'Art Life Ethics' by Myrel Chernick,

Mapping the Maternal: Art, Ethics and the Anthropocene, colloquium organizers, Nathalie S. Loveless and Sheena Wilson, CoLab, Arts Based Research Studio, University of Alberta, Edmonton, Canada
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Myrel Chernick

Art Life Ethics

In reply to *Mapping the Maternal: Art, Ethics and the Anthropocene*

Falling asleep, I visualize the deceptively random trajectory of the honeybee, the beauty and symmetry of the hive, its perfect hexagonal structure. I imagine the comb dripping with lush, sweet honey, the bees with their prescribed functions in the hierarchy, and their extraordinary contribution, with myriad acts of pollination, to the human food chain. Artists have often been intrigued by bees, and now they are dying. Donald Trump is president of the United States. I wrote last spring of my fears that this might occur, but I didn't actually believe it would happen. I could not have imagined the nightmare we would be living now, and this is only a hint of what is to come.

I fantasize moving back to Canada, as I have during previous times of crisis, although no past crisis comes close to our current situation. I say moving back because my roots are here. My grandparents immigrated to Winnipeg in the early twentieth century, my parents were born and raised there, and I have visited many times. My father, growing up in poverty during the great depression, cultivated his revolutionary ideals in Winnipeg, and although his views softened as he aged, he never abandoned his principles. My parents inhabited the cocoon of family, their memories of Winnipeg blanketed by the cold, the snow, the long winters, of waiting for the bus to the university in minus thirty-degree weather. I have also reveled in the brilliant sunshine and endless skies of the Canadian prairies. And I continue to believe that Canada is a more advanced country than the United States. Canada has state sponsored healthcare, welcomes immigrants,

supports artists and filmmakers, even has a ministry of the status of women in Alberta. We in the United States, behind on all these fronts, are currently regressing to a state most of us could never have fathomed.

However, in Edmonton I was the closest I had ever been to the tar sands, discussing the Anthropocene amid one of the most polluting and destructive industrial projects on earth.

Hannah Arendt has said that all nations share the onus of evil as committed by all others.[1] As I researched the stories of Jewish children who had been hidden during the war in France for my novel, and who survived because a friend or neighbor risked their life, I couldn't help but ask myself what I would have done in a similar situation. Would I have risked my life and that of my family to save someone else's child? What are we to do now, when Trump threatens to deport hundreds of thousands of children in his first year in office?

What does it mean to live an ethical life in the Anthropocene?

Does a creative life imply an ethical life? I answer that with a resounding no, as I think of all the male artists who abused or neglected their wives and children. But I thought of Elizabeth Murray, a painter who died almost ten years ago of cancer in her early sixties. She was a role model and a colleague; we met when I was in the Whitney program and she was a visiting artist. Unlike the male visiting artists that we had, she invited us into her home and studio, which made a huge impression on me. She had had a child in her early twenties whom she was raising alone and then had two more children in her forties, when she was already very successful. Seeing the film brought me back to the beginning of my artistic life in New York, when I hoped to achieve a degree of fame myself, even though the work I was making at the time had no commercial potential. Elizabeth said something that stayed with me, that an artist's creativity doesn't stop when she leaves the studio, but instead permeates her entire life and the lives of those around

[1] Hannah Arendt, *Essays in Understanding, 1930-1954: Formation, Exile, and Totalitarianism*, Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2011, p 131

her.[2] Her children are shown playing and interacting with her work as they grow up, and I think my children would concur that the experience of a creative upbringing has had a decisive influence on their own lives.

That's not enough though, is it, I say to myself. Can art truly effect change? I obviously think that art enriches our lives, but what about the real problems of mothers and children, of women far away from the world we know? Can we even imagine their lives? So many women worry about whether their children will even survive, with enough to eat, clean water or a roof over their heads. As Hannah Arendt remarks, aren't we all responsible for the conditions we permit to exist for others?

For two springs I have hosted a feminist art salon in my loft in New York. Women—and a few men, including my son, whom I can proudly call a feminist—talked and commented about their own or someone else's work. The atmosphere was relaxed, without the pressure for self-promotion that is often the case in New York where competition among artists is fierce, so people could talk honestly talk about their aspirations. It was thrilling for me connect with young women whose feminism is an integral part of their lives and work, and made me happy to be a feminist artist mother.

Can I make art that is substantive, relevant, and meaningful, that makes a worthwhile contribution to the world around me, and that enhances the lives of others?

When my children were young, I worried about their health, and whether I was harming them by putting them in daycare. As they grew I worried about their schoolwork, their social lives, their relationship. When they were in high school I worried about drugs, sex, AIDS and bullies, mean or incompetent teachers, the dangers of walking around New York late at night, and Sam's silence after his class watched the people jumping off the world trade center when the

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[2] *Everybody Knows...Elizabeth Murray,* 60 minutes, color, RubyRed Productions and the Human Arts Association, 2016

towers came down across the street from his school during the second week of his sophomore year.

We survived.

Now that they are grown-up and don't live with me, there's plenty for me to worry about in the Anthropocene. What kind of world is my generation bequeathing to theirs?

In the irony of seeking concrete information, I turn to the web. And consume electricity, around ten percent of the world's electricity, I am informed. Can I believe what I read online? After this past election, who knows?

But I don't need the internet to know that our planet is in crisis. Every day we hear reports of extreme weather conditions: heat waves, droughts, torrential rains, floods, hurricanes, blizzards, thunderstorms, tornadoes, wildfires. Here in New York the temperature can fluctuate forty degrees in one day. Two days ago it was twenty degrees, today it is sixty, tomorrow back to twenty.

The glaciers and ice sheets are melting and the sea levels are rising. The ocean is becoming more acidic. The coral reefs are dying, the ocean is full of plastic, the fish are disappearing.

The world's population has exploded, by almost a billion people in a decade[3], and yet, in much of the world, the most dangerous thing a woman can do is become pregnant,[4] and many die daily in childbirth. Women are most of the world's poor.[5]

I try to reduce my personal carbon footprint. I get rid of the car, I walk, bike and take public transportation as much as I can. I pay extra to get my electricity from a renewable energy source. I save my compost in bags and schlep it to the corner drop off instead of throwing it out with the garbage. But then I spend hours on the computer every day. We have four computers

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[3] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Population_growth
[4] http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs348/en/
[5] https://unstats.un.org/unsd/gender/chapter8/chapter8.html

and three tablets for two people. So when I compare my electrical usage with that of the typical one-family detached house, it's not that much less.

After researching and writing this I become so depressed I can't sleep.

When I started teaching at Pratt in 2001, I joined a group of students and faculty called Sustainable Pratt. Led by a woman of vision named Debera Johnson, the group prodded the president to join a consortium of colleges and universities that were addressing issues of sustainability, both on campus and in their communities. Now called the Sustainability Coalition,[6] they have established a minor in Sustainability Studies, and a masters in Sustainable Environmental Systems.[7] The Pratt campus is gradually becoming green. In exposing my freshmen students to these ideas, I hoped to inform and alter their future courses of study.

We need creative thinkers of all kinds—artists, designers, academics, scientists, environmental lawyers, idealists, visionaries, philanthropists, community organizers and politicians to work assiduously to bring people out of poverty, to empower women to transform their lives, to increase renewable energy, to change the laws, and to fight corporations that despoil the earth, polluting the air and water.

I start searching, again online, for some correctives to what I previously learned. And the good news is, these people exist. I discovered a staggering number of artists who address climate change in their lives and work, both symbolically and concretely.

Here I would like to write about two artists whose exhibits I saw this fall: Mierle Laderman Ukeles at the Queens Museum[8] and Jackie Brookner at Wave Hill[9] in the Bronx. Their work stimulates connections between individuals and public spaces, and gives value to lives and occupations often unacknowledged and ignored. They both exemplify for me the kind of

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[6] http://csds.pratt.edu/about-the-sustainability-coalition/
[7] https://www.pratt.edu/academics/architecture/sustainable-environmental-systems/
[8] http://www.queensmuseum.org/2016/04/mierle-laderman-ukeles-maintenance-art
[9] https://www.wavehill.org/arts/exhibits/jackie-brookner-nature/

idealism mixed with pragmatism and the ability to connect with the communities they serve that allow them to truly contribute to the remediation of our physical environment. What is also thrilling to me, as a mother, as I contemplate the concept of an ethics of care that was raised at *Mapping the Maternal*, is to see that Ukeles's entire oeuvre grew out of her *Manifesto for Maintenance Art 1969!*[10] that referenced her need as well as her desire to care for her children. Her performances expanded the boundaries of art making and had a profound influence on both conceptual art and what we now call social practice. Jack Burnham, who wrote about her in *Artforum*, and Lucy Lippard, who included her in her first feminist conceptual exhibition, *c. 7,500*, both acknowledged and promoted her early work. This public recognition combined with her own ambition and drive enabled Ukeles, who had been photographing intimate daily rituals with her children, to begin performing public as well as private maintenance art. She began with the venues the Lippard show traveled to, washing, cleaning, dusting and working alongside the maintenance staff. Her first large scale public work took place at the downtown Whitney Museum in 1976, in a prescient exhibit organized by the Whitney Independent Study fellows called *Art < > World*. This was during my year as a studio participant there, but schooled in the formal Avant Garde as I was at the time, and determined not only to never have children but to actively pursue the kind of work Ukeles labeled "Development: pure individual creation," as opposed to "Maintenance: keep the dust off the pure individual creation," and "Everything I do is Art is Art", I wasn't ready to appreciate her groundbreaking work. It took my own experience of motherhood ten years later to comprehend the significance of her accomplishments. Ukeles's piece, "I Make Maintenance Art One Hour Every Day," involved three hundred employees who were responsible for maintaining every aspect of the mammoth skyscraper that housed the Downtown Whitney museum. She invited the diverse workers to participate, and asked them to

[10] This and future citations of Laderman's work refer to: Patricia Phillips, *Mierle Laderman Ukeles: Maintenance Art*, Prestel, 2016.

perform one hour of maintenance art with her per day. Over the course of the show, she documented the process with Polaroids and created several performances with the workers in the museum, as well as a party for the night workers during their shift.

When I moved to New York in 1976 the city was in a major financial crisis. The sanitation department had suffered huge layoffs and was barely maintaining its fleet of dilapidated sanitation trucks. Ukeles's tenure as Artist in Residence at the Department of Sanitation, which continues to this day, was triggered by a facetious remark in a review of the Whitney show. The reviewer suggested that New York city's financial woes could be helped by turning "its regular work into a conceptual performance," and then it might be eligible for a National Endowment grant—an agency, by the way, that the Trump administration is preparing to eliminate completely. Ukeles seized on this idea and immediately contacted the Sanitation Commissioner. In 1979 she began her *Touch Sanitation* performance, where during the course of a year she shook hands with 8,500 sanitation workers, giving value to their endeavors as well learning their schedules and actually accompanying them on their routes. Ukeles's own preparations included extensive research into the functioning and organization of New York City's massive sanitation department, from the hierarchy and scheduling of garbage removal to the mechanical functioning of the trucks, sweepers and barges that carried the garbage from transfer stations to the Fresh Kills landfill. This achievement of adding dignity to the lives of some of the most disparaged employees of the city government, while valorizing their work, continued to develop over the years into an interest in the garbage itself, and the structure and use of the landfill. An early proponent of recycling, in 1987 Ukeles installed *Re-Entry* at PS 1 in New York, a ninety-feet long passageway that incorporated twenty tons of recyclable materials, from newspapers to computer parts. Since the closing of the Fresh Kills Landfill on Staten Island in 2002 Ukeles has worked with engineers, architects and landfill remediation experts to create a park and nature preserve on the site. She will hopefully be able to witness the construction of her

proposed work: *Cantilevered Overlook, Earth Bench, and Earth triangle* that she originally proposed in 2008. She has organized large-scale barge and maintenance truck ballets, proposed landfill remediation projects, and worked nationally and internationally to promote dialogue and understanding between disparate groups of people. At age seventy-seven she is still vital and engaged. Her work is beautifully presented at the Queens Museum, and the comprehensive catalogue documents her entire oeuvre.

Jackie Brookner's life and work, sadly cut short by her death from cancer in 2015, took a different trajectory but embraced many of the same issues and concerns, as each of her projects increased in scale and community involvement. She left a PhD program in art history to study traditional sculpture, developing a studio practice in the eighties and teaching at the Parsons School of Design. She soon became interested in organic forms, incorporating water, rocks and soil into her work. The physical immediacy of the drawings and sculptures nestled in her studio among the plants anticipate the forms of what she would do environmentally, always organic, flowing, curved.

In 1992 she was invited to edit the *Art Journal*'s issue on "Art and ecology,"[11] and the discoveries she made were the catalyst for an expansion of her own process, as she became fascinated by our personal physical relationship to the earth, to the dirt that we often disparage, and the need to change that relationship if we want the planet to survive. *Of Earth and Cotton,*[12] a sculptural project that took her out of New York City to the cotton belt, took place between 1994-98. She located people who had picked cotton by hand in the 1930s and 40s, talking to them while sitting on the ground sculpting their feet with the dirt from the nearby fields. Her

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[11] Brookner, Jackie, guest ed. "Art and Ecology", *Art Journal*, 51:2, Summer, 1992 8-99.

[12] Descriptions of Jackie Brookner's projects can be found on her website, http://jackiebrookner.com, and in the catalogue for her exhibit *Of Nature* produced by the Wave Hill Museum. The day long symposium about her work that took place on November 11, 2017 can be viewed on the Wave Hill Artists Facebook page.

partner documented some of the conversations, and the video was projected in the gallery during the exhibit. For me this work closely parallels the kind of acknowledgement and valorization of multiple lives that Ukeles sought in her interactions with the sanitation workers. Viewing the sculpted feet with all their variations and earthen colors exhibited together is an extremely moving and powerful experience. Brookner continued to expand her public practice during the next fifteen years, perfecting her ability to engage, teach and inspire, particularly with her visual imagination and spirituality. She was to able collaborate with diverse members of the community—architects, politicians and urban planners, local artists and individuals—developing her technique of "deep listening," which grew out of her studio practice. Brookner was totally committed to her environmental work. The public projects that address land and water remediation took years to develop and execute. They include figurative and abstract sculptures, create channels that filter pollutants out of local water supplies, and complement the beauty of the natural landscape. My favorite is *Veden Taika*, or *The Magic of Water*, created in Salo, Finland from 2007-2010. A group of professionals and volunteers worked with Brookner in a lagoon that had previously been polluted by sewage. They created three floating islands, with plantings that extract pollutants from the water and sediment. The middle island, an avian nesting site, uses lightweight fabricated rocks for the nesting habitat, and keeps the birds free from predators. Local and recycled materials were used whenever possible, and the result is a stunning tribute to remediation and sustainability. Brookner collaborated on *The Breath Project*, a global vision for healing and peace, right up until the end of her life.

Today I'm watching my philodendron leaf unfurl. The plant appears healthy but doesn't have many leaves, so I defend each one jealously, spraying them with water several times a day. Months after the last new growth, the residual sheaf has grown thicker and straighter, and I sense the new leaf inside. I scrutinize it, as if I can make it grow faster by keeping watch, although during these final days the stem grows so quickly I can almost feel the upward movement. When

the stalk first emerges, it is tiny and folded in half 180 degrees, but by evening it has lifted itself to ninety degrees. Now I can see the tiny lobes wrapped in a spiral around the stalk, like thread on a bobbin. They are so tightly wound I need to put my nose right up to the stem to see them. By the next morning the stem is vertical, has increased about an inch in length and a quarter inch in diameter, thicker at the base, and ends in a sharp point at the top. The bottom lobes are starting to unfurl, slowly, slowly lifting off from the dense spiral. The color is a light, effulgent green, in contrast to the darker, duller, older leaves. I come by every hour to check the progress, observing the stalk doubling in length and girth, as the resplendent green lobes grow, unfurl and straighten, in a slow dance that adds life and vigor to my urban environment. Where I live in a city neighborhood of asphalt, concrete and cast iron, I can go for days without seeing a tree. My plants sustain me, as I am comforted and encouraged by the work of artists who are devoted to preserving and restoring the physical environment, to alleviating poverty, to providing food and sustenance, to working within their communities.

Although we are living in extremely troubled times, and do not know what the future will hold, I believe that you, I, we *can* contribute. We need to connect, as artists and mothers and global citizens, across generations and cultures. We still have a chance, a window of opportunity before it's too late.