-doors. Central to her practice as a whole, journeys act as a linking thread between each discrete work. Another is the Thames itself, "port, sewer, pleasure ground, heart of London . . . its lifeblood," in the words of *Swim the Thames 2012*. All London rivers lead to the Thames. Like the sea, London's great natural boundary draws all tributaries into itself, engulfs them all, makes room for them all.

The series of six public walks—named after each of the underground rivers they traced: *Effra*, *Fleet*, *Walbrook*, *Tyburn*, *Westbourne*, *Neckinger*—spanned the course of a year from June 2008 to June 2009. Together they make up *London is a River City*. Each had its own distinctive flavor and set of participants. A collaboration with Ana Laura Lopez de la Torre, *Neckinger* (September 23, 2008) took place at night and in silence. *Effra*, on February 1, 2009, saw the walkers contend with gusts of wind and swirls of snow. *Walbrook* (June 19, 2009) was the blue walk: the fifty odd people who signed on for it were asked to wear blue and were loosely tied by the waist with blue ribbon. In *Westbourne* (April



*Thames Water.*  
Photos:  
Courtesy  
Jim Banks.

28, 2009), all the participants were equipped with dowsing rods, acting as water detectors of sorts.

Rather than “guided tours, in the usual understanding,” the walks were conceived as “attempts at a different kind of engagement . . . a connection to a different grid. As much a physical connection as a leap of imagination.” For the actual mapping of the underground rivers, likened to a “kind of palm reading of London,”<sup>22</sup> Sharrocks availed herself of the services of a professional water dowser, Vicky Sweetlove. Prior to the walks, the dowser would hold a pendulum over the map of the city and dowse the river by first locating its source and then following its hidden trajectory all the way to the Thames. This virtual survey would then be verified in practice with the aid of dowsing rods used as pointers to show the direction of the river’s flow on the actual walks. However dubious this method of locating water may appear, dowsing relies on the assumption that our bodies are mostly made up of water and thus physically react to water.

The artist’s avowed aim in making these collective artworks was to trace the memory of water running beneath our feet, tantalizingly close yet separated from us by layers on layers of concrete. Richard Long, the archetypal walking artist, is quoted on the *London is a River City* Website as saying that a “walk is just one more layer, a mark.” But whereas the walks at the heart of Long’s practice tend to be a solitary pursuit, Sharrocks and other London-based artists such as Simon Pope—in his *London Bridge Recall* (2007), *Memorial Walks* (2009), and most recently in the film *Memory*

*Marathon* (2010)—have explored walking as a sociable activity in their work.

*Walbrook*, a public walk that set out to “re-create one of London’s oldest rivers by thronging the pavements with people,” is a case in point. Sporting as many shades of blue as there were walkers, the participants gathered outside of Highbury and Islington underground station, the meeting point, where the organizers proceeded to tie them up together with shimmering blue ribbon. “There is no actual water on this walk,” Sharrocks declared at the outset of a three-hour-long itinerary that traced the course of Walbrook River from its source in Islington, meandering its way through the heart of the City, to its mouth at the Thames beneath Southwark Bridge. “Until we get to the Thames, we are the water—90% water apparently.” Part bondage, part girdle, yet supple enough to allow for ever new permutations and conversation partners, the ribbon at once restricted movements and ensured that the walkers flowed together, river-like, past lamp posts, phone booths, cars, and any other urban obstacles.

For the span of an afternoon, collectively the participants embodied a river that had been buried for five centuries. Like many of London’s lost rivers, paved over, piped in, and largely used as sewers, the Walbrook today is commemorated above ground in the names of streets or churches, in the boundaries of city wards that espouse the river’s course, and in the occasional plaque that records its hidden passage. In the second part of the walk, after they had emerged from the tunnel beneath the Old Street roundabout, the walkers were under strict instruction to observe a vow of silence. For those who kept to it (not everyone did, making for

a somewhat thwarted meditative experience), the focus shifted away from their companions to the busy streets of the City and to onlookers whose amused, and occasionally bemused reactions followed the silent convoy until it dispersed onto the shore of the Thames.

The shared experience of meditating on water, in some cases quite literally, is something that Sharrocks turns to again and again in her work. This ongoing preoccupation goes back to *Drift* (2006), initially staged indoors within the confines of a Victorian swimming pool in Camberwell, and more recently recreated on lakes, rivers, bathing ponds, and swimming pools around England, including on the boating lake in Battersea Park as part of Battersea Arts Centre's BURST festival (2009). Unlike the group meditation that pieces such as *Walbrook* encourage, *Drift* was a one-on-one artwork in which the artist invited people to join her in a pontoon for two fitted with cushions and decked out with lanterns. The cocoon-like set-up lent itself to an intimate private exchange as the boat was set adrift, borne by water currents and wind gently spinning it (at least in the piece's outdoor incarnations). Moments of silence, leaving one ample opportunity to become alive to a range of new physical sensations, alternated with snatches of conversation in a meditation *à deux* on the aesthetics of drifting.

In Roni Horn's 1999 *Still Water (The River Thames, for Example)*, the question "What is water?" underlies the fifteen photographs riddled with tiny white numbers, each of which connects up with fragments of conversation and seemingly random thoughts elicited by the great river. These close-ups of the river's reflective surface capture only a fraction of its many moods, hues, and textures. Sharrocks's London water pieces tally with Horn's sculptural and photographic attempts at sounding the complex nature of water. From Battersea Park to Tower Bridge, they cohere around the Thames and gravitate towards it like so many of the waterways buried beneath the city's pavements. Coming at it from different directions, by day and by night, whether walking, swimming, or drifting, together they form a sustained meditation on and a celebration of water in the city.

## NOTES

1. "Swim," Red Giant Projects and Amy Sharrocks, accessed May 2007, <http://www.iwanttoswim.co.uk>.

2. "London is a River City," Red Giant Projects and Amy Sharrocks, accessed May 2009, <http://www.londonisarivercity.com/why.html>.

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