

“YOU MIGHT AS WELL THROW AWAY YOUR CAREER”

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Delivered as part of a roundtable for The Feminist Art Project at the Chicago College Art Association Meeting, Feb 15, 2014

A couple of years after M/E/A/N/I/N/G 12 came out (this particular issue of the feminist art journal was focused on artists who are mothers) I was sitting in Santa Monica having lunch with an internationally known, female art critic. She and I had known each other for almost 10 years and she had written some insightful things about my interactive work about nuclear nightmares, the environmental crisis and unemployment. I respected her a lot. At some point, I hesitantly announced to her that I was pregnant. Her reaction to my news could be described as a mixture of horror, despair and indignation. She said to me without a shred of impulse control, "You might as well throw away your career." I was 40 years old, and actually wasn't surprised by her reaction. My career plans had not included motherhood. Aside from internalizing the common, but peculiar belief that serious female artists were not supposed to have kids, I had been gradually disabled by a chronic environmental illness, and didn't feel like the best candidate for motherhood, much less pregnancy. My partner and I had already made the agreement before we married five years earlier that we would not be parents. Our work as activists, and our understanding that the world was going to be increasingly challenging for the next generations impacted this decision. We also had so many commitments in our lives that we barely saw each other. A child in that mix made no sense.

Still, despite all these circumstances and beliefs, our son's spirit asked to come in with great determination and persistence. We paid attention.

With similar determination, I chose to get well from my illness in order to parent him well, which meant leaving tenure & a secure income, the smog of Los Angeles, and moving 3000 miles with a newborn. As I healed, I was equally determined to prove my art critic friend wrong, by bringing even more commitment to my art practice.

My first artworks about my new role as parent were created during the pregnancy, questioning stereotypes about motherhood and the contrast between my community's relationships to me as a practicing artist vs. an expectant mother.

During my son's infancy, my drawings, sculptures, photo/text works, conceptual proposals and paintings, often referred to my sleep deprivation, the challenges that my son might encounter living in our deeply unjust world and the insights my son brought to my work as he began to speak.

Soon after the move, I had a demanding project to complete for a museum exhibition and every hour of my son's sleep became a moment to create work and wrestle with new technology. I also began co-teaching with my partner, a course on Activist Art in Community at the Institute for Social Ecology and developed the fine art of nursing while giving a slide lecture.

Over the past 18 years, my son's presence in my life has given me permission to expand my work in new directions and has liberated my imagination. Of course, there are limitations imposed by motherhood and by parenting this particular person, but I like to reframe these limitations as walls that give my psyche a good bounce rather than a dull thud.

In rereading the stories published in the 1992 issue of MEANING, I see how my story diverges often from the dominant paradigm of success often referred to in these stories. What I deliberately distanced myself from, both before parenting and AFTER was the chance to be a breathless competitor in the current capitalist art market. As a radical feminist, I never wanted a piece of the rotten pie. I wanted and have attempted to imagine a new pie. While I continue to respect my liberal feminist friends' efforts to make more space, visibility and economic mobility for women artists, mothers or not, AT THIS POINT in history, we need to put forth more proposals for a post-capitalist world and find ways to make those visions manifest.

The paradigm of dealers & their hedge fund manager/collectors and the fleetingness of fame offer little spiritual grounding or possibility in a time of imminent ecological collapse and gross economic injustice. Simply fostering models of cultural democracy and nourishing a vision of an integrated life, where parenting and creative work are economically and emotionally supported by the communities we live in, needs to be reasserted repeatedly, even in this time of enormous & continuing backlash. And we need to be vigilant to function as compassionate allies, doing outreach to invite those with less privilege into the conversation. Two plus decades, post-issue 12, we have our work cut out for us.

I will close with a plea from my wise, sensitive son that guides my continuing passion. He said this at age 13 (he's now 18): "if you knew things were such a mess, why did you give birth to me?" Just as his birth provided me with the fuel to get

well from my environmental illness, his question pushes me forward, to find the tools and the allies for remediating the mess we are in.