THE BROOKLYN RAIL

ArtSeen

Brown's a Color, Black is Not

ecofeminism(s)'s Anti-Intersectional Feminism and the Use and Abuse of Diversity

By Darla Migan

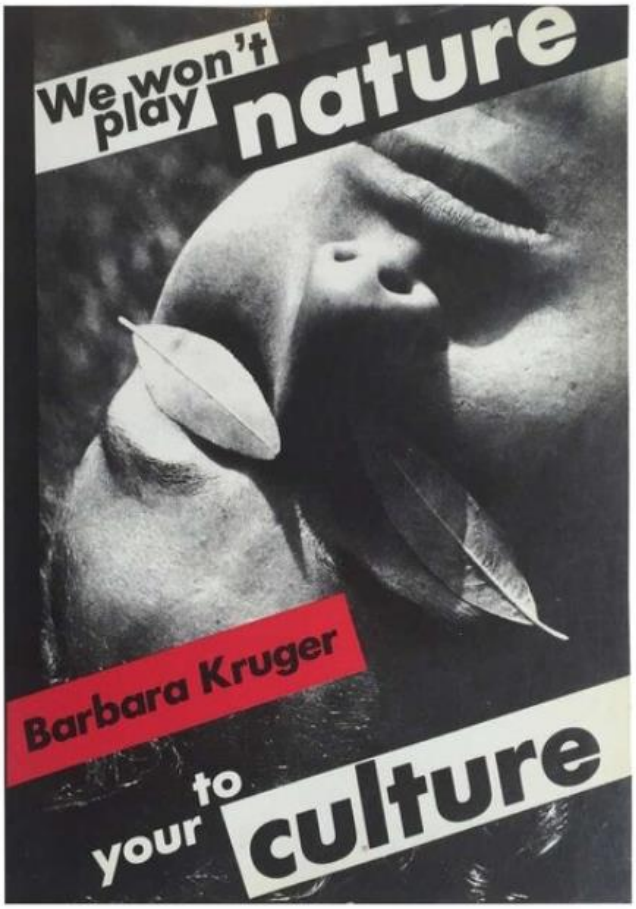
ecofeminism(s) at Thomas Erben was one of the first shows to open in New York City since the statewide PAUSE program went into effect in March to slow the spread of COVID-19. While New York may have flattened the curve, I questioned the timing of this exhibition especially in regards to the uprising of the second wave of the Civil Rights movement. Despite the depth of curatorial research into the pioneering works on view, the peculiarity of *ecofeminism(s)*'s delimited scope presents an occasion to think through the role of cultural essentialism in the mediation between appropriation and inspiration, and offers insights on the strategies through which the politically correct anti-Black art world is currently reconvening.

Helène Aylon, *The Earth Ambulance*, 1982. Inkjet pigment print, 11 x 8 1/2 inches. © Estate of Helène Aylon. Courtesy Leslie Tonkonow Artworks + Projects.

"Ecofeminist art emerged in the late 1960s when the development of conceptual art, spiritual feminism, and the exclusion of women from the art market pushed their inventiveness far beyond the limitations of painting and classical art gallery presentation, and led to creating new mediums, diving art into new territories," writes curator Monika Fabijanska in the exhibition essay. These artists recognized how the hierarchical conception of values and oppositional dualisms (civilization over nature; men versus women) serve to justify acts of violent force and arrange the ongoing systems of our patriarchal-ecological disaster.

However, the ecofeminist movement seems to have lost its momentum after the 1980s when scholars and activists critiqued the lack of intersectional analyses of race, class, and ability within the mainstream ecofeminist world-view, pointing out that orthodox ecofeminism tends to ignore *most* women. As the lore goes, environmental activists such as scholar Gwyn Kirk—co-editor of *Gendered Lives: Multicultural Perspectives* (now in its seventh edition, Oxford University Press, 2019) with Margo Okazawa-Rey, a member of the Combahee River Collective—attended a 1987 ecofeminist workshop in NYC and concluded that ecofeminism had lost its relevance because of its homogenization of women of different identities and reassertion of a paradigmatic "individualistic" Euro/Western worldview onto women with different values concerning their own flourishing and that of their communities.

While *ecofeminism(s)* highlighted the long-held and ongoing commitment to environmental justice of artist-activists such as Betsy Damon (see *The Memory of Clean Water*, 1985), who imagined new forms of art that could address harm to the environment—harms ignored even by major land artists of the 1970s—I'm torn about the show. While at times helpful for contextualizing the positionality of the artists, the decision to display the ethnicity of certain women-identified artists in the show works to perhaps distance it only rhetorically from its proximity to whiteness. My concern is that this is a curatorial strategy employed both to show a certain consideration for educating viewers about a wider diversity of artists but in a way that creates a situation of plausible deniability in its erasure of the intersection between ecofeminist concerns and the protests for Black lives at the heart of our country's conversation today.



Barbara Kruger, *We Won't Play Nature to Your Culture*, 1983.Book cover, 11.82 x 8.27 x 0.2 inches. Softcover catalogue of the exhibition, *Barbara Kruger: We Won't Play Nature to Your Culture*. Authors: Barbara Kruger, Iwona Blazwick, Sandy Nairne, Craig Owens, Jane Weinstock.Publishers: London: Institute of Contemporary Arts, Basel: Kunsthalle. © 1983.

The maintenance and materialization of an enduring white supremacist capitalist art world relies on a willfully ignorant brand of "strategic essentialism." While tagging on hyphenated descriptors to identify the non-white ethnicities of some of the artists in *ecofeminism(s)* appears to show off the diversity of the artists' identities, its actual function is to shield against accusations of a too-close proximity to white purity (already a dangerous and violently enforced ideological fiction). More importantly and beyond considerations of the realities of the current structures of the art market, the curatorial framework of *ecofeminism(s)* continues to rely on a racist art historical methodology insofar as its elitist form of re-envisioned canonization follows a received notion of cultural essentialism that is at worst necessarily anti-Black, or, at best, leaves Black lives exposed to the inheritances of degradation and neglect at the intersections of our capitalist, state-sanctioned or extrajudicial, ecological, and patriarchal violence.

For example, mentioning that Helène Aylon—who is identified by the curator as an American with an "inspired sensitivity informed by her Jewish roots"—worked with indigenous women, one of whom is described as "Native American, Mary Fowler," on *The Earth Ambulance (1982)* along with a band of women with a variety of (unidentified) ethnic and class backgrounds does not go far enough to revise or expand the concept of ecofeminist art and its potential for

imagining a more just world and habitable earth. Furthermore, this rhetorical strategy plays up the political correctness of a shallow identity politics that undermines the bold imaginaries of some of the original and radical actions or concepts built by both the established and emerging artists in this show.

Bilge Friedlaender, *Cedar Forest*, 1989. (installed in nature) Nine freestanding handmade linen paper sculptures, variable dimensions: 34 inches. © Mira Friedlaender. All rights reserved. Courtesy The Estate of Bilge Friedlaender.

This is not an institutional show meant to periodize ecofeminist art of the ’60s and ’70s and the position of the women-identified artists who mostly continue to go unrecognized by the gallery system. Rather, Fabijanska claims, *ecofeminism(s)* is taken up as an expansive concept with an inclusive lineage in the context of a contemporary art gallery exhibition that also highlights emerging artists. To boot, *ecofeminism(s)* is a comparatively well-researched gallery show. And my critique is not about which identities fail to be represented within this adumbration or supposedly expanded concept of ecofeminism. Rather, I am concerned with the underlying conditions and motivations for the willful ignorance on display—only barely hidden by the obvious use of flat rhetorical devices. Adding the ‘(s)’ to ‘ecofeminism’ or tagging artists with their ethnicities to show off non-NW-euro or indigenous people merely serves to ward off the glaringly obvious fact that this is a show centered on white women artists.

The works in *ecofeminism(s)* bring attention to our Earth emergency—an emergency that has, in fact, been ongoing for several hundred years. In the May 1982 action initiated by Aylon, *The Earth Ambulance,* a functioning medical ambulance emblazoned with the eponymous text departed northern California's Lawrence Berkeley Laboratories on a cross-country road trip to "rescue" the earth. Perhaps inspired by Adrian Piper's *Utah-Manhattan Transfer* (1968), one of the earliest pieces of earth-art concerned with Cold War-era US militarized zones, these women collected soil from several Strategic Air Command military bases across the country, carrying it in pillowcases to the United Nations in New York City, to join a protest against nuclear armament. Aylon's documentation included interviews with participating indigenous women, and the various types of soils "rescued" from the bases were installed in a painterly gesture across the street from the UN.

What are the differences that matter in the ongoing struggle for political freedom of marginalized groups, including women of all backgrounds who continue to suffer the ongoing effects of patriarchal violence, and the calls for greater diversity of gallery rosters in the competitive art market today? While many women-identified artists struggle for recognition of their art, then as now, one exception to this complex story of non-representation is Barbara Kruger, whose work received international attention in the 1980s. A mid-sized soft cover catalogue for Kruger's 1983 exhibition *Untitled (We Won't Play Nature to your Culture),* condenses the familiar graphics of the (now well-known) artist down to the size of an 8.27 by 11.82 inch catalogue cover. The cover shows a face, in style of fashion photography, but with eyelids covered by leaves—adding greater context to the larger-than-life scale of Kruger's more recent commercial exhibitions.

Situating artwork as action intended to directly heal and protect the earth, I was moved by the social practice of artists Aviva Rahmani and Eliza Evans whose works on view prioritize sharing the responsibility of alleviating environmental harm. Rahmani's *Physical Education* (1973), one of the first projects to witness the resemblance between ecocide and misogyny, is an instructional work that exposes the absurdities involved in the designed destruction of our own habitat and raises consciousness around restoring the fragile balance of our resources. And, with a clever 21st-century update to the sit-in protest, in Eliza Evans's *All the Way to Hell* (2020–ongoing) the artist utilizes a contractual agreement to offer participants the opportunity to make an online purchase of 1/1000th of a deeded mineral bed (at $65 a slice to cover legal and filing fees) in order to slow down corporate access to land desired for fracking.[1]

The themes explored in *ecofeminism(s)* gather around the imbalance between human activities to extract resources and land use, the pollution of our waters by processed chemicals and suffocating particulates (see pioneering eco-tech artist Lynn Hershman Leeson's *Twisted Gravity* [2020]), and the co-constitution of settler colonial ideologies that continue to justify the protection of property over people fueling environmental degradation, war, and domestic violence. In Sonya Kelliher-Combs's *Mark, Polar Bear* (2019), fur appears to have grown over an American flag protruding from a wall—striking back softly in favor of the region's eventual recovery from colonial intruders. From the onslaught of Russian and American explorers in the 19th century to the heavy presence of "male-dominated industries" in Alaska today, Kelliher-Combs repurposes a symbol of horror to honor the peoples of the Iñupiaq from the North Slope and the peoples of the Athabascan in the Interior.

The sculpture-installations by Cecilia Vicuña and Bilge Friedlaender exemplify the best of the sustainable conceptual art objects on view. Vicuña worked in exile from Chile after the installation of the Pinochet dictatorship and her works hold space for those who were disappeared and for history erased but not forgotten. Often composed of seeming detritus and poetry, Vicuña does not consider the assemblage to be complete until each of its components is returned to the earth. By including this final instruction for carrying out the piece, in *Tres elementos (Precarios)* (2014) Vicuña also subverts the preciousness of traditional Western art objects—often stored out of sight and under heavy security to preserve their value. Friedlaender's powerful, yet delicate *Cedar Forest* (1989) is taken from a larger installation in which the artist reinterprets the epic of Gilgamesh to materialize the rise of feminine consciousness. The lightness in density of the linen and colored paper show strength through their verticality, yet also signify a brave trust through the repetition of the sculptures' hollowed openings. The care of Freidlaender's *Cedar Forest* has also been brilliantly strategized in that the elements of the installation can be folded and packed into small nested boxes.

Ana Mendieta, *Bacayu (Esculturas Rupestres)* [Light of Day (Rupestrian Sculptures)], 1981/2019. Black and white photograph, 40 x 55 inches. &cpopy; The Estate of Ana Mendieta Collection, LLC. Courtesy Galerie Lelong & Co.

Carla Maldonado's video work *Dystopia of a Jungle City, and the Human of Nature* (2019) highlights the political resistance of the Cipiá Indigenous Community Center near Manaus—a region of Amazonas—against Brazil's current far-right regime. By using a technique of splitting and recombining screens, at times into halves, thirds, or quarters, a play unfolds between elements of dark and light, the sounds of river life, industry, and dialects, as well as the well-timed display of captioned translations. The composition of these elements allows Maldonado to shift between zones of contact, giving space to the stories of communities in their own voices, only occasionally interspersed with the artist's brief voiceovers. The genocidal politics of Brazil's neo-liberal initiatives are undeniable. We hear interview clips of the proud nationalist Brazilian president, Jair Bolsonaro, mirroring his Tweets on "saving the savages" and integrating the peoples of the Amazonas—traditional, peasant, and indigenous communities—through a commitment to not ceding one more centimeter of protection to indigenous lands. Unsurprisingly, the indigenous peoples of the Amazonas are hardest hit by COVID-19 and Brazil trails only the United States in the number of cases per country.

> From time to time over the years, the citizens of Cienfuegos tried again to "civilize" the Black Venus. But each time her passive protests forced them to return her to the key…[2]

In what feels like an ominous retelling of the myth of the Black Venus for the feminism and ecology issue of the zine *Heresies* #13 (1981), Ana Mendieta's research on Taíno culture centered around the creation myths of spirits. The Bacayu's source of power is the land, though

thought of not as a potential space of dominion but, instead, as the embrace of the womb. Of Mendieta's rupestrian *Bacayu* (1981/2019), part of a series of carvings in the shape of her body incised in rocky caves of her birth home in Cuba, we are left only with the photographic ephemera of Mendieta's private performances.

Insofar as *ecofeminism(s)* gathers art in consideration of our endangered habitats and our disturbed and threatened lives, it is clear that the human species constitutes the greatest threat to the environment. As the multi-level and overlapping crises of the current pandemic—and the murder of George Floyd, a Black man, by police officer Derek Chauvin—make evident, a kind of ongoing cross-pollination is occurring at an accelerated rate between various forms and intensities of structural violence. Black, indigenous, and other historically marginalized people of color are disproportionately impacted by the spread of the virus for reasons tied to current and cross-generational effects of eco-genocidal patriarchy, racial capitalism, the gross inequality in access to care, as well as through the greater risk of exposure to the virus from employment in essential civic and service industries. And while the earth has shown signs of healing as many people are sheltered in place in order to slow the spread of COVID-19, theories of the Anthropocene—a term marking the period during which human activity has been the dominant influence on the climate and the environment—also require nuance. What does it mean to say "we" are dangerous for this planet? Who is threatening to whom, to which ecologies and peoples, why, and when?

As recently as last month, a call for an intersectional environmentalism came from activist-scholar Leah Thomas in the essay "Why Every Environmentalist Should Be Anti-Racist." [3] Certainly, a show with artists exploring environmental justice within the current political climate of global protests against anti-Black racism, even through the narrower lens of ecofeminism, might have been attentive to critiques like Kirk's, if not the work of Piper and the entire oeuvre of LaToya Ruby Frazier whose work considers the disproportionate impact of ecological injustice on Black people in mid-Western post-industrial cities (see *Flint is Family*, 2016). But which artists are included, are excluded, or continue to be overlooked remains a problem for even the most thoroughly researched curatorial projects.

1. www.allthewaytohell.com.
2. Ana Mendieta, *Heresies #13*, 1981.
3. (*Vogue*, June 8, 2020)