

Tate Thames Dig

Drawing an Algorithm
in the Sand

Gilda Williams

¹
Robert Williams, *Mark Dion Archaeology* (London: Black Dog, 1999).

²
'Mark Dion: The Thames Dig and Other Projects', lecture given at the AA School of Architecture, London, October 1999. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mkclicYDGIM>, accessed 2 Sept 2017.

Tate Thames Dig is an artwork 400,000,000 years in the making. In the summer of 1999, the American artist Mark Dion enlisted a group of volunteers to spend two weeks combing paired sites along the foreshore of the Thames: the north, at Tate Millbank, and the south, at Bankside Power Station (soon to be reborn Tate Modern). Attesting to three millennia of life along the busy river, over 100,000 artefacts were recovered, including:

Coins, clay pipes, plastic toys, human and animal bones, shells, glassware, chains, rope, bricks, biro, pencils, cocktail stirrers, combs, tools, crockery, buttons, toothbrushes, bottlecaps, jewellery, cutlery, mollusks, broken chimney pots, a shovel, a rake, a 400 million year-old fossil.

The Port of London Authority granted *Tate Thames Dig* permission provided that no excavating probed beyond a depth of six inches, in order to minimise ecological disturbance. Millbank proved the more problematic location, plagued by a 'thick, stinking silt coating'¹ that smothered the found objects; moreover, these tended to be of recent vintage. At Bankside the river slowed and produced older, more sizeable booty, such as larger pottery fragments or bones, oyster shells and even a bear's tooth – souvenirs of the Southbank's raucous past as a throbbing entertainment venue since Shakespeare's day.

'Each day was a new roll of the dice',² is how Dion described the dig, owing to the Thames' extreme tidal patterns that dramatically altered site conditions from day to day. Collecting on the slivers of shoreline was restricted to brief, two-hour time slots, and the beachcombers were instructed during their limited shifts to adopt an open-minded, 'scatter-gun' approach. Collect anything that catches your eye, Dion advised. The team combined two urban demographic sets who might otherwise share few occasions for daily interaction: teens under seventeen, and pensioners over sixty-five. The artist recalls that the age divide was not always harmonious, and conflicts occasionally arose. In practice, the two groups surprised themselves

in very different ways. On one hand, the profoundly urban youngsters discovered an unknown riverside freedom right on their doorstep, taking the Tube to an unfamiliar central London location where they could lark about in the river mud like Huckleberry Finn. On the other hand, the pensioners revealed themselves as exceptionally sharp-eyed amateur archaeologists, often identifying uncommonly meaningful objects. The older diggers found they possessed valuable first-hand knowledge of local history, able to spot, for example, antiquated nails or even tiny pins in the riverbed – evidence of the specialist hardware factories that once flourished near London Bridge.

All the findings were gathered in three Indiana Jones-type archaeologist's tents pitched on the Millbank lawn: one tent devoted to each site, plus a third for talks and seminars. Meticulous sifting, cleaning and cataloguing took place in public view. Experts including Museum of London staff, Thames River Police and ecologists were on hand to help identify the more mysterious artefacts extracted from the mud, such as a fragment of human shinbone, seventeenth-century Bellarmine pottery, or a World War II bullet. Some retrieved items were sorted by object type, later grouped and labelled in white plastic boxes. MIRRORS. TEETH. MONEY. TILES. The tagged boxes were displayed in Tate Britain's 'Art Now' space (Oct 1999–Jan 2000) alongside large loose items presented in the upper half of a magnificent, specially-made, double-sided cabinet – a massive feat of carpentry more suggestive of real estate than furniture. The enormous mahogany display case voluminously occupied the gallery, becoming a kind of room-sized still-life. We could say (with apologies for referring to a worn art cliché) that if Michelangelo imagined his *David* sculpture as a fully formed figure concealed inside the marble, a finished statue 'merely' extracted from the stone by the artist's hand, then Dion's *Tate Thames Dig* is a 'found' still-life, concealed within the sands of the Thames and 'merely' extracted from the riverbed by the artist and his dedicated team.

Nearly all of the retrieved materials found a place within the colossal cabinet save for a few omitted, outsized things – a shopping

cart, two tyres, a drowned dog. The heterogeneous presentation was heavily suggestive of Renaissance and Victorian traditions of collection, with their favoured *wunderkammer* exhibiting style – a jumble-sale presentation that Dion calls the ‘bunch of stuff’ curatorial method. Forming the cabinet’s giant lower half were neat drawers of carefully arranged items grouped by multiple classifying criteria, such as material (plastic, metal, ceramic); utility (bottle stoppers, pens, keys) or colour. In the ‘pottery’ drawer, a shard from a rare Saxon pot might be displayed alongside bits of blue-glazed Delftware, Georgian-era English porcelain, or recently smashed IKEA crockery: irregular pieces skilfully arranged to form a kind of complex mosaic. One drawer gathered ‘greatest hits’: wondrous objects of special appeal such as a child’s shoe dating from the nineteenth century; a voodoo doll; a message in a bottle with text written in Arabic. Overall, the motley collection of drawers described not merely an encyclopaedia of *things* but a sampling of possible *systems* with which to classify and display them. Dion has spoken of the influence of Stephen Jay Gould’s writings, such as *Taxonomy as Politics* (1990), which proposed that scientific categories are socially constructed schemes rather than ‘objective’ structures. Also on display at Millbank were tidal flow charts and photographic portraits depicting all involved – from volunteers to Tate curators – in a roll-call akin to the credits at the close of a film, attesting to the many hardworking contributors required to accomplish an epic archaeological feat such as *Tate Thames Dig*.

A Democratic Enterprise

Dion’s collaborative practice has been recognised as an early example of the participatory turn that swept contemporary art-making at the start of the twenty-first century. Today, we are familiar with such process-based, group-generated artworks, in which both authorship and execution are shared beyond a singular artist. But when Dion first began inviting multiple participants to join him on projects like *Chicago Urban Ecology Group* (1993), such collective practices were a rarity. At the time, ‘the art world did not salute this [participatory]

flag', as Dion put it,³ although these methods were famously theorised in the late 1990s under the umbrella term of 'relational' art-making.⁴

Tate Thames Dig belongs to a strain of Dion's 'archaeo-naturalist' artworks, such as *A Yard of Jungle* (1992) in which the artist scooped up a square yard of the Amazon floor and painstakingly itemised the contents – aphid by aphid, leaf by leaf, invertebrate by invertebrate, yielding no fewer than 2,000 specimens. A large body of analogous works, which includes *The Great Munich Bug Hunt* (1993); *A Meter of Jungle* (Brazil, 1992); *History Trash Dig*, (Fribourg, Switzerland, 1995); *History Trash Scan* (Venice, 1996); *A Meter of Meadow* (Fribourg, 1995); or *A Tale of Two Seas: An Account of Stephan Dillemath's and Mark Dion's Journey along the Shores of the North Sea and Baltic Sea and What They Found There* (1996), attest to Dion's spirit of wonder and curiosity about whatever his chosen sources produce, whether a felled tree in Munich, an Italian rubbish dump, the North Sea, a Swiss meadow, a Venetian canal, a South American jungle or an English river. 'During my digs into trash dumps, I'm not interested in one moment or type of object, but each artefact – be it yesterday's Juicy Fruit wrapper or a 16th-century porcelain fragment – is treated the same',⁵ Dion says.

The artist regularly throws traditional museological hierarchies into question, ignoring conventional divisions between, say, fine art/ethnographic art; nature/culture; museum/trash heap; rare artefact/unwanted garbage. Whether 'natural' or 'manufactured' (and are these two categories in fact mutually exclusive?), 'old' or 'recent', 'valuable' or 'ordinary', for the artist, everything belongs in equal measure to a single environment. Every bug, every shard of glass, every plastic straw: all findings merit the same attention. The *Tate Thames Dig* sample boxes were treated and shelved democratically; there is no sense that some items belong 'naturally' to the river (shells, fish bones, flint) while others are alien to it, or that selected articles are distinctly loaded with value (credit cards, car keys, jewellery), or hold exceptional historical merit (ancient pottery, old coins, Victorian-era tools), or that some findings are negligible – your garden-variety garbage. In some

3

Clare Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London: Verso, 2012), p. 204.

4

Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Dijon: Les Presses du Reel, 1998; English trans. 2002).

5

Interview with Lisa Graziose Corrin in *Mark Dion* (London: Phaidon, 1997) p. 30.

Mark Dion
A Meter of Jungle, 1992

Silver dye bleach prints
69.9 x 53.2 cm each



ways Dion's work pre-empted later twenty-first-century thinkers such as Timothy Morton, whose revised concept of ecology refuses the Romantic fantasy of an unspoiled natural order existing at antipodes to the ravishes of humankind.⁶ Objects, people, 'waste', 'nature': each plays a part in producing our ecosystem. For Morton, as for Dion, we are all in this together.

6
Timothy Morton, *Ecology without Nature* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2007).

7
Peter Ackroyd, *London: The Biography* (London: Vintage, 2001).

The Dark River

The Thames River has long flowed as the very lifeblood of London. Beloved by writers, poets and artists from Dickens to Joseph Conrad to Roni Horn, the river was bound to yield rich pickings for Dion's eager search party. The capital owes its origins to the fortunes offered by the silvery Thames, a river of commerce since the city's earliest history. Precious metals were transported along it as early as 2000 BC, well before the Romans arrived. Like Rome, London was established because it offered the narrowest point on a busy river where a bridge could cross, gaining supremacy over Wessex by 1500 BC as the island's principal trade centre.

For centuries, the majority of Londoners lived either directly off the river (as rope-makers, boat-builders, fishermen, dockmen, shippers) or were dependent on the wealth of goods transported along it: pottery, porcelain, cotton, wool, silk, pipes, timber, fruit, flour, sugar, tea, wine, spices, olives, oranges, raisins. The Thames itself served as a kind of employer; as late as 1930, the East End docks still employed over 100,000 people, providing for centuries a livelihood to a multitude of labourers:

rivermen, tidemen, boatmen, chalkmen, eelmen, baillies, galley-men, ferriers, lightermen, mariners, petermen, plingmen, shipwrights, shoutmen, piledrivers, trinkers, dockworkers, water-bailiffs, watermen.⁷

Hand-drawn views of the thriving city from centuries ago show nearly empty streets flanking an impossibly busy river, teeming

with activity. Honest trade survived alongside a steady undertow of thievery, piracy, black markets and dirty dealing. In William Blake's day the stretch between London Bridge and the Tower was reportedly packed with a floating forest of some 2,000 ship masts. Immense galleons competed for precious water surface with barges, brigs, tugs, fishing-boats and barks. The Thames was London's principal thoroughfare – not Piccadilly, Fleet Street or suburban Oxford Circus. Taking its name from the French word for 'beach', The Strand assumed early urban pre-eminence for its proximity to the mighty river.

The name 'Thames' is pre-Celtic in origin, from *tamasa*, or 'dark river'. Even today, some forty to sixty human bodies are retrieved from the river each year: the victims of drownings, suicides, murders, jumps, missteps, mishaps and accidents. A map of London's haunted places reveals that – for reasons unknown – the majority of London ghosts are in proximity of its many rivers, which are also held responsible for the countless cases of rheumatism, fever, asthma and allergies that plague the capital. Across the centuries, the material remains of London's life and death seemed to find their way to the Thames, and Dion's archaeological project was to seek these out and reveal a heretofore unseen material history. There, at the bottom of the Thames, lay an untapped museum: relics lying in wait, testimonies to the city's ongoing, sedimented history.

Phishing for Language

As we've seen, a waterway generates masses of associated vocabulary, whether floating upon it or carried by it. In *Uncreative Writing*, Kenneth Goldsmith recalls James Joyce's fascination with the myriad ways in which water evaporates, solidifies, pools or erupts through language, in words such as:

vapour, mist, rain, sleet, snow, hail glaciers, icebergs; icefloes; seaquakes; waterspouts, maelstroms, eruptions, torrents, eddies, freshets, spates, groundswells, watersheds, geysers, whirlpools, inundations, deluges.⁸

Goldsmith points at how often the digital world too is expressed as a kind of liquid ecosystem, with its own Cloud, downloads and streaming.

With *Tate Thames Dig*, recovered objects were first classified broadly by 'genus' (TOYS. GLASS), and if the volume of like-objects was notable, these could be further refined into 'species'; for example:

TOYS – dolls; trucks and vehicles; teethers and baby toys; water pistols; building blocks; soldiers and figurines;

GLASS – bottles; bottlenecks; bottle bases; bottles with text on them; bottles with patterns on them; green, blue, clear and brown glass.⁹

Tate Thames Dig's proliferation of items dictated an expansion of categories and words, almost as if the artist were pulling language, as much as objects, out of the river. (Recall that when he sent Ahab searching for Moby Dick, alongside the prize leviathan, Melville pulled from the ocean a 200,000-word novel.)

In early 2017, Thames River Watch published online its Litter Monitoring Results, extracting and ranking by volume the river's woefully abundant supplies of:

food wrappers; cotton bud sticks; drink bottles; bottle tops; take-away containers; unidentified plastic; polystyrene cups; unidentified synthetic foam; cutlery; straws; lollipop sticks; stirrers, wet wipes.¹⁰

As with Dion's search almost two decades earlier, the variety discovered within one category – in this case 'drink bottles' – deserved further breakdown and sorting through language:

DRINK BOTTLES: still water; unknown; cola; sports drink; fruit drinks; flavoured water; sparkling water; lemonade.¹¹

9

<https://narratingwaste.wordpress.com/2010/05/04/mark-dion-and-tate-thames-dig-1999-an-extract/> accessed 29 Sept 2017
<http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-britain/exhibition/art-now-mark-dion>, accessed 2 Sept 2017.

10

<http://www.thames21.org.uk/thames-river-watch-litter/>, accessed 31 Aug 2017.

11

<http://www.thames21.org.uk/thames-river-watch-litter/>, accessed 31 Aug 2017.

The people behind Thames Watch – and, probably, most of us too – perceived these mounds of throw-away plastic as not rightfully belonging in the river: bottom feeders in an assumed hierarchy of materials ‘naturally occurring’ in the beloved Thames. In fact, Dion’s *Tate Thames Dig* results were basically a sampling of historical garbage, even the rare Roman artefact. And yet somehow our generation’s special, voluminous contribution of non-biodegradable rubbish seems disturbingly more toxic. Of special interest here, the Thames Watch clean-up campaign chose to photograph its dreary treasure trove of found wet wipes in an almost sculptural abstract arrangement. The stiff, square-meter bas-relief looks like a cross between a late twentieth-century Mark Dion artwork and a Piero Manzoni *Achrome* (1958–59) – a remarkable example of life almost indistinguishably imitating art. This frameable, eco-critical monochrome would not look amiss in a contemporary art gallery (p. 174).

I’m Feeling Lucky

Back in 1999, the Thames yielded relatively very few waterlogged mobile phones; today, I’m guessing, the river would spit out countless drowned Smartphones. What Dion could not have foreseen in 1999 was that his watery search was taking place at the dawn of the mass-digital age, when the very notion of ‘searching’ was on the brink of seismic change. At the time, this quiet revolution was the undertaking of an ambitious, promising year-old company with a cartoonish name: Google. Just another fledgling start-up in the not-so-distant days of *Tate Thames Dig*, Google has recently surpassed Apple to become the most valuable brand on Earth.¹² In 1998, the year Google officially launched, it served about 10,000 search queries a day; a year later, while Dion was ankle-deep in Thames silt, Google was answering some 3.4 million searches daily. Today, Google performs two trillion searches per year – about 270 searches for every single human being on the planet.¹³

Old-fashioned hobbies such as bird-watching and trainspotting involve searching purely for fun. We ‘search’ more than ever today but rarely in the *Tate Thames Dig*’s spirit of collecting and discovering,

'Wet wipes found in 1m² of
foreshore on the southside
of Hammersmith Bridge after
being washed and disentangled'
(original caption from the
Thames Watch website), 2017

Piero Manzoni
Achrome, 1958–59

Fabric and gesso on canvas
70.5 x 50.2 cm
Solomon R. Guggenheim
Museum, New York



or to be reunited with a beloved lost thing – as in Tacita Dean's audio work *Trying to Find Spiral Jetty* (1997), a pilgrimage enacted around the same time as *Tate Thames Dig*, which saw another determined artist searching for an artwork tantalisingly concealed underwater. The spirit of wonder in the *Tate Thames Dig* search has nothing to do with the compulsive, screenbound searching that relentlessly consumes us, day and night. *Tate Thames Dig* seems to belong to an Age of Exploration that although only recently vanished already feels as distant as Alfred Russel Wallace's peregrinations to Southeast Asia 150 years ago, elsewhere the subject of Dion's art. Perhaps the dig didn't just celebrate the joy of searching for the unknown, but represents the waning of a time when such open-minded, untargeted, wondrous searching survived as a plausible and pleasurable pursuit.







Tent details

2 canvas tents (site I and site II)

Tents are 12' x 15' with Alum. Frames
They have a laminated vinyl floor tarp and wooden floor construction
There are zippered doors at both ends
Sidelalls are 5'3"
Tents treated to be waterproof
Both tents 10 oz white army duck

Tate Thames Dig (Two Banks)

M. Dion 1998

Materials List

- | | |
|---|----------------------------|
| 4 Work tables (32" x 48") | 4 Field collecting bags |
| 2 small desks | 4 Soil Sieves |
| 6 Metal or wooden stools | 2 crack hammers |
| 2 Equipment exhibits (42 x 18 x 6) | 2 Chipping Hammers |
| 2 open shelving units (42 x 20 x 6) | 6 enamel pans |
| 2 closed steel shelving units (39 x 19 x 6) | 2 desk lamps (Magnifiers) |
| 4 Paper and polyethylene 30gal drums with lids | |
| 8 large plastic buckets | 4 Magnifier glasses |
| 10 Plastic storage boxes | 8 orange cones |
| 10 Wooden boxes 14" x 12" x 12" | 2 liquid sifter cans |
| 12 Wooden boxes 12" x 14" x 12" | Various cleaning liquids |
| 12 Archive boxes 11" x 8" x 10" | 2 coat trees |
| 12 Archive boxes 4" x 2 1/2" x 6" | Rope and string |
| 12 Archive boxes 13" x 14" x 10" | 2 Plastic rulers |
| 12 Archive boxes 8" x 5" x 11" | 10 orange safety vests |
| 12 Archive boxes 3' x 2' x 5" | Various plastic 20-lb bags |
| 6 Pairs of rubber boots | Thames maps |
| 2 wheelbarrows | |
| 12 heavy rubber gloves | |
| 1 box latex examination gloves | |
| 2 First aid kits | |
| 1 box of dust masks | |
| 2 large wash tubs | |
| 2 small wash tubs | |
| 2 Sets of standard tools - hammer, files, screw drivers, etc. | |
| Various brushes | |
| 4 Shovels | |
| 4 Forks | |
| 4 Rakes | |
| 2 long nets | |
| cleaning materials | |
| 4 hand trowels | |
| 4 hand forks | |
| 2 mallets | |
| 2 Dissecting sets and extra instruments | |
| 2 Geologist hammers | |
| 4 measuring tapes | |
| 8 rolls of marking tape | |
| office supplies | |

Theatre of the Natural World
Mark Dion



Whitechapel Gallery