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Mothers of Our Pearls

A pearl is formed when a foreign particle, most often indigestible food, becomes trapped between the shells of an oyster. Unable to dislodge the particle from its mantle, the oyster coats it in layers of nacre, which consists of a combination of the calcium-carbonate crystal called aragonite and the protein conchiolin.[1] Nacre, which is the same material used to build the shell, is intended for an oyster's protection—possibly how it earned its name "mother-of-pearl." This natural defense is often the reason for an oyster's untimely death by the hands of consumers, desiring the lustrous white gem it produces. However, the eastern oysters native to New York City, *Crassostrea virginica*, are not pearl producers. In the rare accounts that mention a pearl found in a New York oyster, the pearl is described as brown, misshapen, and too small for market use.[2] In other words, it has no commercial value.

My mother recently sent me a photo of an artwork I had started my senior year of high school. She discovered it deep in the back corners of our garage when moving out of my childhood home in Los Angeles. (It had slipped my mind over the years or perhaps was also tucked away in the corners of my memory). My mother, eager to encourage my budding interest in sculpture, allowed me to cast her face and torso in plaster gauze. I then left her plaster form, covered in a mixture of flour and water, to cultivate mold along the surface of the bust. Four years later she still grows.

This oyster project, *Mothers of Our Pearls*, sprouted from a similar inclination to create a structure whose materials function as the means for something else to grow, develop, and create on its surface. It works in collaboration with another organism that has been neglected, unnoticed, discarded, and considered insignificant, such as mold or the oyster. *Mothers of Our Pearls* is a sculpture in the New

[1] "How Pearls Form," American Museum of Natural History, 2002, Accessed April 29, 2019. https://www.amnh.org/exhibitions/pearls/what-are-pearls/how-pearls-form.
[2] Mark Kurlansky, *The Big Oyster: History on the Half Shell* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2006), 24, 29.

York Harbor that may—or may not—act as an artificial oyster bed. The sculpture is not defined by whether or not it fulfills the desired effect. As it sits on the bottom of the harbor's floor, it is only a structure that offers a place for the oysters to build their home. It functions as an invitation, a gesture towards cooperative living and creating with the nonhuman. It is maternal in its labor, care, and consideration. Motherhood, here, is an expansion on the idea of maternity as an ethos of accommodation, generosity, invitation, and reciprocity. The mothers of this work (myself, my own mother, the oyster) are not engaged in "natural" heterosexual reproduction but, rather, they act maternally through their creative and generative practices in ways that are, like the hermaphroditic oyster, more queer. *Mothers of Our Pearls* links these collective and cooperative motherhoods to suggest a radical recasting of being.

As a collaborative art praxis, I do not have a claim to authorship, as the work continues its creation by other authors in the water. De-authorship also inhibits ownership of the artwork's valuation as a commodity. *Mothers of Our Pearls* calls for a *re*-production of a different value system independent to and independent from capital value. It is concerned with the role of the artist in urban renewal projects that facilitate urban gentrification. And, it is curious about the historical interconnectedness between the oyster and the devaluing of women's labor, class struggles, indigenous cultural survival, the rise of industry, slavery, sex work, freedom in the commons, colonialism, Edenic nature, maintenance labor, and privatization in New York City. The oyster is in alliance with those who have been marginalized, considered disposable, and displaced. *Mothers of Our Pearls* is a small gesture. It is a reaching out, recalling how Walter Benjamin believed radical thought is reflected in "the child who learns [the practical task] of grasping by trying [impossibly] to catch the moon in his hands."[3] *Mothers of Our Pearls* imagines that even a minor gesture has the potential to reverberate—to cause quakes that rupture the trajectory of human habitation which renders land inhospitable both to ourselves and to our co-inhabitants.

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[3] Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989), 117.

This text, broken down into sections, is an account intended to consider the oyster. The oyster's story is primarily associative; it offers various constellations of thought. The paper draws attention to the oyster's entanglement with the history of New York, concerns of the environment and its inhabitants, the philosophies of materialism and conceptualism, and urban wastelands. My intellectual process of detangling and re-tangling this web is not supplementary to the structure that sits in the harbor but deeply integral to and conjoined with it.

Part I: History of a Humble Bivalve

Despite New York oysters not being pearl-producers, the mere promise of pearls was sufficiently enticing for the Dutch colonists that arrived on the island in the 1620s. In *The Big Oyster: History on the Half Shell*, Mark Kurlansky traces the central role of the oyster in forming what has become New York City. Kurlansky cites The Provisional Regulations of the West India Company of 1624, along with the countless logs of explorers, who referred to the abundance of oysters in the land (soon to be called New Amsterdam) as a sign of the riches promised by the New World.[4] The Dutch pearl industry had been so profitable that the "word *pearl* was synonymous to wealth."[5] One can see artifacts of this cultural ideology in the naming of "Pearl Street" in the Financial District and the use of pearls in 17th century Dutch master painters, such as Johannes Vermeer (*Girl with a Pearl Earring* and *Woman with a Pearl Necklace*, c. 1665). It is estimated that, prior to industrial harvesting, the "New York harbor contained fully half of the world's oysters."[6] The oyster functioned as a figure to promote the Edenic narrative of nature's boundless resources.

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[4] Mark Kurlansky, *The Big Oyster: History on the Half Shell* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2006).
[5] Ibid., 29.
[6] Ibid., 35.

While it participated in fulfilling the colonial manifesto, paradoxically, the oyster also preserved the history of the Lenape who the colonialists violently displaced and massacred from the island. The most common remnant markers of indigenous habitation in Manhattan are known today through archeological oyster middens, which are piles of oyster shells. These middens are classified as either "kitchen" or "processing:" Kitchen middens are leftover oyster shells that were found alongside other food scraps, such as bone and nuts, suggesting they were eaten fresh and left as garbage; processing middens are thought to be sites where oysters were preserved for winter consumption, arguably the "earliest form of year-round mass production practiced by New Yorkers."[7] The oyster recalls both the colonial and indigenous histories to indicate the first of many conflicts over whom this land *belongs* to. The hundreds of oyster middens discovered in the New York City area (the last middens were found in 1988 when workers were repairing the Metro-North railroad)[8] articulates how the Lenni-Lenape people are still invisibly woven into the fabric of the city through the refuse of oyster shells.[9]

[7] Mark Kurlansky, *The Big Oyster: History on the Half Shell* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2006), 11, 16, 17.
[8] Ibid., 15.
[9] Aligns with Walter Benjamin's theory that looking to discard is the way to properly attend to the historical materialism of the past. See *The Arcades Project*, Convolute N on the Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress

Oyster shells collected for oyster cultivation and farming in approximately 1860-1920. Photo courtesy of the New York Public Library Digital Collections.[10]

As the land changed from Dutch to British ownership in 1664, oyster consumption increased when the English settlers developed new technologies to harvest the 350 square miles of oyster beds in the Lower Hudson estuary.[11] Kurlansky references the growing gastronomic importance of the oyster through their presence in published cookbooks and home recipes of the 17th and 18th century. The pleasure of their consumption is reflected in the widespread variety of their preparation: oysters pickled, oyster sauced, oysters stewed, oyster smothered fowl, oysters fried, oyster "pye," oyster in Indian cornmeal, oyster collup, oyster-loaves. One recipe even detailed how to feed oysters to preserve and fatten them on long journeys.[12] The oyster was not just enmeshed in the building of the gastronomic culture of New York City, but in the physical construction of the city itself. The empty, leftover shells, referred to as

[10] The Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs: Photography Collection, The New York Public Library, "Oyster shells for oyster "farming"," New York Public Library Digital Collections, Accessed April 29, 2019. http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47d9-ab0b-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99
[11] Mark Kurlansky, *The Big Oyster: History on the Half Shell* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2006), 34.
[12] Ibid., 67-72.

cultch, were either used to fill the newly paved roads or burnt down to produce lime, which functioned as the mortar for buildings. The still-standing Trinity Church was made with oyster paste.[13] The oyster, in colonial New York's vision of nature as Eden, could be utilized without discretion, as it was not even considered that there could be an end to its bounty.

This humble bivalve, a type of aquatic mollusk, became a highly profitable commodity as New York became known for having the best oysters in the world. Since the city's economy relied on selling perishable goods, the need to ensure faster travel time along trade routes led to Robert Fulton sailing the Clermont steamboat in 1807. Although Fulton's Clermont was not the first steamboat, it was the first to prove the new technology was economically viable, as it completed the trip from the East River to Albany in record time-while carrying a load of oysters.[14] The building of the Erie Canal sent oysters, along with other New York State products such as flour, from the harbor to the Great Lakes.[15] A few decades later, the transcontinental railroad project in 1869 opened the way to supplying national demands. New York City oysters could now be found in St. Louis, Chicago, Denver, and San Francisco.[16] The oyster became a figure which embodied the paradox produced by the rise and fall of United States industry; it promoted an image of prosperity and progress and left only ruins. The oyster inadvertently served as both a facilitator and subsequently a casualty of the myth that capitalism can provide a constant oversupply of commodified natural resources. The oyster's end in New York City came both as a result of industrial overharvesting to meet national and international market demands and, at the same time, being polluted by the industrial mechanisms that were made to meet those demands. By 1910, the freshwater sources where these filter-feeders thrived were receiving 600 million gallons of raw sewage dumped in the water every day.[17] Consequently, the consumption of these oysters resulted in the typhoid outbreak of the late

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[13] Mark Kurlansky, *The Big Oyster: History on the Half Shell* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2006), 56, 80.
[14] Ibid,, 101.
[15] Ibid., 104.
[16] Ibid., 232.
[17] Ibid., 251.

19th century, causing a short ban on eating oysters by the Pure Food Department in Washington.[18] The oyster was one of the first to teach New Yorkers that the health of a city's people is intrinsically tied to the health of its environment and those who live in it—a lesson we still have not learned. By the time it occurred to New Yorkers that the demand for oysters was exceeding the supply, the oyster beds were already empty, and the few oysters left were destitute, choking on our pollution and sewage. From Fulton's steamboat in 1807, it took a little over a century until the last of the oyster beds were closed to harvesting.[19] Oyster consumption in the city has continued from the 1930s to present. But now, New Yorkers eat imported oysters.

The devastation of the oyster beds was not just devastating to the oysters and the ecosystem they maintained, but it was devastating to the poor, the immigrants, and the working class people who depended on this cheap food source. The oyster's availability and accessibility on the shoreline made them a democratized form of sustenance. In the 1700s, in contrast to the perception under Dutch control, oyster consumption was associated with poverty. It became an informal means of income as one of the first street foods—sold in carts on almost every street corner, primarily by freed former slaves.[20] Access to the shoreline for oystering was considered a right of the commons until it was realized how profitable the resource could be. In *Waterfront Manhattan*, Kurt Schlichting marks that the 1730 charter by Governor John Montgomerie, which established New York as an independent colony, "granted the city the right to the land, then underwater, extending out from the shoreline for an additional 400 feet beyond the low-water line. The charter defined the underwater land around Manhattan as 'water-lots,' the equivalent of the underdeveloped 'waste land' on the island, creating a public asset of immense value."[21] Grants were sold to private owners, who utilized coastal land to build wharves and piers, boosting Manhattan's

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[18] Mark Kurlansky, *The Big Oyster: History on the Half Shell* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2006), 252-3.
[19] Ibid., 265.
[20] Ibid., 65, 69.
[21] Kurt Schlichting, *Waterfront Manhattan: From Henry Hudson to the High Line*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018), 22.

maritime economy. This charter set the precedent for the first set of restrictions under a 1769 colonial law, which determined who could harvest oysters and where. It argued the poor's access to the resource would destroy the oysters.[22] The oyster beds would not have decimated at the same rate and scale that they did if harvesting methods stayed within the informal, small-scale practices of the Lenni-Lenape or working class New Yorkers. Limiting the lower classes' access to the shoreline ensured that industry was the sole profiteer. By the mid-nineteenth century, New York state was selling rights to exclusive access to underwater oyster beds.[23] State-issued privatization of natural land is supported by the capitalist ideology that views nature as something to be owned and extracted for private gain, rather than accessible as a commonly held resource.

The oyster's dual relationship to freedom and exploitation is mirrored in the connection between the freedom they provided free blacks in the North as a source of economic sustenance and the revenue they brought through sales to slave owners in the South. One of the first free black communities in early 19th century New York were known as the Sandy Ground oystermen. Oystering in Prince's Bay provided the means for their community to become prosperous and self-sufficient, allowing them to develop their own shops, crafts, and churches.[24] While the oyster for this community served as a means for freedom, the pickled oysters shipped out of New York 50 years prior "were a by-product of the port's involvement in the slave trade… with the British West Indies slave plantation." Selling pickled oysters to slave owners was six times more profitable for New York merchants then selling them fresh to locals.[25] The oyster presents layers of nuance within the narrative of the North that allowed New York to profit from slavery and absolve itself from participating in it. Mapping the historical entanglements of the oyster reveals how

[22] Mark Kurlansky, *The Big Oyster: History on the Half Shell* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2006), 84.
[23] Ibid., 123.
[24] Ibid., 126.
[25] Ibid., 78.

it is aligned with those who have been characterized as disposable. Paradoxically, both in their access to sovereignty and in the perpetuation of their oppression.

In addition to the street carts, oysters were sold throughout the city in late-night markets, oyster barges on the shoreline, high-end French dining and, most notably, in oyster cellars. From the 18th to the 20th century, oysters collapsed class boundaries of consumption. The poorest immigrants and the wealthiest citizens of the city could both inexpensively eat the same food, prepared in the same way at the same time in history, just in different locations in the city.[26] Oyster cellars were basement establishments in the slums of Manhattan infamously known as Five Points. Charles Dickens was the first to write about these spots, remarking how they were indicated by a red balloon and a sign reading "OYSTERS IN EVERY STYLE."[27] The oyster cellars provided the three most famous New York experiences: oyster consumption, alcohol consumption, and prostitution.[28] The sex worker was the inferred attraction of these working-class luxuries, which could arguably be the reason for the common misconception that oysters are an aphrodisiac. Kurlansky notes how "oysterwoman" or "oysterwench" were phrases used to delineate either "a woman who sells oysters or a woman of low moral character."[29] The act of selling oysters and the selling of the self are put in conjunction to criticize forms of female labor that are not domestic. The shoreline scavenger, the freed black, and the sex worker each used the oyster as a means for self-sufficiency. They embody the figures that undermine a system which intends to limit their class freedom and independence. Oysters, for each, present an opportunity for sovereignty that is outside state control. They are threats to the class structure integral to maintaining the capitalist system, and therefore each became targets of persecution and further oppression.

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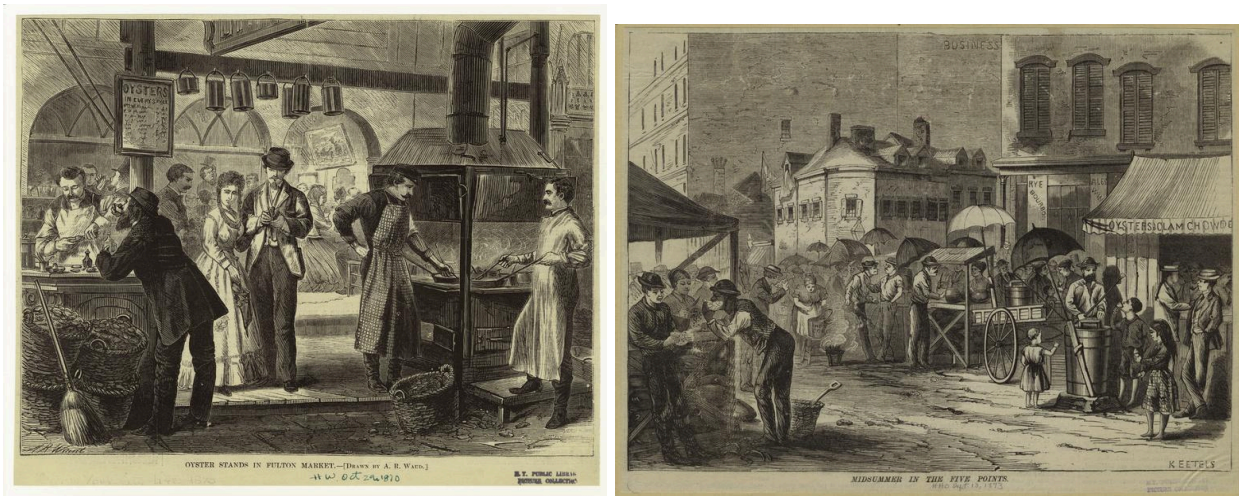
[26]Mark Kurlansky, *The Big Oyster: History on the Half Shell* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2006).
[27] Ibid., 157, 159.
[28] Ibid., 65.
[29] Ibid., 160.



Left image: Oyster Stands In Fulton Market 1870.[30] Right image: Midsummer in the Five Points 1873.[31] Both images courtesy of The New York Public Library Digital Collections.

I present the various histories I have gleaned, broken into pieces, and woven back together from Mark Kurlansky's book not as a mere overview but to make clear what is at stake of being lost with the loss of the oyster. It is not what we generally learn of the clean-cut, linear progression of New York's development to the contemporary metropolis. From the oyster, we hear a different story of what shaped the landscape, what is embedded in the architecture, what sustained the poor, what gave freedom to the marginalized, and what took it all away. It is through the oyster that we find complications in our history that are disturbingly resonant with our present moment. The oyster cannot be dismissed as something of the past, but a ghost amidst our present moment—haunting us, causing fissures in our concrete structures, and trying to tell us to recall what we have forgotten in our past. Attending to this past means we can no longer act surprised when we repeat environmentally unsustainable actions and arrive at the same results. In *Mothers of Our Pearls*, to bring the oyster back to the New York harbor is to say, "we remember."

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[30] Art and Picture Collection, The New York Public Library, "Oyster Stands In Fulton Market," New York Public Library Digital Collections, Accessed April 29, 2019. http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47e0-db1e-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99.

[31] Art and Picture Collection, The New York Public Library, "Midsummer in the Five Points," New York Public Library Digital Collections, Accessed April 29, 2019. http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47e0-cd04-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99.

Part II: Environmentalism or art?

An oyster restoration project is not a new idea. The Clean Water Act of 1972 significantly improved the quality of the harbor by prohibiting the dumping of sewage and waste into the waterways and made it more possible for oysters to return to New York. Leading the efforts in New York City since 1997 is the non-profit organization Billion Oyster Project whose mission is to restore the harbor to 1 billion oysters by 2035 by introducing 100 acres of oyster reefs back to the estuary. Although it seems minor in comparison to the 220,000 acres that existed when Henry Hudson arrived in 1609, 100 acres of oyster beds would provide significant improvement to the ecosystem.[32] *Mothers of Our Pearls* is indebted to the work and research of the Billion Oyster Project; the idea came to me during one of my days volunteering for them.

Oysters are a keystone species for the New York Harbor. They act as a habitat for assemblages of marine life, as grounds for refuge and forage, provide storm protection along the shoreline, and filter water through bioaccumulation of contaminants such as nitrogen, mercury, and other heavy metals.[33] Their bio-absorption capabilities make them a species of interest in discussions around reducing the concentrations of greenhouse gases through carbon sequestration. The Billion Oyster Project stands out amongst other projects in it that does not adhere to merely determining the fiscal value of the oyster. The research of marine biologists Katherine McFarland and Matthew P. Hare in "Restoring Oysters to Urban Estuaries: Redefining Habitat Quality for Eastern Oyster Performance near New York City" is intended to "discuss how to quantify the economic value of each of the ecosystem services provided by oyster reefs." [34] In this framing, the oyster is refolded into the commodity sphere. It serves a different purpose than to

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[32]"Restore Our Harbor," Billion Oyster Project, Accessed April 29, 2019. https://billionoysterproject.org/#.
[33] Park, E. J., Kim, M. Garcia, A. Malinowski, P. "Mercury Uptake by Eastern Oysters (Crassostrea Virginica) in Oyster Restoration Project of the New York Harbor." International Journal of Environmental Science and Technology, vol. 14, no. 10, pp. 2269–2276. EBSCOhost, doi:10.1007/s13762-017-1358-3.
[34] McFarland, Katherine, and Matthew P. Hare, "Restoring Oysters to Urban Estuaries: Redefining Habitat Quality for Eastern Oyster Performance near New York City," (PLoS ONE, vol. 13, no. 11, Nov. 2018), pp. 283. EBSCOhost, doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0207368.

produce pearls, make mortar, or be food, yet the oyster is still conceptualized as an organism whose purpose is to provide monetary value to us. *Mothers of Our Pearls* considers instead what we might provide for an oyster's wellbeing.

Despite the difficulties in labor, organization, funding, etc., the Billion Oyster Project cites that 62.5% of the challenges they face in oyster restoration are due to regulations and permits required for use of the shoreline. Their work requires permits from (1) USACE: United States Army Corps of Engineers, (2) United States Department of Commerce, (3) NOAA: National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, (4) NYSDOS: New York State Department of State, (5) NYSDEC: NY State Department of Environmental Conservation, (6) The New York State Office of Parks, (7) Recreation and Historic Preservation, and (8) NYCDPR: New York City Department of Parks and Recreation.[35] It became quite clear during my own process of trying to obtain permits for my project that it is nearly impossible. After months of being referred to different contacts, who each provided different information, I was finally notified that *Mothers of Our Pearls* would require possibly thousands of dollars, years of various permitting approvals, a full benthic survey, a structural engineer, and constant surveillance once temporarily installed. The bureaucratic difficulty of this process is far more of a hindrance than an aid. The structural inaccessibility of this system renders environmental projects highly exclusive. There is little agency for environmental care permitted to those who will feel the impact of corporate and governmental carelessness.

Mothers of Our Pearls is intertwined with and complementary to the work of the Billion Oyster Project, but the work diverges in its conception of environmentalism. Robin Wall Kimmerer writes her

[35] M McCann, P Malinowski, E Burmester, "Two decades of oyster restoration in New York City," (presentation, Coastal & Estuarine Research Federation Meeting, Providence, Rhode Island, 2017). https://drive.google.com/file/d/1_h4DkQ-9RgNJdYInr92XWRTIyBIB0aFp/view.

work, *Braiding Sweetgrass,* from an Indigenous worldview to conceive of a different form of environmental aid called restorative ecology. Kimmerer recognizes my frustrations:

> We are deluged by information regarding our destruction of the world and hear almost nothing about how to nurture it. It is no surprise then that environmentalism becomes synonymous with dire predictions and powerless feelings. Our natural inclination to do right by the world is stifled, breeding despair when it should be inspiring action. The participatory role of people in the well-being of the land has been lost, our reciprocal relations reduced to a KEEP OUT sign.[36]

In this human-land relationship, people are incapable of care and connection to the land, as they no longer have rightful access to the commons. Environmental rehabilitation, preservation, and conservation often call for a "renewal of land for production of natural resources"; this is "is not the same as [a] renewal of land as cultural identity," where maintaining a culture is intrinsically tied to maintaining the physical place.[37] Restorative ecology requires us "to think about what land means."[38] Under her terms, the organism and the ecosystem it lives in are not constrained or determined by their use value but operate as non-discrete subjects. She asks us to consider "what if those beings were the drivers?"[39] In this land ethics, we are positioned as partners in helping our environment. When land is our caregiving responsibility, restorative ecology is "creat[ing] habitation for our nonhuman relatives… We restore the land, and the land restores us."[40]

Mothers of Our Pearls is not an environmental project. These endeavors require sustained monitoring, control, and management to determine if the project results in meeting or failing predetermined outcomes. Rather, *Mothers of Our Pearls* has no qualifications for what would make it considered successful. As a gesture, this work is an expression of meaning—it only carries the potential for action as a response in the context of performance. Instead, this piece is situated as an artwork. The

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[36] Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2015), 327.
[37] Ibid., 328.
[38] Ibid., 328.
[39] Ibid., 331.
[40] Ibid., 335-336.

structure of *Mothers of Our Pearls* is a sculpture, and its installation into the New York Harbor is a performance. Under the conditions for permitting provided by the NYC Mayor's Office of Citywide Event Coordination and Management, the Street Activity Permit Office (SAPO) determines that a performer is only required to apply for a permit if they are using a sound device or are performing in or next to a park.[41] The installation of *Mothers of Our Pearls* is a performance of maintenance labor. The performers act as city construction workers. They arrive in a cargo van, costumed in matching uniforms, lay out orange safety cones, and begin their performance of labor. The performance makes reference to Mierle Laderman Ukeles' manifesto that aligns her "Maintenance Art" practice with domestic, maternal, and civic work because of their mutual emphasis on collaboration and care.[42] As an artwork, unlike an environmental project, it does not need to prove an expected result. Therefore, it refuses to mark the exact site in which it lives and resists presenting any documentation of its installation. These choices are intended to prevent the perpetuation of art as commodity.

The Art Workers' Coalition and the conceptual art movement both emerged in the political climate of New York City in the 60s and 70s. Coalition members were passionate about subverting institutional structures of power, especially the museum. The Art Workers' Coalition started in April of 1969 to voice a set of demands to the art museum that advocated for museum reform. Their concerns were largely around democratized public access, relinquishing institutional ownership and control of artworks, becoming more inclusive in representing female and minority artists, and altering the institution as a place for profit to a place for education.[43] Dan Graham, an artist who played an integral role in conceptual art, commented during the first Art Workers' Coalition "Open Public Hearing" that "the subject is the artist,

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[41] See NYC311 permit requirements: https://www1.nyc.gov/nyc-resources/service/3003/musician-or-performer-permit.

[42] Ukeles defines Maintenance as: "keep the dust off the pure individual creation; preserve the new; sustain the change; protect progress; defend and prolong the advance; renew the excitement; repeat the flight." Mierle Laderman Ukeles, "Maintenance Art Manifesto, Proposal for an Exhibition, 'CARE,'" in *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999), 123.

[43] Lucy R Lippard, *Get the Message?: A Decade of Art for Social Change*, (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1984).

the object is to make art *free*. The art world stinks; it is made of people who collectively dig the shit; now seems to be the time to get the collective shit out of the system."[44]

The conceptual art movement seemed to be the way to "get the shit out of the system" by eliminating matter and aesthetics in art. In 1968, Lucy R. Lippard and John Chandler published "The Dematerialization of Art" to mark how conceptualism had the potential to render art as an object obsolete. Conceptualism "emphasizes the thinking process almost exclusively" so "such a work is a medium rather than an end in itself or 'art-as-art.'"[45] Dematerialized art seemed to have the capacity to eliminate art as a form of consumption and commodity, which undermines the institutions that profit. Sol LeWitt's "Buried Cube Containing an Object of Importance but Little Value" was his first conceptual piece in which he buried a cube in an undisclosed location to emphasize the value of the idea rather than the value of the object.[46] Photographs documenting the process of burial are the only indications that the event took place. "Postface, in Six Years: *The Dematerialization of the Art Object, 1966 to 1972*" is Lucy R. Lippard's response to the essay cited six years prior:

> Hopes that 'conceptual art' would be able to avoid the general commercialization, the destructively 'progressive' approach of modernism were for the most part unfounded. It seemed in 1969 that no one, not even a public greedy for novelty, would actually pay money, or much of it, for a xerox sheet referring to an event past or never directly perceived, a group of photographs documenting an ephemeral situation or condition, a project for work never to be completed, words spoken but not recorded; it seemed that these artists would therefore be forcibly freed from the tyranny of a commodity status and market-orientation. Three years later, the major conceptualists are selling work for substantial sums here and in Europe; they are represented by (and still more unexpected—showing in) the world's most prestigious galleries.[47]

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[44] Dan Graham, "Art Workers' Coalition Open Hearing Presentation," in *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999), 92.
[45] Lucy R. Lippard and John Chandler, "The Dematerialization of Art," in *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999), 46, 49.
[46] Xennex, "Buried Cube Containing an Object of Importance but Little Value, 1968 - Sol LeWitt," (WikiArt, August 13, 2012, Accessed April 29, 2019).
https://www.wikiart.org/en/sol-lewitt/buried-cube-containing-an-object-of-importance-but-little-value-1968.
[47] Lucy R. Lippard, " Postface, in Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object, 1966 to 1972," in *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999), 294.

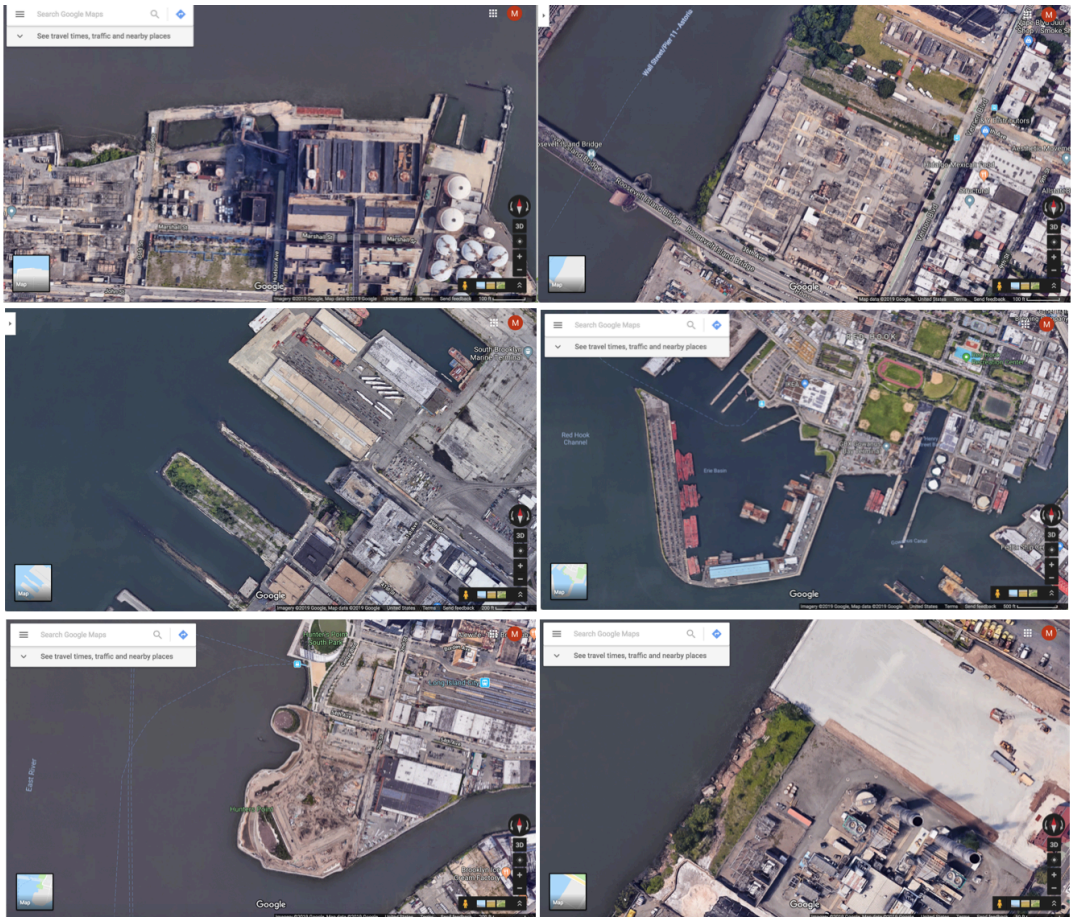
Even if one absolves the artwork of its material importance, any documentation (even in its simplest form) makes a work sellable to the art world. *Mothers of Our Pearls* attempts to prohibit its future reproduction of commercial value by choosing not to document the process of its installation. It begins with the desire to consider and accommodate the oyster. Human satisfaction, utility, and profitability are counter.

Photos were taken by the author.

Part III: Safety in Industrial Wastelands

Today, living in the polluted waters of New York's harbor both endangers the oyster's survival while also ensuring its livelihood—its toxic body means it cannot re-enter the market. In searching for a dwelling for *Mothers of Our Pearls*, the areas that were once marked with the highest pollution rates now provided the most ideal locations since they are designated as useless and unproductive. These are the areas of the New York City coastline that are understood as wastelands. In contrast to 1730s

characterization of a wasteland as underdeveloped, the wastelands in New York City exist in the afterlife of hyper-development—they are the crumbling, post-industrial terrains. These coastal wastelands exist as the last remnants of industry, serving as evidence of capitalism's inevitable production of discard. It is with great irony that *Mothers of Our Pearls* finds its home today in the ruins of the maritime industry that killed the oyster a century before. In part of this retaking of the oyster's lost habitat, I repurposed a leftover slab of steel from the site to serve as part of the sculpture's material. Waste of industry becomes an active contributor towards remediating the consequences of industrial waste.



Compilation of screenshots from Google Maps satellite view taken by the author. These aerial views were used to locate industrial wastelands in New York City.

However, these wastelands are far from wasted spaces. Once these industrial structures had been left to decay, the natural ecology was allowed to return. Trees burst through the fractured slabs of concrete

on the ground, and hundreds of ducks roam the adjacent waters undisturbed. Algae cling to the rubble that has tumbled into the shoreline. Neglected warehouses often become a communal home for squatters. Perhaps even a few oysters are lodged onto the wooden legs left from an old pier. These zones of abandonment are arguably the only unmanaged natural landscapes within the city limits. They are similar spaces to what Michelle Ty refers to in "Trash and the Ends of Infrastructure" as geographies of waste, where the "allocation of waste helps to constitute the mobile distinction between the center and periphery on which the very notion of infrastructure depends and demarcates... what geographical zones are unlivable, what areas are subject to abandonment, and what spaces are habitable only at great risk."[48] She looks to these areas of neglect, produced through enterprise and infrastructure, to apprehend "the afterlife of the commodity, or, put otherwise, the fate of capitalism's disjecta membra, and the people who tend to it."[49] These uninhabitable wastelands exist as the last places in the city that offer habitable spaces to house communities of humans and nonhumans who have been historically displaced—"for whom the waste of modernization becomes a source of livelihood."[50] It is no coincidence that in these wastelands we find the homes of the laborer, the immigrant, the minority community, the artist, the sex worker, and now, maybe, the oyster.

In urban planning, these sites are referred to as brownfields. This classification is political—it is a term used mark areas of degradation in order to permit eminent domain. The label of brownfield or Superfund allows for government and private enterprise to reinvest in the wasteland. Politicians argue that these projects are intended for environmental remediation and cleanup, but they are invested in redevelopment. This is just another example of how the state, colonial or otherwise, uses law, policy, and regulation to profit from capitalist development. They promise that they are giving back to the commons, to the public, and that they are rendering the spaces accessible and affordable. But accessible and

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[48] Michelle Ty, "Trash and the Ends of Infrastructure," *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 61, no. 4 (2015): 622, 606-607. doi:10.1353/mfs.2015.0053.
[49] Ibid., 608.
[50] Ibid., 612.

affordable to *whom*? The wasteland becomes a tumultuous site of gentrification. The artist, in this narrative, occupies an unintentional role when they move into the wasteland, revitalize the space, and make it more attractive to live there—inadvertently causing it to become more marketable and expensive. In choosing not to mark the site of installation, I hope to prevent *Mothers of Our Pearls* from facilitating this process in a site that is already in the initial stages of transition. The work exists as a counter understanding of what constitutes renewal. It rejects the idea of renewal proposed by governmental *improvement* projects. *Mothers of Our Pearls* calls attention to those who already inhabit and find a livelihood in the wasteland. Instead, it proposes a method to render these spaces more habitable for them.

Part IV: A Vital Materialist Praxis

Mothers of Our Pearls facilitates a new valuing of the oyster and prevents the work, the site, and the oyster from being redelivered back into the commodity sphere. Recall Robin Wall Kimmerer's interest in reconceiving of the non-human subject as the driver of reciprocal ecology, rather than a mere object which we control and manage. Her work aligns with Jane Bennett's philosophy of vital materialism in *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Bennett's work expands on materialist thought and argues for the "vitality of (non-human) bodies"—vitality meaning "the capacity of things… not only to impede or block the will and designs of humans but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own."[51] Vital materialism is an alternative to our conception of the nonhuman as a passive recipient of human action, which "presumes that at the heart of any event or process lies a *human* agency that has illicitly been projected into things."[52] She demystifies the assertion that we are in charge of the world. Vital materialism defines agency as not dependent on intentionality or

[51] Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, (London: Duke University Press, 2010), viii.
[52] Ibid., xiv.

purposiveness. Rather, even small and simple bodies "may indeed express a vital impetus." Yet, "an actant never really acts alone. Its efficacy or agency always depends on the collaboration, cooperation, or interactive interference of many bodies and forces."[53] Vital materialist practice requires deep attention to the minor, the concealed, and the forgotten. The foraged metal and the empty oyster shells (which act as the oyster's substrate to adhere to) that make-up *Mothers of Our Pearls'* materials are situated as actants with a lively and vital possibility for agency. They do not exist as discrete or isolated matters, nor is their ability to act individualized, but it is rather within a network of associative relations between metal, spat,[54] chemical, water, human, nacre, waste, etc. At the intersection of thought between Kimmerer and Bennett, the oyster is no longer identifiable as a resource. It becomes reconstituted within this alternative ethos and offers a different kind of being—a being with, a being of, a being in, and a being on this planet. We can call this vital materialism, kinship or reciprocal ecology. We can call this maintenance. We can call this maternal. Or, perhaps, we can find something beautiful and promising in it being encompassing of all of these practices.

As the assembler of the sculpture, my capacity for agency relies on the reciprocity of the oyster. This work is a collective project not only in its partnership with the oyster but because of the collaboration and support I received in its conception. The work is informed and shaped by the thinkers, authors, researchers, projects, and artists cited here. I am indebted to my professor, Laura Harris, who acted as my guide and advisor throughout the project. Eugenia Kisin advocated for me from the start. AB Huber's poetic engagement with Walter Benjamin's thoughts helped structure my thinking. Kedar Berntson, Andreas Petrossiants, and Danielle Johnson all edited my work. Karen Holmberg and Mitch Joachim both offered me sound advice. My closest friends listened to me relentlessly talk about oysters for two years. And my fellow performers gifted me their Sunday afternoon.

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[53] Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, (London: Duke University Press, 2010), 21.
[54] Oyster larvae.

I mention them not just to acknowledge their roles, but because they are testaments to the fact that this project would not have been possible without my personal relationships that formed it. This work is not quite *mine*. *Mothers of Our Pearls* is a generative, cooperative, creative, entangled, fragile, resilient, vital, minor, redemptive work. It acts as a mother in its desire to care and protect the oyster, and in providing them an opportunity to endure. The oyster's imaginable response is maternal as well. It takes time, labor, and care to make a misshapen, brown, imperfect pearl. *Mothers of Our Pearls* is for the making of a better home. Reciprocity is not sentiment but survival.

Photo taken by author, Michelle Johnson.

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