International Journal of Education & the Arts

Special Issue: Art for the Sake of Care

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http://www.ijea.org/ ISSN: 1529-8094

Volume 25 Special Issue 1.4 September 27, 2024

Ecological Intimacy as Anarchic Feminist Care Practice

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Citation: Moscovitch, K. (2024). Ecological intimacy as anarchic feminist care practice. *International Journal of Education & the Arts*, *25*(si1.4). http://doi.org/10.26209/ijea25si1.4

Abstract

This paper triangulates an approach to ecology, via the frames offered by the intersection of intimacy and care. I situate radical intimacy within a discourse of care, identifying a pathway for anarchic feminist care practices. By investigating how intimacy adds anarchic elements to care, I inquire into how my own artwork engages care frameworks from a subversive and critical perspective and suggest that intimacy lends an anarchic feminist frame to ecological care. I engage theoretical constructs from several object-oriented philosophers to situate intimacy within an ecological discourse. I also investigate the work and ideas of Annie Sprinkle and Beth Stephens, specifically their ecosexuality projects, as counterpoint and complement to my own work as an artist. Finally, I introduce my recent body of work *Sun, Moon, Egg* to inquire into the radical roots of ecological intimacy in maternity-based practice.

Ecological Intimacy and Care

This paper traverses both academic and practice-based reference points to identify a constellation of elements through which I triangulate my approach to ecology, via the frames offered by the intersection of intimacy and care. I wish to situate radical intimacy within a discourse of care, identifying a pathway for anarchic feminist care practices. By investigating how intimacy adds anarchic elements to care, I inquire into how my own artwork engages care frameworks from a subversive and critical perspective. I wish to better understand how my practice operates through radical intimacy, even when its quietude seems to evade the upheaval of taboo. By situating my own artistic practice within an intertextual conversation about intimacy, ecology and care, I seek a renewed relationship with the intimate and its sociopolitical implications. Through this process of discovery, I suggest that intimacy lends an anarchic feminist frame to ecological care. In the writing that follows, I engage theoretical constructs from several object-oriented philosophers to situate intimacy within an ecological discourse. I also investigate the work and ideas of Annie Sprinkle and Beth Stephens, specifically their ecosexuality projects, as counterpoint and complement to my own work as an artist. Finally, I introduce my recent body of work *Sun, Moon, Egg* to inquire into the radical roots of ecological intimacy in maternity-based practice. These varying approaches showcase the nuanced ways in which art participates in a discourse of care, and provide language for a new relationship to ecology that engages the radicality of intimacy.

To examine the delicate relationship between ecology, care and intimacy, I turn to several scholarly and artistic touchstones. Philosopher Timothy Morton's prolific writings on ecology, intimacy and radicality have provided helpful frames and terms—most notably for this project: *ecological intimacy*. According to Morton, ecological intimacy is "intimacy between humans and nonhumans, violently repressed with violent results" (Morton, et al., 2017, p. 154). Morton advocates for a kind of *attunement* that can be described as an aesthetic noticing which liquifies rigid notions of "nature." Additionally, I am interested in the concept of *withdrawal*, which has been extrapolated by object-oriented thinkers such as Morton to push subject-centered philosophical canons into the realm of objects and, by extension, into the ecological sphere. Morton proposes: "Since a thing cannot be known directly or totally, one can only attune to it, with greater or lesser degrees of intimacy" (ibid, p. 151). Through this writing, I attempt to resituate intimacy in the context of care ethics, and specifically, the socio-politics of motherhood, in order to show that intimacy and care are ecological. I will be using my own art-making and maternity processes to animate the inquiry, along with a discussion of Sprinkle and Stephens's ecosexuality projects as aesthetico-political practice. Sprinkle and Stephens describe ecosex as "a conceptual art practice and a way of thinking beyond individual identity, and even beyond human beings, to envision a larger system—an ecology of relationships" (Sprinkle et al., 2021, p. 8). Their work provides a bridge between overtly environmental work that may more directly imply an ecological discourse, and the

private intimacy of the body that I explore in my own practice. I find this intersection generative to a discussion of how we may visualize radical care through the ecological imagination.

As a philosophical foundation, I introduce two related movements in which Morton is a key participant to help contextualize these ideas: object-oriented ontology (OOO) and object-oriented feminism (OOF). Thinking ecologically entails a consideration of the relationship of human beings to nonhuman beings such as plants, animals and fungi, as well as to non-sentient and inorganic objects such as rocks and minerals, bodies of water, and objects in outer space. Care ethics, in parallel, is inherently relational. According to Gary,

> care ethics treats members of the moral community as relational selves rather than independent agents. If individuals are formed – both causally and constitutively – through relationships, then key concepts like autonomy, dignity, and reciprocity must be reoriented in order to capture the ethical importance of relationships and the needs of those within them (Gary, 2022, p. 3).

The emergent field of object-oriented ontology (OOO) takes concepts of relationality a step further to conceive of events, ideologies and even imaginary constructs as objects in order to equalize their ontological status and devise a master theory in which all that exists can be framed as things in themselves rather than merely their relational being (Harman, 2018). By extension, object-oriented feminism (OOF) rejects the notion of a master theory, and instead looks to a prescriptive activist philosophy in which humans align themselves with the object world in order to examine and infiltrate the power relations that result when some objects are privileged over others (Behar, 2017). These questions of power and privilege are essential to discussions of care. María Puig de la Bellacasa argues:

> In feminist discussions as well as in activism, the politics of caring remain at the heart of concerns with exclusions and critiques of power dynamics in stratified worlds. Considering care as a struggle makes of it an ethico-political issue well more problematic than it could initially seem to be" (2017, p. 29).

Relevant to care ethics, OOF points towards alliances between objects. Relevant to art practice, OOF aims for these alliances to be performative, aesthetic and, ultimately, impactful on a social and political scale. While OOO provides much of the vocabulary of this inquiry, OOF offers the performative, materialist and activist frame of contemporary art practice.

I aim to synthesize these ideas into an aesthetic approach to care, framing the very human (or at the very least, *animal*) activity of maternity through an ecological lens. I am interested in

this strategy as a way of understanding my own experience of motherhood outside of the ideological imperatives of gendered practice. As part of a critical and revisionist approach to care ethics, Gary points out the historically hegemonic identities that dominated early care theory. Gary (2022) states:

> By positing the maternal relationship as the paradigm of care, early care ethicists opened the theory up to serious objections that linger today. Two related objections are particularly enduring: first, centering the maternal relation ends up centering a highly normative vision of motherhood that, in turn, prioritizes a regressive organization of society and the function of care within it. Exacerbating both aspects of this critique is the dominance of white, cisheterosexual, middle-class mothers among the first generation of care ethicists, many of whom drew explicitly on personal narrative in crafting their theories (2022, p. 5).

My own work cannot directly address the experiences of communities of color, queer communities and individuals who do not conform to the cis- hetero- able-bodied white standard narrative; however, I hope that my findings point to the ways that ecological intimacy can erode some of the social and political rigidity that have historically dominated narratives of motherhood. Morton describes ecology as "the thinking of home, and hence world (*oikos* plus *logos*)" (2013, p. 116) and suggests that these concepts are unstable due to the instability of objecthood. Ecology lends itself well to considerations of the intimate due to this inherent instability.

Home is an ideological concept, and its edges are unclear, whether they be geographic, biological, legal or emotional. Home is also a site that we tend to ascribe to the intimate, due to its perceived privacy and comfort, as well as the role it plays in family and love relationships. However, home can also be an ambivalent and sometimes uncomfortable place. We may find language for this ambivalence and unease within the intimate. Drawn from the Latin *intimus*, meaning "the most interior," (Kristeva, 2002, p. 43) the word *intimacy* implies a constant striving towards completion and the merging of multiple elements into a unified whole, while maintaining the separation necessary for that striving to be perpetuated. In intimacy, the borders between self and other, inside and outside, subject and object, blur to the effect of destabilizing these seemingly fixed ontologies. This ambiguity of edges causes tremendous friction and energy, as well as a questioning of identity and a priori concepts. According to Puig de la Bellacasa

> [c]are is not only ontologically but politically ambivalent,"[1] an observation that links

> care to the ambivalent borders of the intimate. Furthermore, she continues, "[w]e learn from feminist approaches that it is not a notion to embrace innocently (2017, p. 7).

These statements pack a provocative message because both care and intimacy carry with them presumptions of beauty and moral goodness that can be challenged by the critical frameworks constructed in artistic practice. Puig de la Bellacasa also states that "[r]eclaiming care is to keep it grounded in practical engagements with situated material conditions that often expose tensions" (2017, p. 11). In artistic practice and intimacy, these tensions are generative and have the capacity to destabilize ideological thinking, an inherently political expression that can be leveraged towards a radical ecological intimacy.

Perhaps the most powerful ideology of modernity is subjectivity, a bulwark that produces distance between individuals and their material conditions. Althusserrian orthodoxy tells us that subjectivity is an imaginative construct that produces and reproduces its own conditions of subjectification to authority and the law (Althusser, 2014). The modern subject is supposedly autonomous, self-conscious, and yet entirely at the effect of the state, a paradoxical position. As I have explored in my previous research, intimacy destabilizes the subject's perceived autonomy, and makes way for new ways of thinking that may be ecological in scope (Moscovitch, 2023). Object-orientation, a subset of speculative realism that de-centers subjectivity and seeks to produce a "flat ontology," elicits a discourse in which the human "subject" recedes in favor of the materiality of things. As the founder of OOF, a feminist response and reorientation of OOO's patriarchal assumptions, artist and theorist Katherine Behar argues: "Shifting focus from feminist subjects to feminist objects extends a classic tenet of feminism, the ethic of care, to promote sympathies and camaraderie with nonhuman neighbors" (2017, p. 8). Object-orientation produces an opportunity for intimacy and care to extend into the ecological realm of *all things*, not just the human subjects at the center of modernist sensibilities. Yet care and intimacy are not synonymous. Articulating their departures is an essential step in examining the ontological and political power of both.

I believe that care exerts a more forceful ethical injunction, while intimacy operates radically to disrupt not only ideological systems, but ideology itself as the ideology of subjectivity, making it inherently more ethically ambiguous. In an essay exemplifying the collision of care theory with institutional critique in the sphere of arts and culture, iLiana Fokianaki (2020) proposes that care be re-established as collective joy and an affront to what she terms "narcissistic authoritarian statism" (NAS for short).[2] She introduces "the idea of care as a

[2] Fokianaki, i. The Bureau of Care: Introductory Notes on the Care-Less and Care-Full. e-flux Journal #113, November 2020. https://www.e-flux.com/journal/113/359463/the-bureau-of-care-introductory-notes-on-the-care-less-and-care-full/.

collective responsibility and collective act, performed and embodied by a community"[3] and provides multiple examples of artists and activists collaborating to address social ills that plague their communities. While care theory centers ethical frameworks, intimacy opens up a world of possibility for poetic interventions and re-evaluating ideology, and destabilizes the ethics of care theory, helping to produce a contemporary ecological discourse.

The ambivalence of subjectivity ushered in by intimacy is supported by this new system of thought that speculates on the human relationship to the world of objects, from the interiorized position of ontological objecthood. According to Morton, "[e]cology includes all the ways we imagine how we live together. Ecology is profoundly about coexistence" (2012, p. 4). Morton's notion of ecology as a function of the imagination connects it not only to artistic practice, but also to the workings of ideology, which Althusser defines as a representation (in the form of symbols, language and laws) of "individuals' imaginary relation to their real conditions of existence" (Althusser, 2014, p. 181). Intimacy, care and ecology are all irreducibly materialist, and undeniably immanent, just as ideology manifests in the material realm in the form of rituals and social practices. By examining the relationship between intimacy and care in contemporary art practice, I wish to introduce an ecological framework of thinking about both intimacy and care that destabilizes ideological thinking and is therefore anarchic in scope. According to Reiner Schürmann, "[t]he *arché* is not all its own. It is anarchic by virtue of an act of otherness which troubles it" (2003, p. 164). I am interested in intimacy as this "act of otherness" that draws from the hidden spaces of the subject to disrupt and disable the ideological constructs that keep it ensnared in its roles and identities, including the politics of Nature which have been used to cement ideological injunctions such as gender and sexuality.

Ideologies can have profoundly harmful impacts. For example, notions of "the natural" are implicated in some of care ethics's more problematic entanglements. Fokianaki critiques "the conceptualization of care and the problems that arise from the feminization of care in contemporary society,"[4] specifically the notion that in modern patriarchal societies, "care labor has been treated as a gendered responsibility following from 'natural' behavior."[5] Indeed early research in care ethics, such as the foundational work of Carol Gilligan, is steeped in controversy about the role of gender in care behavior (Gary, 2023, p. 2). Gary explains:

> Although once labeled a 'feminine ethic,' care ethics was soon redefined as an explicitly feminist project focusing not simply on the gendered distribution of care

[3] Ibid.
[4] Fokianaki
[5] Fokianaki

> labor but on the injustice of the patriarchal domination that configured it. Through this revision, care became a value for critical feminist projects rather than a natural good (2023, p. 2).

Such explicitly political approaches—with their emphasis on justice, equity and community—risk becoming ideologically rigid themselves, framing care through expectations of prescriptive moral injunctions. How can intimacy contribute to care practices' rejection of ideological thinking in order to produce more poetic, and therefore more aesthetico-political representations of care relationships and ecological collisions?

Annie Sprinkle and Beth Stephens's Ecosexuality

Radical intimacy subverts the *archic* ideologies of subjectivity and Nature—and by extension, patriarchy—and can be a helpful lens through which we examine our relationships to these questions. Through my research on intimacy as feminist activist practice, I became interested in the Ecosexuality movement through the work of sexecologist and former sex worker Annie Sprinkle in collaboration with her partner Beth Stephens, and which aims to shift the environmental paradigm from Earth as Mother, to Earth as Lover. Using the tactics of erotics, politics and ethics, as suggested by object-oriented feminism, these artists animate ecological care beyond the ideological, through the transformative potential of the intimate. Behar explains that OOF engages three important aspects:

> politics, in which OOF engages with histories of treating certain humans (women, people of color, and the poor) as objects; erotics, in which OOF employs humor to foment unseemly entanglements between things; and ethics, in which OOF refuses to make grand philosophical truth claims, instead staking a modest ethical position that arrives at being "in the right" even if it means being "wrong" (2017, p. 3).

The artists perform actions such as marrying a mountain and making love to the Earth. These intimate engagements with non-human *hyperobjects*—according to Morton, "things that are massively distributed in time and space relative to humans" (2021, p. 1)—put into practice the utopian possibilities offered by an object-oriented approach to sexual intimacy. In the spirit of object-oriented feminism, ecosexuality's politics are radically immanent, erotic (which includes the humorous) and meant as activist and tangible rather than merely speculative. Sprinkle and Stephens, however, carefully disavow anarchy in their EcoSex Manifesto and claim to instead "embrace the revolutionary tactics of art, music, poetry, humor and sex" (2021, p. 15). I suggest that this distinction is false, and that radical intimacy is a form of radical thought operating in the spirit of anarchy, which is not a destruction but a productive disruption by a radical otherness within ideology.

Supplementing and building upon Sprinkle's early focus on sex work and the female body in her art and scholarship, and Stephens' decades-long performance art practice and research, the couple have spent the last twenty years working together as artistic collaborators. They discovered ecosexuality early on and embarked on a project of articulating their own relationship to the movement. According to Una Chaudhuri, "Coupling ecology and enjoyment is the most radical thing one can do today" (2021, p. xi). We may understand "radicality" as a disruption of subjectivity, as explicated by Althusser. Radical practices destabilize the institutions of the Repressive State Apparatus via the Ideological State Apparatus, where ideology and subjectivity are essentially one and the same (2014). Sprinkle and Stephens disrupt the "obviousness" of subjectivity—to use Althusser's term—through sexual intimacy. Their work brings up important questions including how we define both anarchy and objecthood. Chaudhuri points out that despite the catastrophic, melancholic and guilt-ridden language that is often used in ecological activism, "there's a groundswell of something else, a gathering force that [they] call *ecosopheric consciousness*." According to Chaudhuri, "It is a reckoning with the future that is as capacious as the planet we are all finally, actually, thinking about. It is in fact a result of listening to the Earth with as much interest as we've been listening to ourselves for several centuries" (2021, p. xi). If we are listening to the Earth, does that not turn the Earth into a subject? Does anthropomorphizing the Earth not negate the radical component of ecosexuality, as understood through the upheaval of subjectivity?

In many ways, it does, and I want to be clear that I do not believe that Sprinkle and Stephens are negating subjectivity, per se. I also want to point out the very different tactics of object-oriented ontology (OOO) and its feminist counterpart object-oriented feminism (OOF), which is essential to underlining the performative aspect of ecosexuality and its aesthetic expressions. While OOO proposes an ontological master theory, OOF aims for a materialist and activist intervention into this master theory by assuming the position of the object, in solidarity with the object, as women and other marginalized groups have learned to do by virtue of their historical exclusion from subject-oriented ontologies. As Behar reminds us: "After all, both feminism and art have long engagements with the notion of human objects" (2017, p. 1). By occupying a position in solidarity with nonhuman objects, ecosexuals bring attention to the lack of clear boundaries between subject and object, self and other, inside and outside. They bring attention to the intimate engagement that is built into the ecological, that perhaps *is* the ecological. Sprinkle and Stephens destabilize the subject-object divide by asking: "What if we imagined the Earth as our lover instead of our mother? Or both? What if our bodies didn't stop at our skin but were much, much more expansive? What if we *are* the Earth, not separate?" (2021, p. xiii). The couple's love and commitment to the Earth is materialized through performances such as weddings to various natural entities such as snow and rocks, which they enact in community with a collective of artists, friends and activists. In

the spirit of OOF, ecosexuality's politics are radically immanent, erotic (including humorous) and meant as activist and tangible rather than merely speculative. Herein lies the political potential of including object-orientation in our discourse of radical intimacy—the possibility to transcend beyond the personal, and even beyond the social, into the environmental.

My research has grown out of a desire to understand the decentering, expansive and disruptive impact of radical intimacy on both the individual and social levels. I suggest that the intimate does not—in fact, *cannot*—replace one ideology with another, because it operates in ways that *veer* from ideology. According to Morton,

> [w]e need to explore the term *veer*, from which we obtain the term *perversion*. Fascinatingly, we get the term *environment* from the same root. The environment is a *veering* insofar as it circles in the deviant sense just outlined, all around us and within us (2016, p. 79).

A discourse on intimacy is a discourse on thought, and deviance is an environmental veering. Morton offers the most explicit relation between radical intimacy and radical thought with their notion of *the ecological thought*. They argue:

> The ecological view to come […] is a vast, sprawling mesh of interconnection without a definite center or edge. It is radical intimacy, coexistence with other beings, sentient and otherwise—and how can we so clearly tell the difference? (Morton, 2016, p. 8).

By questioning subjectivity through the tenets of object-oriented ontology, and inviting us into close, radically intimate contact with the object world, Morton reminds us that the ecological thought—"a thinking that is ecological, a contemplating that is a doing" (Morton, 2016, p.8-9)—requires a praxis of subversion, perhaps even of *perversion*, of ideological thinking.

Sprinkle and Stephens may be referred to as perverts, but would this accusation not reflect the spirit of anarchy apparent in their work? Stephens explains: "Engaging in an ecosexual vision of the world expanded our notion of sex and eroticism way beyond genital contact, beyond corporeal sex, and even beyond erotic energy exchange" (2021, p. 7). Ecosexuality is, to borrow Morton's words, "a thinking that is a doing" that leverages ideas of perversion and queer activism to challenge ideological frameworks of love, sex and the relationship of subjects to their object-filled environments. As Stephens states, "Annie and I were now interested in thinking about variant kinds of love that extend beyond humans" (2021, p. 8). As members of the queer community, Sprinkle and Stephens occupy their position as human objects who have already been placed on a lower ontological rung by the Ideological State Apparatus. By drawing a connection between objecthood and deviancy, Morton offers

additional language for considering radical intimacy in Sprinkle and Stephens's practice, within a discourse of ecological and political thought.

For their documentary film *Water Make Us Wet*, Sprinkle and Stephens enlisted artist, scholar and activist Sandy Stone to narrate the film *as* planet Earth. In the course of filming, the couple is involved in a horrific car accident, captured on film and woven into the film's narrative. In the aftermath of the accident, Earth is pictured floating in the dark fabric of space. Earth says: "I have a confession to make. They almost died. But, honestly, in that moment, I could care less." The camera slowly pans in on Earth as it gets closer and closer and says:

> I was always giving and giving, and they were always taking me for granted. If I was really their lover then why were they treating me with such carelessness? And they're *always* anthropomorphizing me—giving me all those human qualities, when I am so much more than merely human.[6]

Sprinkle and Stephens use such humorous gestures of self-reflection—perhaps the epitome of modern subjectivity—to question their own position as privileged subjects. This notion of "more than human" gives Ecosexuality its object-oriented angle. Humans are human, and by virtue of modernity, we cannot deny the obviousness of our subjectivity. What might we discover, however, if we explore our "more than humanness" through the framework of our solidarity with nonhuman entities, both sentient and inert, organic and inorganic, living and nonliving? What might happen if we expand the boundaries of our ontological positioning beyond our subjectivity?

While my own practice does not explicitly address the environmental concerns that Sprinkle and Stephens approach in their work, I find solidarity between our projects in their utilization of intimacy towards generating ecological awareness as a politics of care and entanglement. Learning about their practices has taught me to look deeper into the ecological roots of my own interest in intimacy, as well as to better appreciate the social and political power of collaborative, intimate art movements. Furthermore, by flipping the relationship to ecology from a maternal (Earth as mother) to a more ambiguously intimate one (Earth as lover), they invite a re-interpretation of the maternal relationship itself from one that relies on romantic notions of "the natural" to one that highlights the ambivalence and complications of the intimate. The maternal relationship—with its blurring of edges and indistinctions between inside and outside, self and other, subject and object—presents active ground on which to investigate intimacy not just as a radical interconnectedness, but as a radical revolt of self as

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[6] *Water Makes Us Wet*. Alexander Street. Juno Films, 2019.

subject that engages the workings of the unconscious in the ecological imagination.

My Own Work—Orienting Towards the Object World

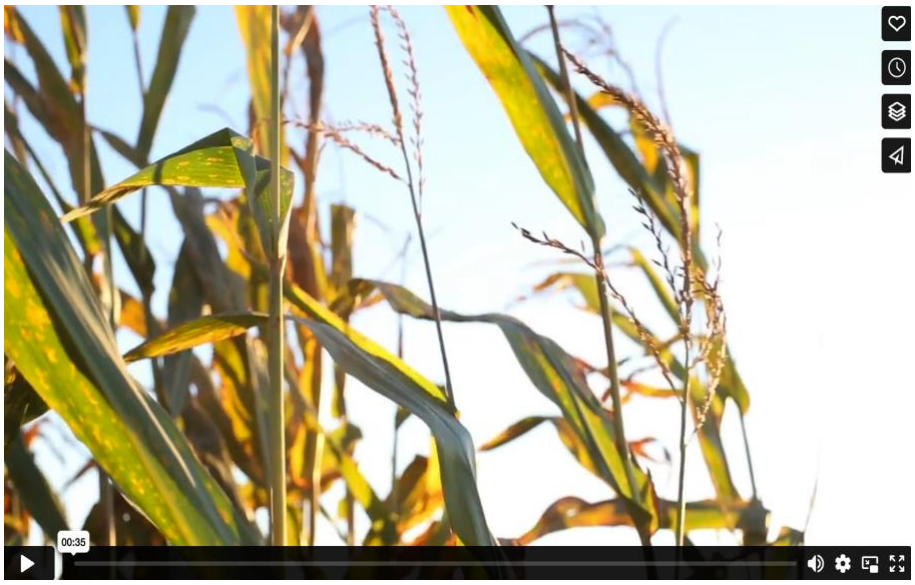
I have long been a researcher of intimacy—a practitioner and scholar of radicality in the intimate realm. My sexually explicit artistic work has at times transgressed boundaries of social propriety, shocked audiences to empty movie theaters, and invited both admiration and consternation. These varied responses are both a manifestation of the radicality of intimacy—the intimate challenges our thinking, our self-conception, and the world around us—and a source of tension in my practice as I attempt to articulate the edges of comfort through physical and visual form. My practice is situated at the intersection of intimacy and revolt—in Kristeva's analysis, "to begin, endlessly, the questioning of value systems, which is neither belief nor nihilism" (2002, p. 237)—a position that leverages the radical exteriority of the unconscious towards a rejection and reorientation of ideological thought. I have long been interested in the sexualized body, and its complications and ambivalences. As may perhaps be expected, by making this work and moving through the shifts and complexities of my life as an artist, the "working through" of the work continues to challenge not only its audiences, but my own subjectivity.

Embedded in object-orientation is concern—or, perhaps, care—for the objectified human object. In my own intimate practice, I have explored questions of care and its place in intimate relationships, with a growing awareness of the object position that exists in representational systems such as photography and cinema, which I frequently use. What responsibility do I as a creator of artwork have towards my subjects, objects of my gaze, and collaborators? Is self-expression a worthier goal than a more egalitarian and communal methodology? Is it important that participants feel "cared for" in our engagements, even if it means excising key pieces of artistic research? How does self-care factor into my creative decisions in the field and in the studio? More generally, how does care manifest through the intimate practice of art production? I, and my collaborators, have responded to these questions in different ways across many years and multiple projects, and my own thinking on their implications has evolved as I have evolved as an artist, researcher and citizen. A core of intimacy, however, continues to reflect a prism of considerations, many of which are contradictory.

One way I have addressed these contradictions is by building each project upon the questions that emerged in the previous body of work. My experimental feature documentary, *One More Way to Sink Into My Heart*, explores the intimate life of a retired couple in rural America. The film traverses love, intimacy and care in the context of a kink-inclusive late-life relationship. While the film itself retains an ambiguity about my role in the subjects' intimate relationship, during the years I spent editing and internally processing the footage, we embarked on several related projects which allowed me to explore these unspoken spaces through performance,

object production and communal text interpretation. I will share details of some of these actions further in this writing to articulate the relationship between intimacy, care and ecology, identifying a sociopolitical strategy for living both radically and ethically in the twenty-first century.

Another way that I become complicit in the intimate space is through transparency, which simultaneously makes me vulnerable, and protects me behind the shield of the filmmaker: the camera equipment, the power to make editing choices, the authority of authorship. Evident in the interstitial spaces between key moments in the couple's life are my own interjections into their relationship. The audience hears my voice asking questions, giving instructions and making camera adjustments, communicating my presence as the third person in the intimate space. Less obvious are the ways in which my own intimate boundaries were breached in poetic and revolutionary ways throughout the process of making the film and our growing friendship. I use the term "revolutionary" here not as an overt political position, but as a derivative of Julia Kristeva's "revolt" which etymologically refers to an eternal turning and movement inwards, while at the same time evading direct definition as it changes form and understanding throughout history. Kristeva argues that "revolt twists and turns—indeed, veers off—depending on history" (2010, p. 4). Kristeva's references are psychoanalytic in scope and point to the ways that memory, dreams and free association—as well as writing and artistic practice—contribute to the subject's uncovering of their personal truths while shedding and re-organizing ideological constructs cemented over ideological time.



Video 1. Theatrical trailer for *One More Way to Sink Into My Heart*, a film by Keren Moscovitch

While filming *One More Way*, I became increasingly drawn to my subjects, and inextricably intertwined with their intimate life. This intimacy took place not through overt sexual activity, but through interactions and conversations that scratched at my own deep memories, fears and associations. As our friendship deepened, I began to share my stories, fantasies, histories and desires, often behind the scenes while the camera was tucked away safely. The space between us both shortened and became heavy with sensation. My focus on my subjects remained strong, while my vulnerability became a form of care for myself as well as for them. They were not alone in their opening. I was opening along with them, reciprocating some of the gifts they were giving me, and the edges between the film and our relationship wavered.

Working through shared experiences and experiments in the privacy of their home, my collaborators and I produced a body of work expressing the tensions and spillages of the unconscious that occurred throughout our intimate friendship. Utilizing segments of bamboo of varying lengths as avatars for the shortening and lengthening of the psychical spaces between us, we produced a single public performance. *The Space Between Us* was an intimate ritual during which John and I stood unclothed before one another while Tina placed the bamboo segments between our bodies. Our task was to hold the bamboo in place for 30 minutes, neither pulling too far apart nor pushing closer together. Inevitably the objects would loosen and fall and need to be replaced, creating a melodic cacophony of sound as they clattered to the ground. The tension was palpable, and sounds from other activities taking place in the arena infiltrated our performance, both accidentally and in deliberate concert with our action. The performance and its aftermath marked an important moment in my practice, during which I began to see inanimate objects as participants in an intimate exchange.

Figure 1. Keren Moscovitch with Jackie + Tina, *The Space Between Us*, performed at Judson Memorial Church as part of the Anarchist Art Fair X, 2016, photograph by Ken Lavey.

After many years of working with human subjects in the traditionally representational systems of photography, video and performance, the COVID pandemic reoriented my relationship to intimate artistic practice. Isolated with my partner and extended family in a rural locale, my previously urban social lifestyle transformed into a slower and more solitary existence. I found myself preoccupied with the urgent question of motherhood and my own ambivalence towards children. Caught between the social injunction of heteronormative procreation that never quite felt right to me, and the undeniable pull of something within me wanting to have an experience of transformation and renewal, I surrendered to the fantasy of motherhood. Maternity was a phantasm, an imaginary relationship to my real conditions of existence, having been born into a female-assigned body with all of its beautiful and abject qualities. I began to dig into the earth around our dwelling, finding native clay that I labored over as I washed and filtered and refined it into workable material. As a lover of intimacy, I both yearned for a deeper relationship to my interior body, which I imagined to be another human growing inside of me, and rejected the notion that motherhood was somehow preordained, or a deeper expression of love than I had already experienced. I was also caught by my own fears, memories and observations of the workings of my unconscious mind in the form of nightmares and terrifying visions that intercepted my rational thoughts. I was intrigued by the notion of "the experience" of another being, another person feeding off of my insides and using my biological and psychical existence to fuel its own becoming, and at the same time I was utterly disgusted by the possibility of this potential alien life form growing inside of me. Thoughts of my own mother, my own childhood, the first memory of a nightmare…these all dominated my psyche as I sank deeper into the earth.

Figures 2-4. Keren Moscovitch, clay-making behind the scenes photographs, 2021.

I molded the giant, dripping chunks of clay into fertility symbols, asking "if" as much as "for" a child that may or may not come to be. Evoking genitalia, internal organs, and the nonhuman workings of primordial earthly processes, these figures connected me with a lineage of human actors performing fertility rituals and devising technological responses to desire and need. I thought a great deal about Sprinkle and Stephens's project as I dug into the ground, removed rocks, roots and earthworms from the raw earth, cleansed it of natural "impurities" and prepared it for my all too human convection. I wondered if my work could be included in the discourse of ecosexuality? After all, sex can, and often does, produce children, and I was communing with the earth and its elements in a way that I never had before. My previous research on sexual intimacy had involved sexuality for pleasure, self-expression and connection. I had always been interested in sexuality as a space of freedom and subversion of the demands of daily social living. My foggy and uncertain desires for a child felt terrifying in their conformity to the laws of femininity and womanhood, and yet they were undeniable and unassailable. I was experiencing something both primordial and modern, the roots of early human technological production emerging from my hands and fingers as I dug and sculpted and meditated. Was the earth helping me conceive my child?

Figures 5-7. Keren Moscovitch, fertility sculptures from native clay, 2021.

I am interested in how the process I have been undergoing both as an artist working with the natural environment, and as a mother, can be extended to thinking about care in an ecological sense. One aspect of maternity that is very intriguing to me is its initial invisibility. The pregnancy occurs in a part of the body that cannot be seen with the naked eye, and that takes some time before it can be medically imaged. As a photographer by training, the process of becoming pregnant was truly one of the imagination. I found myself looking for ways to use photography to visualize what was happening inside my body, and using objects—everything from small pebbles to the sun—to produce representations of how I imagined motherhood to

be forming in and around me. The inherent failure of representation and my own repeated attempts to construct visual symbols of fertility and birth resulted in an intimate process involving my body, the natural environment and the imagination. According to Morton: "An environment is not a neutral empty box but an ocean filled with currents and surges. It environs. It veers around, making me giddy. An aesthetic wormhole, bending the terrestrial and ecological into the cosmological."[7] I began placing objects from the environment, and then later from the home, onto paper coated in a photosensitive mixture of potassium ferricyanide and ferric ammonium citrate, producing cyanotype prints. My attempts to illustrate biological processes such as egg fertilization and embryo growth used the radiation of the sun hitting activated iron salts to paint them into strange blue murmurs of form. The simple roundness and refraction of the forms attracted me in their ambiguity and their simultaneous evocation of very small objects, very large objects and objects that did not yet exist, even in my imagination. The withdrawn object was motherhood, was a baby, was life or death or a faraway star. Just as in the unconscious, forms emerged that I was barely aware of and that were withdrawn even from themselves.

Figure 8. Keren Moscovitch, cyanotype process behind the scenes, photograph, 2021.

[7] Morton, "Attune," 164.

Figures 9-10. Keren Moscovitch, *Sun, Moon, Egg studies*, cyanotypes on paper, 19x22," 2021.

At a private viewing of my exhibition *Sun, Moon, Egg*[8] at Penumbra Foundation in New York City, which featured still-lifes and abstractions from this studio period, an audience member remarked on the work's apparent departure from my known oeuvre. "Not so radical anymore?" he surmised. I found myself stiffening with defensiveness. The question has chipped away at my creative identity and inspired me to dig into the roots of radicality in my recent work, which lacks the sexual explicitness, taboo practices or personal entanglements that made my earlier work so challenging. The research detailed here has helped me to articulate how intimacy functions in my artistic output beyond the more obvious expressions of radical sexuality that have preoccupied me for the last 15 years.

Essential to this inquiry is the fact that *Sun, Moon, Egg* was produced before I became pregnant, and therefore anterior to any actual experience of maternity. It exists in the realm of speculation, possibility and, ultimately, *fantasy*. This fantasmatic quality, on the one hand, can be found in all visual art forms. As a transition from a more relational practice, however, the imaginary quality of my object shifted my perspective towards a larger ecology of objects and their collisions and refractions. Furthermore, I found myself in an intimate dialogue with prehistoric humans who perhaps related to the earth, time and their bodies through a differently oriented lens. The earliest known figurative sculptures by humans are inextricable from notions of gender, sexuality and maternity. One prominent example is the Venus of Willendorf, a limestone sculpture of a female form with large pendulous breasts and protruding buttocks and abdomen, produced over 30,000 years ago. While such figurines are generally accepted to have been produced for ritualistic purposes for the manifestation of

[8] Penumbra Foundation. "Project Gallery: Keren Moscovitch." Penumbra Foundation – Photography Non-Profit in NYC, 2023. https://www.penumbrafoundation.org/project-gallery-keren-moscovitch.

fertility, they remain mysterious as to the identity of their creators as well as their precise use. One particular study caught my attention during my research, in which the authors argue that at least some of these figurines appear to have been intentionally destroyed—in fact, designed to self-destruct in a hot kiln or fire (Vandiver et al., 1989, pp. 1002-1008). The authors ask: "Did their makers purposefully fabricate the figurines as permanent portable goods or as active agents in an activity of performance?" (ibid). What were these ancient humans articulating about subjectivity, the body and the sacredness of ritual in the human psyche? What might we learn about our contemporary selves and our relationship with the earth, each other, and ourselves when we think broadly about human technological, and aesthetic development? In response to the aforementioned study, William Booth of the *Washington Post* notes the wonder of "finding that the first use of ceramics was not for the creation of practical and permanent objects but more likely a kind of prehistoric performance art, or perhaps even a religious ceremony."[9] What might we learn about anarchy and the destitution of subjectivity by looking at, and even integrating into modern rituals, the earliest manifestations of our ecological intimacy?

Figure 11. A female Paleolithic figurine [also known as the Venus of Willendorf] of oolitic limestone tinted with red ochre, found in Willendorf, Austria.[10]

According to Schürmann, the law—the dominant social paradigm—is archic-anarchic in the sense that the anarchic is embedded in the hegemony of the arche. Schurmann states: "This is why the law is never mastered, for to what *arche* would we subject it? To say that all hegemonic law is essentially archic-anarchic means that it predominates without any

[9] Booth, W. (1989, November 24). "Stone Age Figurines Were Designed to Self-Destruct, Study Finds." *The Washington Post*. https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1989/11/24/stone-age-figurines-were-designed-to-self-destruct-study-finds/b8a9395e-4fae-4ee7-abb6-7e77038eaf3c/.

[10] *A female Paleolithic figurine, Venus of Willendorf*. Place: Wellcome Collection. https://library.artstor.org/asset/24795656.

perspective dominating it" (2003, p. 21). By virtue of being the dominant fantasy to which all other laws are subject, the arche is itself lawless. Where does this leave us in terms of looking at what we would perhaps like to consider anarchic practices? Are they simply manifestations of the hegemonic framework against which they supposedly operate? For Schürmann, the anarchic is less a disordering or disruption of hegemony, than a surfacing of the *differend*—the gap between language and reality, the difference between the particular (as example of the universal) and the singular (that which defies the universality of the law)—from inside the *arche*. On the one hand, Ecosexuality takes certain steps that align it with the hegemonic phantasm of modern subjectivity: the focus on human use and abuse of natural resources, and humankind's responsibility for the health of the planet; the anthropomorphizing of nature; and the imposition of human rituals, like weddings and sexual intimacy, on nonhuman entities. On the other hand, could this playfulness with the human-nonhuman binary system that defines modern subjectivity be an act of teasing out the anarchic from its home in the archic? In parallel, I experienced a tremendous personal restructuring as I imagined myself not only interconnected with elements of the earth and the natural environment, but also in conversation over tens of thousands of years with predecessors who were perhaps less preoccupied with their individual subjectivity as with a collective and elemental relationship to fertility.

My ongoing research on intimacy and present engagement with care has led me to a preliminary understanding of care as maintenance of the interconnectedness of all objects in the world, including those that are imaginary, speculative or invisible. This approach invites a consideration of one's interiority—both physical and psychical—as a withdrawn entity that emerges only partially from the ether of the environment. Art is an important methodology for describing the barely-thereness of an object such as maternity. As a concept, maternity is fuzzy, slippery and ideological. As a lived reality, it is socially constructed, politically manipulated and emotionally distorted, yet it remains real and present, even when it does not yet exist. By addressing the gap between logos and lived experience, and attempting to incorporate it in ways that challenge our subjectivity and ideology in general, we may find an ecological intimacy that destabilizes fixed ideas about the self and the environment, ushering in an important approach to care as an anarchic practice.

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Keren Moscovitch is an artist, philosopher and curator based in Brooklyn, NY and the Shenandoah Valley. Her practice explores radical intimacy through psychoanalytic, ontological and ecological lenses. Her book *Radical Intimacy in Contemporary Art: Abjection, Revolt, and Obejcthood* was published by Bloomsbury Academic in 2023. Her film *One More Way to Sink Into My Heart* celebrated its world premiere in 2019 at the Sydney International Film Festival, where it won Best Documentary Feature. Her work has been exhibited internationally, most recently at Penumbra Foundation, Experimental Forum and BEAVER the book project. She serves on the faculty at the School of Visual Arts, and Parsons School of Design at the New School.
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International Journal of Education & the Arts

http://IJEA.org ISSN: 1529-8094