

THE NEW QUARTERLY

NEW DIRECTIONS IN CANADIAN WRITING

*And Let
the River
Answer*

87



*Walkerton Water
Stories Project:
Photographs and Prints*



*Artist Basia Irland canoeing the Saugeen in her Walkerton Life Vest.
Photograph by Phil Holmes.*



*Basia Irland in The Stable, Stonyground. On the wall, E.coli Scrolls.
Photograph by Phil Holmes.*



Basia Irland. Walkerton Life Vest. Front View. Photography by Margot Geist.



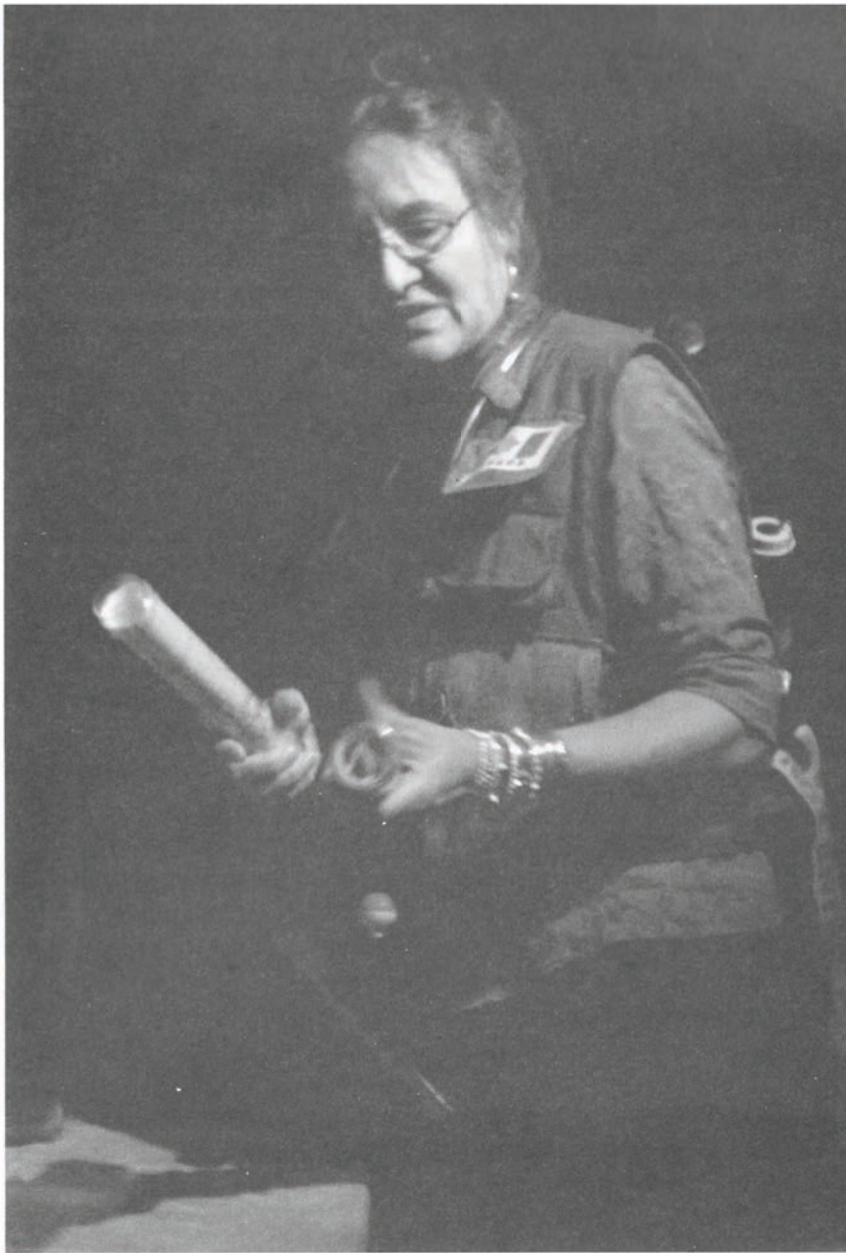
Basia Irland. Walkerton Life Vest. Back View. Photography by Margot Geist.



Basia Irland. Walkerton Life Vest. Detail. Photography by Margot Geist.



Basia Irland. Walkerton Life Vest. Detail. Photography by Margot Geist.



Basia Irland. Photograph by Phil Holmes

BASIA IRLAND

Walkerton Life Vest

Prologue

What appears to be an orange planet with its moon comes into hazy focus as I press my right eye against the lens. A distant star seen through a telescope? No, a tiny bacterial pathogen, smeared across a glass slide. I am peering through a scanning electron microscope into the minute world of *E. coli*, which usually infects its host through food or water containing contaminated feces. After being diagnosed with giardia, a water-borne parasite contracted while swimming in polluted Javanese rivers, I began to spend hours at the University of New Mexico medical library studying parasitology and looking at bacteriology colour atlases. Water-borne diseases kill a person somewhere in the world every eight seconds, and *E. coli* is just one of many deadly and fascinating pathogens.

In June 2001, at an ecological conference in Lancaster, England, I presented a paper about my artwork, which focuses increasingly on aspects of international water. Included were slides of a five-year, community-based project I created along the 1,875-mile length of the Rio Grande and Rio Bravo, connecting people upstream and down, and images from my series, *Non-Potable Agua*, showing enlarged photographs of water-borne diseases. During another session, Susan Scott, who helps people tell their personal stories, discussed the recent disaster in Walkerton, Ontario, where deadly bacteria had entered the town drinking water, killing seven people and infecting another 2,300 residents. Reports about the contaminated well had been falsified, adding political bungling to the town's list of problems. A small rural farming community, one and a half hours north of Toronto, Walkerton had become synonymous with water-borne disease and death.

After returning home to Waterloo, Ontario, Susan phoned me and began discussing the possibility of collaborating with the residents of Walkerton on an art project. She reflected on what I had been doing in international communities to help establish connections around water issues and how this had sparked in her the desire to work with a local town near where she had once lived. Medical authorities, the press corps, hydrologists and politicians had all become involved with Walkerton, but where were the artists? What could writers and visual artists contribute in some small way that might aid the healing process of a town that had been in the constant glare of negative newspaper headlines across Canada?

Although I had lived in Ontario for almost twenty years and my son was born there, I now reside in New Mexico, so all of the preliminary plans for the Walkerton project were done long-distance. Since the source of contamination came from a farm, I originally envisioned a sculptural backpack built of barn board. However it would have been bulky and heavy. As with my other recent work, it was important that this piece be portable, not a static museum sculpture, but a living repository conveying the notion of journey.

In numerous e-mail and phone discussions with Susan, I learned about the importance in the region of fishing along the banks of the Saugeen River. That was it! A fishing vest with lots and lots of pockets would function perfectly as a repository or archive for objects, images and stories related to Walkerton. A fishing vest is lightweight, wearable, has numerous compartments, and carries associations already familiar to the community.

Another reason for using the fishing vest emerged a month later when I flew to the Center for Contemporary Art in Cincinnati, Ohio to give a lecture about my art being shown in an exhibition entitled *ecovention*. The work of German artist Joseph Beuys was also in the show. An image of him wearing a khaki-colored photographer's vest, similar to a fishing vest, reminded me that this had been the piece of clothing he wore constantly during his "actions" (performances based on his concept of social sculpture, the notion that everyone is in some sense an artist).

Susan successfully received several grants, and one helped me pay for materials, expenses, and the roundtrip flight to Canada. Before I arrived, she arranged for me to meet with various members of the town who would share their responses to the events of June 2000. We arrived in Walkerton exactly two years after the tragedy. I was curious to see what specific objects people would suggest incorporating into what I now thought of as the Life Vest.

The Working Process

The process of creating and assembling the contents of the Walkerton Life Vest took place on the screened-in back porch of a cottage I had stayed in many years before in Port Elgin, on Lake Huron, only fifteen miles from Walkerton. It is the cottage of a long time friend, Trish, an editor for *The Globe and Mail*. The original, musty cabin had been torn down and a handsome new wooden structure with high ceilings and a second story built in its place. I am in heaven working out on the back porch. I watch a rabbit grazing cautiously at sundown; a squirrel digging a small hole as if to bury the nut in its mouth, only to hop to another place and begin to dig again. A blue jay flutters from an evergreen limb. The constant but companionable backdrop sound is the pounding surf of Lake Huron.

Two days before I arrived, Trish's Aunt Jean, who had raised her from an early age, suffered a massive stroke. During the days while I go into Walkerton and work on the project, Trish sits by the hospital bedside, holding Jean's limp hand and singing familiar hymns to her. After seven days, Jean dies, and Trish and her cousin John return numbly to the cottage. The three of us pick bouquets of wild flowers—purple and white iris, fragrant lilies of the valley, waxy yellow buttercups and large ferns for greenery. We walk down to the lakeshore, place the flowers on a large rock and stare at the ever-changing orange and gray clouds as the sun lowers itself below the watery horizon.

Susan and I have long talks about the gift of being present with a loved one who is dying and the irony that this vigil is happening as we are with the residents of Walkerton during their second memorial. As I am writing this on the screened porch, it is twilight and there is a slight breeze. No one else is at the cabin. The night is quiet, the cabin dark except for the light from a small candle, a gift from Trish, burning next to the computer. It is set into a cross section of a pine tree limb with the bark remaining. In the middle is a hole for the teal candle, with a scent named "rain." Three maple leaves are stamped into the wood and hand-written around the circumference are the words, "Port Elgin, Ontario." I like the humanness of this misspelling. With the computer in front of me and the candle burning to my right, I stop to take a drink of tea from the mug the students at Walkerton High School gave me after my talk with them. The crest on the mug reads "Walkerton District Secondary School, 1873." Below this in blue are three objects: an oil lamp with flame, three maple leaves, and an open book. A copy of this crest is the first object to go into the vest.

Vest Contents

A. *The Sound of Helicopters* (a toy Red Cross helicopter fits into the back right pocket)

I am invited to talk with Mary's grade 12 "Global Issues" class. One of the students dons the fishing vest and we begin to talk about what they would like to see added to its contents.

"Javex."

"Yeah, bleach. We had to scrub everything with bleach to get rid of any bacteria."

"Helicopters. I mean like a toy helicopter," the quiet boy sitting next to me blurts out.

"Why helicopters?"

"Because helicopters were brought in to airlift the sick to bigger hospitals in the region. One day we were out on the field trying to play soccer and each time a helicopter ambulance would fly overhead we would just stop our game and watch. It sounded like what I imagine Vietnam was. . . ." His voice trails off.

"A plastic water bottle." Two other teachers have now joined the class. The biology instructor says, "In the days following the outbreak, various groups across Canada sent us cases and cases of drinking water. It was stored in the civic center and we could go there anytime to pick it up for our families. One second grade class from a nearby town added handwritten notes on each bottle. It was so moving it's still hard to talk about, even today. Their kindness was so appreciated."

B. *Straw and Bailing Twine Bundle* (front left pocket). *Fishing Gadgets* (strung to the vest, front and back)

Since I now live in the arid high desert of New Mexico, the sight of lush, verdant fields ushers in a serene calm. Each morning, as Susan and I drive the 15 miles from Port Elgin into Walkerton through dense fog, I absorb the muted green shades of field, shrub, tree—and wonder at the myriad tones of this one color.

Visiting Linda and Rob's farm is like stepping into a hazy celadon painting complete with pond, footbridge over a stream, sheep, old barn, chickens and, incongruously, a llama. Linda takes me to the barn, using bailing twine to tie a small bundle of straw for the vest pocket. I feed an orphaned baby lamb milk from a bottle, taste Saskatoon-berry jam, photograph chickens drinking from a miniature rain barrel, hunt for worms to be used as bait. From the hall closet, Rob pulls his well seasoned fishing vest and digs around inside to give me red and white floats. He tells me his wife is never allowed to put it in the laundry for fear of washing

away luck. (Over the next several weeks I will be given two trolling shock absorbers that prevent hooks from pulling out of fish's mouths, heavy-duty leaders, bobbers, swivels, slip sinkers and stringers).

The discussion while sitting around the cozy kitchen table drinking tea centers on rural water issues and how Linda and Rob want to help educate other farmers about caring for their wells and keeping livestock away from water sources, the primary cause of the *E. coli* contamination. Five days of steady rain saturated the ground, the banks of the Saugeen River overflowed, and fecal matter from a nearby farm seeped into Well #5, one of the primary sources of drinking water for Walkerton. From this well, the liquid flowed out into pipes, and as each household turned on the taps in kitchens and bathrooms, the clear but potentially deadly water was consumed.

C. *Oxidized Copper Valve* (one-inch in diameter and attached to the front vest zipper-pull)

Fluttering plastic tape that reads "Danger" dangles ominously from a nearby twig. We find Well #5, the one determined to be the source of contamination. The pump house has been destroyed and debris is scattered around the square cement foundation. Leaning against a tree in the grass is a white rusty cabinet with black lettering: Pump #5. Standing at this site on a balmy day, surrounded by a grove of ash trees and watching black and white cows in a field near the barn, I find it hard to imagine this quiet country scene has such a dark history.

We examine an eight-inch diameter pipe that rises vertically three inches above the cement. Water hovers right at the lip of the pipe without flowing over the side. (What would the results of an analysis be today?) I pick up a small blue-green oxidized copper valve lying next to the pipe.

D. *Hospital Sheets* (scrolled in tubes)

In previous projects related to water-borne diseases and non-potable water, I have used photographs taken through a scanning electron microscope, enlarged and heat-transferred to silk scrolls. Hung from Plexiglas rods, the scrolls can be rolled and placed in clear tubes with carrying straps. When on display, the carrying cases are hung next to the scrolls. This time I heat-transfer the images of *E. coli* and *Campylobacter* directly onto hospital bed sheets from local medical centers. (The two primary bacterial agents in Walkerton that caused the problems were *Escherichia coli* 0157:H7 and *Campylobacter* spp.) The enlarged pathogens permeate the scrolls like stains.

E. *Birch Bark* (rolled in clear tube sewn horizontally onto center back of vest)

Rolled into a clear plastic tube sewn on the back of the vest is a strip of birch bark inscribed with the names of the seven Walkerton citizens who died, their only crime drinking a glass of water, an activity each of us takes for granted every day.

F. *Strength in Song* (rolled in tube)



Walkerton musician Ron Fisk and *The Players*. Photograph by *RwHarwood*.

One evening Susan and I visit with four locals who are practicing songs for the festival of celebration and remembrance that will occur in a few days. They laugh, drink wine, smoke cigarettes, and sing folk-tunes and hymns. Oh how they harmonize, especially on the chorus:

It's a song, the sigh of the weary,
Hard times, hard times, come again no more.
Many days you would linger too long around my door,
Oh! Hard times, come again no more.
(Emmy Lou Harris)

★

As I went down to the river to pray
Studying about that good old way
And who shall wear the robe and crown
Good Lord show me the way.
(hymn)

★

Kiss me mother, kiss your darling,
Lay my head upon your breast,
Throw your loving arms around me,
I am weary, let me rest.
(hymn)

★

I'll fly away, oh glory, I'll fly away, in the mornin'
When I die, hallelujah, by and by, I'll fly away
(hymn)

★

The dirty washes down Poisoning the common ground
Taking sins of farm and town And bearing them away
The captains of industry And their tools on the hill—
They're killing everything divine, What will I tell this child of mine?
Goodbye to a river, Goodbye to a river, So long
Goodbye to a river, Goodbye to a river, Roll on.
(Don Henley, Stan Lynch, Jai Winding, Frank Simes)

G. *Headlines* (rolled in six blue translucent tubes and hung from fishing leaders)

"Grief, Sorrow and Anger as Walkerton Asks: Why?" (*Toronto Star*, 05/27/2000)

"*E.coli* Tragedy Blamed on Faulty Pipes: Every Kitchen Sink, Dishwasher and Bathtub to be Flushed Out" (*Toronto Star*, 06/03/2000)

"Walkerton Won't End My Career: Harris" (*National Post*, 06/06/2000)

"Walkerton Water Has Many Good Stories, Too" (*The Record*, 03/19/02)

"Eves Vows to Bring in Water Act" (*Toronto Star*, 06/03/02)

"Bungled Water Tests Lead to *E. coli* Risk" (*Canadian Press*, 06/13/02)

H. *Analyse Bacteriologique de L'eau Potable* (two Public Health Laboratory plastic bottles, one in each top front pocket)

After the outbreak, the Ontario Ministry of Health distributed drinking water kits that were sent to laboratories for testing bacterial analysis, but by this time it was too late.

I. *Photographs* (two flat cases in each front vest pocket, below the pockets with the drinking water kits)

Four clear plastic, hinged containers—exactly the right size for 4 x 6 photographs, hold images of the town, the people, the Saugeen River and the water of Walkerton.

J. *Miniature Hand-Carved Canoe and Paddle* (The paddle is sewn vertically onto the vest back and the canoe nestles horizontally underneath in an enclosed fabric compartment.)

John presents me with a small, foot-long paddle and a canoe of the same length he carved from wood as a child. These two objects are dear to his heart and I am honored that he is willing to have them become part of the vest.

Question: “Aren’t you some sort of Communist?”

Answer: “No, I’m a canoeist.”

(P.E. Trudeau to Marshall McLuhan, 1968)

★

Tu es mon compagnon de voyage!

Je veux mourir dans mon canot.

Sur le tombeau, pres du rivage,

Vous renverserez mon canot.

(Traditional folk song)

K. *Wooley Booger* (sewn onto right front pocket)

Phil unties the knots that lash his family’s “Bluewater” canoe to the car roof, hoists the boat onto his shoulders, portages the boat a short distance and plunks it right side up on the Saugeen’s shores. Saugeen is an Ojibway word for outlet or river mouth, but since the tribe did not have a written language, the spelling was recorded in documents as Saugink, Sauggeen and Sahging. On the charts of the Queen’s surveyor, Charles Rankin, it was listed as the Rapid River in 1822. But the word that stuck with future settlers moving into Bruce and Grey counties was Saugeen.

I don the fishing vest. Even with all of the attachments that have been sewn into place and pockets bulging with donated memorabilia, it is comfortable. Wanting to get the “Life Vest” physically on the water, we paddle the river through the outskirts of Walkerton.

Once in the current, Phil demonstrates various paddle strokes; the j-stroke, draw, running pry, figure eight, half-moon, bow stroke,

feather, back stroke, cross bow-rudder. I canoed with my son in the Northern Ontario lakes during his youth and have recently been canoeing in Quebec’s Laurentian Mountains on Lac Jumeau, but one can never have too many refresher courses on paddle strokes. Each person adds his own personal flair. Phil shows me the places where the bass hide and the salmon spawn. What a bucolic river, this Saugeen. A great blue heron flaps its wide wings in flight as we round a bend. Phil gives me a fish fly he has made to add to the vest contents. He calls it the Wooley Booger.

L. *Walkerton Heritage Water Garden* (brochure in back pouch)

In the pamphlet for the recently dedicated Garden is written, “Unlike the negative recent image, forged by the disaster in Walkerton, the Fountain presents water as a positive, life-affirming and healing symbol. The Memorial Fountain in the Garden serves as a reminder of those we lost in the E.coli tragedy of May 2000.” Carved into a large rock at the base of the fountain are the following words: “And you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water whose waters fail not.” (*Isaiah* 58:11) Below this quote, inscribed on the same rock, in capital letters is: “DEDICATED TO THE INDOMITABLE SPIRIT OF THE PEOPLE OF WALKERTON. TO ALL WHO SUFFERED AND THOSE WHO DIED.”

Epilogue

The day before leaving Walkerton, Susan and I have dinner in town at a venerable local diner. Across the street is a hand-painted mural of two people in a canoe, gliding along the Saugeen River. The waitress asks if we want bottled water. We both say no, just tap water. As she sets a glass in front of each of us, we order our meal. We smile, clink glasses, and drink the clear fluid. We never imagined such a simple gesture could be a political act.