Simon Usborne

Dozens of people dressed in blue are being tied together with blue ribbon outside a north London tube station. It doesn’t take long for passers-by to start staring. As the gathering of mostly strangers grows, one onlooker realises she, too, is wearing blue, and almost runs away lest she become entangled in the strange human web. The look on her face—something between bemusement and mild antipathy—is one that will become familiar over the next three hours. What on earth, she must be thinking, are we doing?

It’s a question I’m asking myself and I know the answer. We have come to “be” art or, more specifically, a river. Most Londoners could name only the river, but dozens of waterways used to feed the Thames. Centuries of building and paving has consigned many, including the W albrook, Tyburn, to the city’s bowels. Others, including the Walbrook, which once bubbled and flowed through the oldest part of the capital, are no more than dry voids. So that’s why Sharrocks is here. I’m here to write this. But who are all these other people? Adrian Murphy, 29, has a professional interest in rivers—he works for the Royal Geographic Society. The quaintness of Walbrook has clearly piqued his curiosity—he has brought as a companion a wind-up miniature yellow plastic duck called London. “It would be nice to set him free when we get to the Thames,” he says, “but it’s my friend’s duck and I promised to give it back.”

Anthony Melville is a lofty energy consultant who, like everyone here, has already reflected on her latest artwork from Amy Sharrocks. Straight away, I make a mistake by suggesting the Walbrook, the name of this piece, is “a bit mad”. Her infectious enthusiasm never wavering, she sets me straight. “It’s a question of how nature, especially when you can connect to it so directly.”

Angie Zelter is an activist (of some renown: she has been arrested more than 100 times during protests). She admits she doesn’t find today’s walk very artistic but says she’ll do anything for climate change. “Maybe when it comes and London is inundated, this will become a river again,” says Zelter, 59. “You could say this is a warning.”

A newspaper seller launches into Sam Cooke’s ‘Chain Gang’. We say nothing…

Blue-clad participants, including the writer, below, wind their way through Moorgate to the Thames. RUTH CORNEY

The parents wore the same shirt, the children the same dungarees. The first of the suits are clocking off for the weekend, a man leans out of a white van and offers: “Excuse you, mate, gone somewheres.” Then, at Moorgate, a City of London police van pulls up and deposits a bounty at the front of the procession, where Sharrocks is compelled to break her silence. “I kept hearing what our intentions were,” she recounts later. “It’s a nice question to ponder but when he saw we posed no threat he left us to it.”

As we ambled through a housing estate, a young couple walking their daughter home from school had to stand aside. The parents were the same look of bafflement seen on the faces of the newspaper seller, the white-van man and the City slicker. But their daughter, who was about eight and wore a blue checked dress, seemed to know exactly what was going on. “Strolling,” she said: “They’re being a river.”

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