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Art and Environmental Racism in the United States
Through the Works of LaToya Ruby Frazier, Pope.L, and Mel Chin

by

Veronika Anna Molnár

Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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Joachim Pissarro
Thesis Sponsor

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Serubiri Moses
Second Reader

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INTRODUCTION

I. What is Environmental Racism: Landmark Reports and Literature

The term *environmental racism* was coined by Environmental Justice activists in the United States and refers to the way in which areas populated by BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color)[1] and low-income communities are burdened with a disproportionate number of hazards, including toxic waste facilities, oil wells, garbage dumps, and other sources of environmental pollution. The term entered the mainstream after Dr. Benjamin F. Chavis used it in discussing the outcomes of a landmark study entitled *Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States* (1987). This study was commissioned by the United Church of Christ's (UCC) Commission for Racial Justice after protests broke out in Warren County, North Carolina due to the creation of a PCB (polychlorinated biphenyl) disposal site by the State of North Carolina in 1982. Residents protested for over four years against locating the hazardous landfill in the community, which has a majority of Black population. Organizations and community leaders, including the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), mounted a lawsuit against the disposal site, which they argued chose the town of Afton in Warren County, because its residents were "few, black, and poor."[2] Though the attempts to block the landfill were unsuccessful, it became the first environmental justice case in the United States, setting a legal

[1] Much of the Environmental Justice literature uses the terms "people of color" and "ethnic minorities," but I will instead use the term BIPOC, referring to Black, Indigenous, and People of Color, to emphasize the disproportionate burdens and discrimination that Black and Indigenous communities have to face in the United States compared to other minorities.

[2] Matt Reimann, "The EPA chose this county for a toxic dump because its residents were 'few, black, and poor,'" *Timeline*, April 3, 2017
https://timeline.com/warren-county-dumping-race-4d8fe8de06cb

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precedent for later cases.[3] The images of Black protestors lying on the road to prevent dump trucks from entering the site shocked the entire nation and galvanized the environmental justice movement (EJM) (Figure 1).

The environmental justice movement emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s, coinciding with the rise of environmental justice (EJ) scholarship. The two earliest studies that linked race with the likelihood of living close to hazardous facilities were the aforementioned *Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States* commissioned by the UCC and *Siting of Hazardous Waste Landfills and Their Correlation with Racial and Economic Status of Surrounding Communities* (1983) conducted by the U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO). The two studies found significant correlation between race and toxic hazards: the UCC report concluded that "Race proved to be the most significant among variables tested in association with the location of commercial hazardous waste facilities. This represented a consistent national pattern."[4] Furthermore, the GAO study, which focused on eight Southeastern states, found that of the four off-site hazardous waste facilities in these states, three were in predominantly Black neighborhoods with a significant number of the population living below poverty line.[5] These studies received heightened attention and were widely cited in EJ scholarship, highlighting the relationship between race and environmental hazards, and leading to the diversification of the environmental movement by the 1980s. As the UCC report mentions:

> Previous to the Warren County demonstrations, racial and ethnic communities had been marginally involved with issues of hazardous wastes. One reason for this can be traced back to the nature of the environmental movement which has historically been white middle and upper-class in its orientation. This does not mean, however, that racial and

[3] Dorceta Taylor, *Toxic Communities: Environmental Racism, Industrial Pollution, and Residential Mobility* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2014), 2.

[4] United Church of Christ, *Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States*: *A National Report on the Racial and Socio-Economic Characteristics of Communities with Hazardous Waste Sites* (1987), xiii.

[5] General Accounting Office, *Siting of Hazardous Waste Landfills and Their Correlation with Racial and Economic Status of Surrounding Communities* (1983), 1.

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> ethnic communities do not care about the quality of their environment and its effect on their lives. […] [W]e have found numerous grassroots racial and ethnic groups actively seeking to deal with this problem in their communities.[6]

The environmental justice movement as well as scholarship on environmental racism has been growing since the 1980s in the United States. The scholarship of Robert D. Bullard, who is often described as the "father of environmental justice," has been pivotal to this field. Bullard wrote extensively about environmental racism, and his 1990 book *Dumping in Dixie: Race, Class, and Environmental Quality* is a landmark work of EJ scholarship. More recent literature on environmental racism include historian Carl A. Zimring's *Clean and White: A History of Environmental Racism in the United States* (2015), in which Zimring scrutinized the country's notions of cleanliness and whiteness, demonstrating that "the conflation of non-white skin with dirt formalized spatial relationships in American society during the twentieth century."[7] Another recent addition to the discipline is environmental sociologist Dorceta E. Taylor's *Toxic Communities: Environmental Racism, Industrial Pollution, and Residential Mobility* (2016) in which she observed the factors that keep BIPOC communities living close to environmental hazards such as toxic landfills or industrial plants. In her analysis, Taylor gives an overview the policies and ordinances as well as other systemically racist processes such as racial zoning, racially restrictive covenants, so-called "redlining", and the usage of eminent domain, all of which forced and/or keep BIPOC communities living with a disproportionate number of environmental hazards.[8] Most recently, in *A Terrible Thing to Waste: Environmental Racism and its Assault on the American Mind* (2020) medical research scholar Harriet A. Washington

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[6] United Church of Christ, *Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States*, xii.

[7] Carl A. Zimring, *Clean and White: A History of Environmental Racism in the United States*. (New York and London: New York University Press, 2015), 137.

[8] Dorceta Taylor, *Toxic Communities,* 98-262.

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examined environmental racism as the root cause of the IQ gap between Black and white communities. Taking into account factors such as exposure to heavy metals, neurotoxins, toxic waste, and pollution, Washington provides an overview of the burdens affecting the intellectual power of the country's Black communities. These recent works have shaped the writing of this thesis project as well as the selection of the three art projects as case studies to examine the relationship between art and environmental racism.

II. Artists and Environmental Injustice

Before narrowing the focus onto artists and art projects that address environmental racism in the context of the United States, it is important to point out that environmental injustice is a global phenomenon. First-world governments and multinational corporations have carried out their polluting and mining activities as well as their nuclear experiments on the land and bodies of BIPOC communities—and thus a myriad of artists have reflected on this issue all over the globe. The context in which these *environmental justice artists* operate is significantly different from the perspective of American artists, as many are battling with multi-national conflicts and instances of neocolonialism. A few artists whom I have studied closely are Nigerian-born London-based artist Sokari Douglas Camp CBE, whose *Battle Bus* (2006) reflects on oil drilling and *petro-violence* in the Niger Delta, and Argentinian artist Tomás Saraceno, whose *Aerocene Pacha* project (2020) has involved the Indigenous people of Salinas Grandes, Argentina in addressing lithium mining and its harmful impact on their communities.

When examining environmental injustice in the United States, it is crucial to highlight that past and existing forms of racism operate differently for Black and Indigenous people. As Patrick Wolfe argues, "[they] have been racialized in opposing ways that reflect their antithetical

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roles in the formation of US society."[9] Consequently, the forms and context of environmental racism differ for Blacks, Native Americans, and other communities of color. Indigenous researcher Dina Ghilio-Whitaker wrote about the "Indigenized" environmental justice movement in her recent book *As Long as Grass Grows: The Indigenous Fight for Environmental Justice, from Colonization to Standing Rock* (2019) and in her PhD dissertation *On This Land, Of This Land: Indigenous Artists Challenging the Racial Logics of Liberal Modernity* (2017), Suzanne Morrissette wrote about contemporary Indigenous artists challenging "contemporary liberal settler society's racial ideas of citizenship, belonging, and relationship to place through methods that involve diverse audiences in imagining more just and shared futures upon Indigenous lands."[10]

Observing both the current state of EJ scholarship and the field of art history, it struck me that very little has been written about contemporary art's relationship to environmental racism and its impact on Black communities within the United States—even though a number of excellent artists have addressed this issue. Instead of attempting to list all of the artists who have reflected on environmental racism, I will use three case studies from the past two decades to examine different artistic approaches and their impact on mitigating environmental injustices against majority Black communities. In this thesis, I will demonstrate that even though environmental racism is not as readily visible and as commonly discussed as other forms of discrimination such as mass incarceration or police brutality, it drastically impacts the lives, and even life expectancy of Black people. Furthermore, I will center this paper around the argument that artists have the

[9] Patrick Wolfe, "Settler colonialism and the elimination of the native." *Journal of Genocide Research* (December 2006): 387.
[10] Suzanne Morrissette, "*On This Land, Of This Land: Indigenous Artists Challenging the Racial Logics of Liberal Modernity,"* PhD diss. (York University, 2017), ii.

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agency and visibility to bring attention to cases of environmental injustices, which otherwise might get overlooked due to their complexity or irrelevance to mainstream news. Using three case studies, I will argue that artists can instigate real change via utilizing the tools of exhibition making, activism, fundraising activities, and political lobbying, and thus help meet the needs of affected communities.

III. Overview

In structuring my thesis, I will use three US locations as starting points: Braddock, Pennsylvania, Flint, Michigan, and New Orleans, Louisiana, as all of these cities and towns have a majority Black population, and are all battling with significant environmental pollution. Using these locations and their histories as a point of entry, I will borrow from the methodologies of sociology, environmental justice scholarship, and utilize scientific data to describe their ongoing struggles with pollution. Following this brief investigation, I will examine artistic projects that reflect upon these instances of environmental injustices. I will focus on the work of three outstanding contemporary American artists, LaToya Ruby Frazier, Pope.L, and Mel Chin. After a short introduction of each artist's work, I will provide an analysis of their selected art projects, discussing their aesthetics, social engagement, and the long-term effects of their work.

In Chapter 1, I will focus on Latoya Ruby Frazier's photo series, *The Notion of Family* (2001-2014). In the series, Frazier documented the lives of three generations of women: her grandmother, her mother, and herself. The three women have lived in Braddock, Pennsylvania—a Rust-Belt town that had been home to many steel mills, producing severe toxic pollution and endangering the lives of its population. After the mills began to close in the 1960s and wealthy, white families left Braddock, the population also started to decline; shrinking from 20,000 to just

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above 2,000 by 2010. Frazier's photo series is incredibly personal and conveys her family's everyday joys and battles in Braddock. Due to the mills' pollution, Frazier has been fighting Lupus, while her mother and her grandmother both suffered from cancer. Her personal narrative calls attention to the larger phenomenon of environmental racism and healthcare inequality in the United States.

In Chapter 2, I will discuss Pope.L's *Flint Water Project* (2017), which addresses the ongoing water crisis in Flint, Michigan—a "textbook case" of environmental racism. Described as "an installation, a performance, and an intervention,"[11] the *Flint Water Project* transformed an artist-run gallery in Detroit into a water bottling facility and sold the contaminated Flint water in signed and editioned bottles—bought from Flint's citizens. Through his project, Pope.L not only called attention to the water crisis, but also raised $34,000 for the local organizations to alleviate the crisis. Merging his Dadaist gesture of selling contaminated water with providing funds for the people of Flint, and fostering conversation around the crisis, Pope.L has created what he calls a "socially responsible" art project.

Chapter 3 addresses Mel Chin's ambitious socially engaged artwork, the *Fundred Dollar Bill Project* (2006-ongoing). To address the lead poisoning crisis of New Orleans, Louisiana—which is part of the so-called "Cancer Alley"—Chin initiated a multi-year, ever evolving art project, which incorporates public education, political lobbying, and collective art making through the creation of "Fundreds," hand-drawn $100 bills created by kids in affected communities. More than 500,000 *Fundreds* have been collected and used to educate people on lead poisoning through

[11] Pope.L: "Flint Water at What Pipeline," Kickstarter, Accessed January 23, 2020, https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/whatpipeline/popel-flint-water-at-what-pipeline.

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various exhibitions and events all over the country. Even though the project originated in New Orleans, it has grown into a nationwide awareness campaign, and the collected *Fundreds* have been presented to policymakers in Washington D.C.

As all three projects operate through different modes of collaboration, I will follow a trajectory that goes up in terms of scale and the number of participants via the sequence of the chapters. Thus, I will begin by discussing Frazier's photo series, which builds on the smallest unit of society, the family. In the *Notion of Family*, Frazier not only collaborated with her mother and grandmother in making the photographs, but also gave the power of authorship and autonomy to those closest to her as well as to her community. Opening up to the viewer's participation, Pope.L's *Flint Water Project* was a collective endeavor where the project could not have come to fruition without the active presence of an audience. And finally, Mel Chin's *Fundred Project* operated on the largest possible scale, inviting children and educators from all over the United States to participate and co-create the *Fundred* dollar bills.

In conclusion, I will evaluate all three art projects, distinguishing between their success as artworks and their achievements in terms of helping local communities and calling attention to the dire consequences of environmental racism.

IV. The Social vs. the Aesthetic

The works of Pope.L and Mel Chin fall under the umbrella of the so-called socially engaged or social practice art, involving the participation of the audience, partly or entirely made up of a local community in which they operate. Now, it is important to address reservations about this genre as well as its evaluation in contemporary art criticism. When discussing these works, art historians point to a certain tension between any given artist's attempts to incite social

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change and the reality of creating artistically valuable outcomes. For example, Hal Foster writes that

> "social practice art" might release a given artist from the criterion of either social effectivity or artistic intention; or one criterion might become the alibi for the other, with any pressure from the social side dismissed as "sociological" and any pressure from the artistic side as "aestheticist."[12]

Foster's remark echoes Claire Bishop's argument outlined in her book *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (2012). Bishop writes that the social critique and the artistic merit of a work" exist in a continual tension with one another."[13] As she explains,

> This tension – along with that between equality and quality, participation and spectatorship – indicate that social and artistic judgements do not easily merge; indeed, they seem to demand different criteria. […] In this schema, judgements are based on a humanist ethics, often inspired by Christianity. What counts is to offer ameliorative solutions, however short-term, rather than the exposure of contradictory social truths.[14]

While both art historians bestow a binary framework onto socially engaged, participatory artworks, I will not only argue that artists can and do further the case of environmental justice, but I will also prove that they need not fall into the trap of activating their social goals at the expense of artistic merit, and vice versa. The artists examined in the next three chapters channel their social, political, critical, and aesthetic concerns into meaningful artworks, offering continuity between their artistic vision and the community's needs.

In his historical survey of socially engaged art *Living as Form: Socially Engaged Art from 1991-2001*, critic and curator Nato Thompson asserts that the discussion of this loose genre of works has to shift from aesthetic analysis to a focus on methodologies, to "emphasize the designated forms produced for impact."[15] While it is crucial to examine the often-

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[12] Hal Foster, *Bad New Days: Art, Criticism, Emergency.* (London and New York, Verso Books, 2017).
[13] Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship.* (London and New York: Verso Books, 2012). 276.
[14] Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 275-276.
[15] Nato Thompson, Living as Form: Socially Engaged Art from 1991-2011. (New York, NY: Cambridge, MA: Creative Time Books, MIT Press, 2012).

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interdisciplinary methodologies that artists utilize for a desired social impact, I will pay careful attention not to neglect the aesthetic value of the artworks discussed in the following three chapters. In this regard, I will follow the lead of Claire Bishop, who not only points to the lack of nuanced language surrounding socially engaged participatory art, but challenges any critical assessment that focuses solely on demonstrable impact, and thus condemns whereby "the difficulty of describing the artistic value of participatory projects is resolved by resorting to ethical criteria."[16] When appropriate, I will follow Bishop's encouragement to analyze and emphasize the aesthetic as well as artistic merit of artworks instead of only assessing their real-life positive impacts.

Before diving into the three art projects, it is critical to remember that much of the history of socially engaged and/or participatory art—just as most of the art historical canon—has been written from a primarily white, Western point of view. This leads to an inevitable tension between the artworks discussed in the following chapters and the theoretical framework that has set the parameters of socially engaged art thus far. In order to challenge the status quo, I have found it worthwhile to borrow from the field of music and the performing arts when approaching the question of aesthetics. *What is Social Aesthetics?*, an essay co-authored by Georgina Born, Eric Lewis, and Will Straw in *Improvisation and Social Aesthetics* (2017) focuses on the question of how one's social experience is immanent in their aesthetic experiences. According to the authors,

> One might think [...] that there are few points of contact between traditional aesthetics and a social aesthetics—that a social aesthetics is concerned with anything but the aesthetic. But this would be a mistake in two ways, [...] first, because a social aesthetics continues to realize the reality and the importance of aesthetic pleasures and displeasures, while recognizing that discussions, theories, and conflict about aesthetic judgments will at the same time often signal, consciously or unconsciously, either a commitment to or a questioning of given social identifications and political positions; and second, because a

[16] Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 19.

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> social aesthetics questions the utility of the very separation of the categories "aesthetic" and "social" when analyzing the nature of artistic objects and processes and the aesthetic experiences they elicit—a stance most obviously relevant, but not limited, to the performing arts […][17]

Thus, the authors argue that the social and aesthetic qualities of artworks are inevitably intertwined in the field of social aesthetics. While they approach the notion of a "social experience" primarily from the viewpoint of an audience/participants (and how their lived experiences impact their aesthetic judgements), the same could be argued for artists making the works. Saturating an artwork with social meaning—from the intimate collaboration of family members to the incorporation of nationwide political lobbying—shapes the aesthetic qualities of a project, and when thoughtfully constructed, only strengthens it. The social responsibility, community engagement, and long-term commitment with which Frazier, Pope.L, and Chin operate in the following chapters propel art into unexpected realms and broaden our notions of what an aesthetic experience can be.

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[17] Georgina Born, Eric Lewis, and Will Straw, "What is Social Aesthetics?" in *Improvisation and Social Aesthetics*, ed. Georgina Born and Jehuda Reinharz (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017): 4.

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Chapter 1: LaToya Ruby Frazier and the Industrial Pollution of Braddock, Pennsylvania

1.1 A Brief history of Braddock, PA and Industrial Pollution

> *What has happened? The thing that has happened in this valley has happened in hundreds of others. The town, the whole valley, has turned its back upon the river. They have sought to get away from it. They have neglected it. They have used it as a sewer, a drain, a place for throwing their waste and their offal.*
>
> —W.E.B. DuBois[18]

The town of Braddock, Pennsylvania lies on the banks of the Monongahela River, nine miles from Pittsburgh. It was once thriving with steel mills, churches, theaters and fraternal organizations. Braddock is home to Andrew Carnegie's first steel mill (the Edgar Thomson Steel Works active since 1875) as well as to one of Carnegie's famous public libraries, which opened in 1888. The Rust Belt town experienced a steady influx of Eastern European immigrants in the 1900s, followed by the mass migration of Blacks from the South, as its many steel mills provided employment opportunities. As historian Dennis C. Dickerson wrote,

> As long as black men offered their bodies to the enormous physical rigors required of mill labor and their wives and children breathed the contaminated air filling Braddock skies, Edgar Thomson made it possible for laborers to buy homes, educate their youth, and plan for the future.[19]

By the 1920s and 1930s the migration of Blacks created a vibrant community as well as a strong social and economic fabric in the town, though it was largely dependent on the prosperity of the mills. In the 1920s, the population exceeded 20,000. Born in 1925, LaToya Ruby Frazier's grandmother remembered this period of prosperity vividly: "There use [sic] to be theaters, the

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[18] Frazier has used this quote from W.E.B. DuBois' speech at Searles High School in Great Barrington, Massachusetts in 1930 in interviews and lectures as a source of inspiration

[19] Dennis C. Dickerson, "Black Braddock and its History," in LaToya Ruby Frazier: *The Notion of Family* (New York: Aperture, 2014): 137.

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Capital, the Paramount, and the Times. There were restaurants, five-and-dime stores, children stores, and furniture stores. Aww, we use to have everything."[20]

However, even this period was dominated by systemic racism against the Black population: mills and unions such as the United Steelworkers of America operated with biased policies, only letting Blacks to fulfill unskilled positions, demanding physical labor and posing serious health hazards. The town was also "redlined" in the 1930s by the Home Owner's Loan Corporation (HOLC), a government entity that evaluated whether an area was on the rise or on the decline based on the occupation, income, and ethnicity of residents, as well as the construction type and sales demand. Braddock was categorized as "fourth grade" and colored red (hence the term "redlining") on the map of the Detroit-area, indicating that it was considered hazardous to investment.[21] These processes might have signaled the town's subsequent decline beginning in the 1960s.

Due to technological advances, competition from overseas, and a decreased dependency on unskilled labor, the decline of the steel industry was unavoidable in the 1960s. Deindustrialization led to a staggering rate of unemployment and white flight, tearing the fabric of the town apart. As Frazier explained,

> What's interesting is that through discrimination and racial and systemic oppression, you see how black people were entrapped in that area — through redlining, and not being able to get loans from banks to move to the suburbs, how they were left behind.[22]

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[20] Frazier, *The Notion of Family*, 11.

[21] Devin Quinn Rutan, "Legacies of the Residential Security Maps: Measuring the Persistent Effects of Redlining in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania," BA diss. (University of Pittsburgh, 2016), 24.
Rutan's thesis includes a color-coded map of the Pittsburgh-area with Braddock colored red in 1937.
As Dorceta Taylor explains, redlining "resulted in a *systematic institutionalized devaluation* of Black, racially mixed, and old inner-city neighborhoods across the country," Taylor, *Toxic Communities*, 237.

[22] Corinne Segal, "A bird's eye portrait of what was once a thriving steel town," *PBS*, November 16, 2015, https://www.pbs.org/newshour/arts/latoya-ruby-frazier-braddock-pennsylvania

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The deindustrialization of Braddock, along with the systemic racism of government and private entities left the Black working-class annihilated. The collapse of the steel industry, along with the crack cocaine epidemic in the early 1980s had a devastating effect on the fabric of the community, who were robbed of any possibility of upward mobility. By 2000, the population fell under just 3,000 with a 67 percent Black population. After over 30 years of negligence on the local, state, and federal level, Braddock's only hospital (Braddock UPMC) was closed in 2009 and demolished due to unprofitability. The bodies of Black workers and families—who had endured the toxic pollution of mills for generations[23]—have been discarded and left to suffer from different forms of cancer and autoimmune diseases, due to the total negligence of the healthcare industry.

1.2 LaToya Ruby Frazier: A Braddonian Point of View

LaToya Ruby Frazier was born in 1982 in Braddock, Pennsylvania. She was raised by her grandmother, "Grandma Ruby" at 805 Washington Ave, where "[t]he shadow from the steel mill always hovered above us,"[24] as Frazier wrote. She would describe her heritage as a "descendant of Scottish, African, Braddonian, Blue-collar, Steel workers."[25] Frazier grew up in Braddock in a period when the town went into steep decline. In her book, she writes that the three generations of women in her family saw and experienced the different faces of Braddock:

> Grandma Ruby, Mom, and I grew up in significantly different social and economic climates; each of us are markers along a larger historical timeline. Grandma Ruby, born in 1924, witnessed Braddock's prosperous days of department stores, theaters and restaurants. Mom, born in 1959, witnessed the close of the steel mills, white flight, and

[23] Only the Edgar Thomson Steel Works is still in operation
[24] Frazier, *The Notion of Family*, 14.
[25] Ibid., 18.

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> disinvestment at the federal, state, and local levels. I was born in 1982. I witnessed as the War on Drugs decimated my family and community.[26]

Frazier's relationship with photography began when she was an undergraduate student at the Edinboro University of Pennsylvania. She has often recounted the story of how she first saw Dorothea Lange's iconic *Migrant Mother* (1936), and how the fact that no one knew whom the photograph depicted has impacted her approach to photography:

> In that moment it just hit me. This is an iconic image, but we don't know the woman's name in the photograph, we only talk about the photographer and the government. How do you bring agency and power to the subject that everyone else is benefiting from? As it happens, her name was Florence Owens Thompson, she died destitute, and her children never received royalties from those images.
>
> That's where it began. Considering the difficult reality my mother, my grandmother and I were living in, I thought, 'Well, wouldn't it be a great way to honor Florence Owens Thompson by thinking about what her portraits might have looked like had she photographed herself?' And so I ran with that idea."[27]

In her first and most widely recognized body of work, *The Notion of Family* (2001-2014) Frazier documented three generations of women: her grandmother, her mother, and herself. As a Braddonian, she turned her eye on her own family and community, reimagining the history of social documentary not as an outsider, but as an insider, depicting it from her own point of view, growing up in a working-class family with environmental and health struggles. In a way, her approach offers an "updated" version to the history of social documentary, capturing the beauty and hardships of neglected communities from the inside.

Apart from photography, Frazier has also been creating videos and performances. A striking performance of hers was a reaction to the Levi Strauss & Co's predatory relationship toward the history of her hometown, recorded as a short film on Art21's website titled "Frazier

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[26] Ibid., 38.

[27] Karen Frances Eng, "An unexpected family photo album," *TED.com*, March 25, 2015, https://ideas.ted.com/an-unexpected-family-photo-album/

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takes on Levi's" in 2011.[28] In the video, Frazier carried out a choreographed series of movement in front of Levi's Photo Workshop in SoHo, New York, destroying the jeans she wore with repetitive movement on the sidewalk. In the film, she explains how Levi's had used Braddock for a campaign with the slogan "Everybody's Work is Equally Important"—with the total disregard for the town's history, and the steel mills' discriminatory practices—picturing it as a "new frontier" for the ultimate goal of profit making.

During the past 20 years, Frazier has focused on highlighting issues of social struggle and racial discrimination, including environmental racism and the lack of access to healthcare. Whether she visited the community of Flint during the water crisis (*Flint is Family*, 2016), documented the closure of a General Motors site (*On the Making of Steel Genesis*, 2017), or photographed for *The New York Times Magazine*'s article *Why America's Black Mothers and Babies Are in a Life-or-Death Crisis* (2018), Frazier has always approached her subjects with deep sympathy, and has managed to combat the stereotypical portrayal of Black and Brown communities as well as the working-class, who are often depicted as "poor, worthless, or on welfare."[29] Most recently, she photographed the family of Breonna Taylor, who was murdered by the police in her sleep, for the commission of *Vanity Fair* (2020). Taylor's murder upset Frazier so much that she broke quarantine, even though she is highly susceptible to COVID-19 as she has Lupus, an autoimmune disease. In an interview, she explained,

> I wake up everyday [sic] thinking about Black people being murdered by the State. We live in a police state. We are constantly under siege. And in addition to being under siege in this very visible way of being gunned down or placed in a chokehold or a knee on the

[28] " LaToya Ruby Frazier Takes on Levi's," Art21, June 17, 2011, https://art21.org/watch/new-york-close-up/latoya-ruby-frazier-takes-on-levis/
[29] " LaToya Ruby Frazier Makes Moving Pictures," Art21, February 10, 2012, https://art21.org/watch/new-york-close-up/latoya-ruby-frazier-makes-moving-pictures/

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> neck, there's a slow violence of pollution and toxicity that are invisible silent killers surrounding Black bodies.
>
> We are biological creatures, organisms, connected to our environment. For multiple generations we've been redlined to sacrifice zones contaminated by industrial and fossil fuel corporations. The United States Steel Corporation has broken many of the EPA regulations that have been put in place, and the Trump administration had the audacity to allow them to release more chemical emissions. Compound that with the COVID virus, it is inhumane.[30]

It is exactly this slow violence, characterized by Rob Nixon as "a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all"[31] of pollution that Frazier manages to capture in her photography and her decade-long involvement with the documentation of her hometown.

1.3 The Notion of Family (2001-2014)

Frazier began to photograph her family as a teenager. Encompassing the work of 13 years, *The Notion of Family* is first and foremost a family album, yet an unusual one: it consists of portraits, landscapes, still lives, and aerial views. The black-and-white photographs Frazier shot on film smoothly oscillate between intimate, close-up images of the artist's family and their immediate surroundings—the home, the bed, or the nightstand—and a bird's eye view of her hometown, Braddock, PA. The main characters of the photo series are the figures of Frazier's grandmother, mother, and the artist herself, though Grandma Ruby's stepfather "Gramps" and other members of the family also appear in a few of the photographs. One of the main reasons Frazier began photographing her loved ones was a desire to leave a trace of their lives and

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[30] Daniel Sharp, "On working with dignity," *The Creative Independent*, September 11, 2020, https://thecreativeindependent.com/people/visual-artist-latoya-ruby-fraizer-on-working-with-dignity/

[31] Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011): 2.

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challenge the erasure of the voices and contributions of the Black community to her hometown's history. In an interview with photographer Dawoud Bey, Frazier recalls how disheartening it was for her to read the book *Images of America: Braddock, Allegheny County* (2008), realizing that all the Black people who contributed to the town's history were excluded.[32] Over the years of photographing her family, the desire to leave trace strengthened to a mission, as Frazier explains:

> I'm committed to knowing that I'm leaving behind this trace that I existed, that my family existed, that my town existed, because it's been wiped away. I mean they've already razed most of it. […] And so how you leave that human trace, that human document behind is what becomes an obsession for me, as well as chasing history. I'm definitely chasing American history because we're just not included, we're not there. And I'm not blaming anyone, but someone has to step up and take the responsibility to put us in there. And I feel a very strong sense of duty to do that.[33]

The Notion of Family promises not just one, but multiple, insider's views: Frazier credits her mother and grandmother as collaborators. She has created several double portraits with her mother, and also one with her grandmother (*Grandma Ruby and Me*, 2005). Frazier's mother, Cynthia frequently took over the camera to make portraits of her daughter. This collaborative aspect, as well as the viewpoint of a vulnerable insider as opposed to a curious (and most often privileged) outsider really challenges historical notions of social documentary.

The Notion of Family was published in a book format by Aperture in 2014, accompanied by a text written by the artist. In the book, poetic, autobiographical remarks are combined with an introductory text on Braddock's history. The words are dominated by the intimate, poetic, and honest remarks of Frazier, who also heavily quotes her mother and grandmother next to the photographs depicting them. In a sense, Frazier's work could be thought of as the antithesis of

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[32] LaToya Ruby Frazier, Dawoud Bey, "A CONVERSATION," in LaToya Ruby Frazier, *The Notion of Family* (New York: Aperture, 2016), 152.

[33] Greg Lindquist, Charles Schultz, "LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER," *The Brooklyn Rail,* (Jul-Aug 2013), https://brooklynrail.org/2013/07/art/latoya-ruby-frazier-with-greg-lindquist-charles-schultz

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Margaret Bourke-White and Erskine Caldwell's *You Have Seen Their Faces* (1937)—turning the white, privileged eye on the impoverished communities of the U.S. and taking every bit of agency away from them by writing captions for on their behalf, indicating their "thoughts." We are offered a view of Braddock from the viewpoint of a Braddonian; and while their economic struggle and health concerns are very visible (Frazier's grandmother and mother both fought cancer and Frazier is battling Lupus), they are depicted in a humane, dignified manner. However, Frazier's focus goes beyond the personal narrative of her family. In a video for Art21, she said that her family "only happens to be a springboard to talking about bigger issues of class, healthcare, and environmental racism."[34]

1.4 Self-Portraits: Close Proximity to Toxicity

> *Ultimately, what I am seeking in the photograph taken of me (the "intention" according to which I look at it) is Death: Death is the eidos of the Photograph.*
>
> —Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*

Though beautifully photographed, the female protagonists of Frazier's in *The Notion of Family* are captured in the shadow of death. They are frequently photographed on beds, before or after surgery, while battling with cancer, neurological or autoimmune diseases. The pollution they had to endure for generations has taken its toll on the bodies and minds of these three women. But there are joyous moments along the way: one of the most remarkable photographs of the series is a double portrait that Frazier executed in collaboration with her grandmother,

[34] " LaToya Ruby Frazier Makes Moving Pictures," Art21

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entitled *Grandma Ruby and Me,* 2005 (*Figure 2*). In this photograph, they sit on the carpet of the living room, surrounded by dolls and furniture, both looking into the camera. Frazier's hair is braided and tied with ribbons, recalling the times when she was little, and her Grandma Ruby dressed her as a doll. A tangible incongruity dominates the image, which forever hovers in the gap between past memories and the present moment. Next to Frazier's subtle smile, Grandma Ruby's face is characterized by her frank gaze. While raising six children in the 1960s on her own, she "internalized the idea that Black women aren't supposed to cry; they're to remain silent and endure suffering,"[35] as Frazier writes. On another photograph, *Grandma Ruby Wiping Gramps*, 2003 she is depicted while taking care of Frazier's step-great-grandfather, who was one of the few Black men working in Andrew Carnegie's mill. As Frazier's accompanying text states,

> African American men like Gramps worked hard labor in high temperatures, tearing down and rebuilding furnaces, cleaning up spilt metal and slag. Once hard labor consumed his body, it was discarded and thrown away.[36]

Death is present in these images, and not just at a meta-level: *Grandma Ruby, Mom, and Me*, 2009 depicts the funeral of Frazier's grandmother, who lies in an open casket with dignity, surrounded by flowers and images. In the middle of the photograph, in front of the casket Frazier stands, looking straight into the camera, while her mother is shown in profile on the side. Her eyes are shut. The sorrowful nature of the image is balanced with the harmony of the composition, and the beautifully constructed lights, shadows and textures of the photograph. It subtly recalls the Renaissance iconography of the "Three Ages of Man" (Titian or Hans Baldung), clearly indicating an awareness of art historical trajectory, which bridges the work of

[35] Frazier, *The Notion of Family*, 27.
[36] Ibid., 31.

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this Braddonian artist to Renaissance masters. Frazier manages to depict suffering and death with dignity and great empathy in all of her works.[37] Yet, it should not lead the viewer to the conclusion that she has made her peace with it: Frazier's gaze is confrontational. Her eyes reveal the pain of witnessing her family wither away, as result of the inequalities surrounding the Black community on federal, state, and local levels.

In *Self-Portrait March (10:00 a.m.),* 2009 (*Figure 3*), Frazier is captured in a straightforward portrait, sitting on the bed against the backdrop of striped sheets duct-taped to the bedroom wall. She sat down to shoot after clearing out her late grandmother's apartment in Braddock. On the photograph, she is wearing a tank top and Grandma Ruby's pajama pants. Her confrontational gaze recalls the photograph of her grandmother's funeral. It was around this time that "it became important to look at why we are dying," as she explains. In yet another self-portrait, she is standing in pajamas in her step-great grandfather's room after it has been emptied. Her figure is enveloped by grief and a depleting environment, but she stands fierce, with an unwavering gaze. (*Figure 4*) In one of her earliest self-portraits, *Self-Portrait in the Bathroom*, 2002 (*Figure 5*), Frazier is seen from the back, looking into the mirror. The bathroom shelves to her right are shattered; her environment is falling apart, but the destruction does not end there: the pollution of Braddock had found a way into her body, wrecking her physical and mental health. In the book, juxtaposed with this self-portrait are a list of chemicals, including benzene, tetrachloroethylene, and lead scattered along the page. As she recalls in an interview,

> I photographed myself at a moment when I didn't feel well. It was a lupus attack, but I hadn't figured it out yet. What is that invisible thing harming me? When I weaved the book together in 2014, it became important to me to list all of the chemical pollutants, to write them as if they were atomized particles floating in the air. It was a way to give the

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[37] Both *Grandma Ruby, Mom, and Me*, 2009 and *Grandma Ruby Wiping Gramps*, 2003 are very sensitive to the artist, and for this reason, she or her gallery never shares these images.

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> reader, through the text, a sense of what was outside, in the environment, but also inside me.[38]

What is striking in these self-portraits is how Frazier puts her own body and flesh on the line, exposing her personal struggles and hardships, to convey the everyday reality and consequences of being exposed to a disproportionate amount of toxic pollution as a Black woman.

In the *Momme Portrait Series*, as the title indicates, it is mainly Frazier's mother in charge of making the photographs. One of the strongest images of the entire body of work is *Momme (Shadow)*, 2008 (*Figure 6*). The image is centered around Cynthia, showing her upper body; she looks down at the camera with an unabashed gaze, almost squinting. Her body covers Frazier's, and her face casts a shadow on her daughter's. Frazier is shown in profile, and the shadow on her face extends onto the bedsheet in the background. At first, the shadow might seem to indicate a hierarchy between the two figures, but in fact, their intention was to present their bodies in unity:

> I found out in 2008 that both Grandma Ruby and Mom had cancer, as did many of the elder women in Braddock. Here, Mom and I explored a new approach to documenting our illnesses (mine being lupus). We stood our mattress on end and covered it with a comforter, essentially making it our studio/stage. We made a portrait of our bodies overlapping as one, unified in sickness, death, and our struggle to survive. The light cast a shadow that for me foreshadows the loss of Grandma Ruby; she passed away six months later from pancreatic cancer.[39]

Behind the simple, yet delicately composed photographs loom issues of healthcare inequality, environmental racism, and suffering. In the *Momme Silhouettes*, 2010 (*Figure 7*), one of the last works that Frazier made collaboratively with her mother, nine photographs are arranged into a grid, capturing the two women's shadows behind a floral bedsheet. Though it is impossible to see

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[38] Christophe Gallois, Claire Tenu, "Interview with LaToya Ruby Frazier," in *LaToya Ruby Frazier* ed. Christophe Gallois (Luxembourg: Mousse Publishing, 2019), 10.

[39]" LaToya Ruby Frazier: A Haunted Capital," The Brooklyn Museum, Accessed January 23, 2021, https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/exhibitions/latoya_ruby_frazier

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their faces, the movements of the two women seem joyous; two of the photographs seem to mimic the body language of a marriage proposal—though it is difficult to tell whether it is Frazier or her mother kneeling. While the composition and the use of the floral textile seem playful, the photographs are loaded with toxicity. In an interview, Frazier explained that the arrangement of the photographs recalls a window, and "the silhouettes themselves can evoke soot, that gray smoky residue that you find on your window if you're from a steel mill town like Braddock."[40]

One of the images that more candidly exposes the relationship between environmental pollution and health concerns is the *Epilepsy Test* from the *Landscape of the Body* series, 2011 (*Figure 8*). It is a juxtaposition of two photographs, in which the image on the left exposes the bare back of her mother with cables running from her head, along her spine, all the way down to the hospital bed. On the right, the remnants of Braddock's demolished hospital building are depicted, with cables sticking out from the remaining walls. The distressing pair of images operate through association and bring to the forefront the intertwined relationship between landscape and body. As Frazier recalls,

> I immediately saw a connection between the entrails of our hospital being torn down and the wires coming out of my mom's head at an epilepsy test. […] It was also then that I realized that the history of a place is written on the body and the landscape, literally. […] If you want to understand history, catastrophe, any type of ecological disaster, any kind of tension that's happening in a city or a landscape, look no further than the people who inhabit it.[41]

Frazier also created multiple video works addressing the relationship between body and toxicity, two of which are included in *The Notion of Family* book in the form of video stills. In *Self Portrait (United States Steel),* 2010 (*Figure 9*), Frazier is seen slowly breathing in and out with a

[40] Gallois and, Tenu, "Interview with LaToya Ruby Frazier," 9.
[41] Ibid., 10.

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bare chest, recalling a medical examination. To her left is a video of the steel mill, enveloped in the cloud of smoke. Its pipes and chimneys are omitting toxins into the air, sickening the bodies and minds of Braddock's residents. The video is accompanied by a jarring mechanical noise, further accentuating the mill's damaging impact. In *Detox Braddock UPMC,* 2011 (*Figure 10*), a 23-minute-long video, Frazier and her mother are captured participating in an ionic foot detox procedure. In the video, they place their feet in a bath, and a pharmacist is heard inspecting the results. He is captured telling Frazier, "You didn't live downwind from the mill, did you? Could've picked a lot of the metal up from the steel mill. It's atomized in the air—you don't even realize you're breathing it and exposed to it."[42] Another one of Frazier's photographs depicts a protester with a sign that reads "UPCM: Life Changing Medicine, Unless You're From Braddock" (*Figure 11*) captures the abandonment with which the healthcare industry has treated Braddock's communities.

1.5 Subverting the History of Social Documentary

Through her body of work, Frazier aims to create an alternative to New Deal-era documentary photography by offering a vulnerable insider's view into the life of an economically struggling family. She took on a mission to go against the historical erasure of Black voices in Braddock's history, to leave a mark of the inequalities they have to endure day after day. Working with black-and-white photography and creating standard-size gelatin silver prints is a very distinctive 20th century aesthetic, which was a strategic decision. As Frazier explains, "[The]

[42] LaToya Ruby Frazier, "DETOX Braddock UPMC 20112014AAB," Vimeo, Accessed January 23, 2021, https://vimeo.com/latoyarubyfrazier

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continued omission, erasure, invisibility, and silence surrounding African American sacrifices to Braddock and the American grand narrative is why I've chosen to work with a twentieth-century documentary aesthetic."[43]

In terms of the aesthetics, Frazier continues the tradition of social documentary, but not without the injection of a critical viewpoint. One of the photographers who deeply influenced her is Lewis Hine, specifically his participation in *The Pittsburgh Survey* (1907-1908), which was a sociological study of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, examining the social and environmental issues raging the industrial city. It was one of the most extensive sociological projects, combining research with Progressivist political activism, accompanied by the photographs of Lewis Hine. Hine's bleak photographs of demolished buildings and empty cityscapes are recalled in Frazier's images of Braddock, such as *Fifth Street Tavern and UPMC Braddock Hospital on Braddock Avenue*, 2011 (*Figure 12*), or *1908 Eight Street Market on Talbot Avenue,* 2007 (*Figure 13*). Besides the evident aesthetic similarities between the two projects, for both artists, photography served as a catalyst to thrust forward social reforms.

Another artist who greatly impacted Frazier's career was Gordon Parks, the only Black photographer who worked for the Farm Security Administration (FSA). Frazier brought his iconic photograph, *American Gothic* (1942) to her photography class as a student to demonstrate what Roland Barthes described as "punctum" in a photograph.[44] Parks was working on an FSA assignment in Washington, when, at the suggestion of Roy Stryker[45], he started photographing Ella Watson, who was cleaning the FSA offices at the time. As Michael Lobel explains in an

[43] Frazier and Bey, "A CONVERSATION," 152.
[44] Frazier and Bey, "A CONVERSATION," 149-150.
[45] Stryker was the chief of the Historical Section of the Farm Security Administration

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Artforum article, Parks' relationship with Watson was quite collaborative.[46] Over several weeks, Watson posed for Parks at work, at home, and at her church, and the images indicate a deep human bond between photographer and subject. In a photograph entitled *Dinner time at the home of Mrs. Ella Watson, a government charwoman, Washington, D.C., August 1942*, Parks composed a multi-layered interior space with the use of mirrors, in which he captured his subjects, Watson's family. A similar approach can be detected in several of Frazier's photographs, for example in *Huxtables, Mom, and Me*, 2008 (*Figure 14*), or *Mom Making an Image of Me*, 2008 (*Figure 15*).

In an insightful essay in *The New York Times*, Maurice Berger compared *The Notion of Family* to the 1955 exhibition *The Family of Man* organized by Edward Steichen at The Museum of Modern Art. Berger points out that the exhibition echoed the New Deal sentiment, that the survival of humanity was dependent on how well the members of society take care of each other. Regarding Frazier's work, he writes,

> "The Notion of Family" testifies to the ominous consequences of rejecting this idea. The ascendance of neoconservatism in the 1980s ushered in an era of brazen self-interest, one that defined the notion of family as more a matter of blood than social responsibility. Braddock's decline was exacerbated during Reagan-era policies favoring trickle-down economics, union busting and diminution of social welfare programs, which foreshadowed the ever-widening gap between rich and poor Americans.[47]

Apart from the influence of the key modernist figures of documentary photography such as Lewis Hine, Gordon Parks, Walker Evans, Roy DeCarava, or Dorothea Lange, a later generation of artists, coming of age in the 1970s also impacted the work of Frazier. As her mentors, Martha Rosler and Carrie Mae Weems were of great influence, and thus, aspects of

[46] Michael Lobel, "Iconic Encounter," *Artforum*, (October 2018), https://www.artforum.com/print/201808/michael-lobel-on-gordon-parks-and-ella-watson-76734
[47] Maurice Berger, "LaToya Ruby Frazier's Notion of Family," *The New York Times Lens Blog*, October 14, 2014, https://lens.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/10/14/latoya-ruby-fraziers-notion-of-family/

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post-modernism and feminism, such as a suspicion towards mass media and the belief that "the personal is political," have been deeply embedded in the work of Frazier. There are striking comparisons to be found between *The Notion of Family* and *Kitchen Table Series* (1990), the renown work of her mentor, Carrie Mae Weems, such as the use of black-and-white photography to capture the domestic interior space and its inhabitants. The simple, but well-composed images depict the artist sitting at her kitchen table, engaged in different activities with family or friends. Yet, as opposed to Frazier's work, Weems' photographs depict herself as a muse or alter-ego:

> The muse made her first appearance in *Kitchen Table;* this woman can stand in for me and for you; she can stand in for the audience, she leads you into history. She's a witness and a guide. […] She's shown me a great deal about the world and about myself, and I'm grateful to her. Carrying a tremendous burden, she is a black woman leading me through the trauma of history. I think it's very important that as a black woman she's engaged with the world around her; she's engaged with history, she's engaged with looking, with *being*. She's a guide into circumstances seldom seen.[48]

Despite their differences, there is a definite kinship between Weems' work and Frazier's photography. Frazier maintains a dialogue with the social documentary tradition of the first half of the twentieth century, yet she constantly offers "updates." Through the introduction of her own point of view, as well as her collaborators, she breaks down the barriers between subject/object and photographer/performer – following Weems' lead. Yet, Frazier's body of work is also dominated by a duty to ignite social change.

1.6 Activism and Advocacy in LaToya Ruby Frazier's work

The struggles of farmers and workers in the 1930s not only constitute a significant chapter of US history, but they also became part of the art historical canon through the

[48] Dawoud Bey, "Carrie Mae Weems," *BOMB Magazine,* July 1, 2009, https://bombmagazine.org/articles/carrie-mae-weems/

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photographs of Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange, Gordon Parks, and the many others who worked for the Farm Security Administration. Unfortunately, within our post-Reagan, current era—with the prevalence of neoliberalism and individualism—it does not seem to be in the interest of the US government to send out documentary photographers to explore society's ills in cities or small towns. Will there be a comprehensive overview, an archive comparable to the FSA, on the economic struggles, corporate greed, racial inequalities, and ecological disasters of our times? Frazier offers to do this work voluntarily, through building a strong human connection with her subjects—her own family, the workers of General Motors, or a family in Flint—and clicking the shutter to rewrite history. Her long-term engagement with each project is a testimony to her devotion, and through each and every story she covers, she is rewriting the "American grand narrative":

> We need longer sustained stories that reflect and tell us where the prejudices and blind spots are and continue to be in this culture and society. This is a race and class issue that is affecting everyone. It is not a black problem, it is an American problem, it is a global problem. Braddock is everywhere.[49]

While Frazier prefers to use the word advocacy with regard to her work—explaining that photography cannot be used to substitute other forms of activism[50]—if there is a social goal that photography can be used for, it is raising awareness. Through exhibiting *The Notion of Family* in a great number of locations all around the United States during the past six years; in cities such as Pittsburgh, Miami, Atlanta, Charlottesville, and New York, and overseas in Paris and Luxembourg, Frazier successfully managed to spread awareness of issues such as healthcare inequality and environmental racism on an international level.

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[49] Berger, "LaToya Ruby Frazier's Notion of Family".

[50]" Artist Talk at The Renaissance Society," LaToya Ruby Frazier, Accessed January 23, 2021, http://www.latoyarubyfrazier.com/video/artist-talk-at-the-renaissance-society/

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The visibility that Frazier has created around the toxic pollution Black women have to endure in her community recalls the work of poet Audre Lorde in *The Cancer Journals*. Lorde wrote extensively about her struggle with breast cancer as a self-described "Black lesbian feminist mother lover poet." Her rejection of wearing a breast prosthesis after her mastectomy as well as her labor of transforming her lived experience into language has challenged the erasure and silence around the disease in a time when most surgeons and medical workers encouraged women to appear as "the same as before" and to conform to the conventional notions of femininity by wearing prostheses. Lorde's decision to turn fear and suffering into creative energies resonates deeply in Frazier's approach to *The Notion of Family*. In *The Cancer Journals*, published almost 35 years prior to Frazier's photo book, Lorde grapples with many of the same issues as the photographer:

> Within this country, where racial difference creates a constant, if unspoken, distortion of vision, Black women have on one hand always been highly visible, and so, on the other hand, have been rendered invisible through the depersonalization of racism. […] For to survive in the mouth of this dragon we call america, we have had to learn this first and most vital lesson—that we were never meant to survive. Not as human beings. […] And that visibility which makes us most vulnerable is that which also is the source of our greatest strength. Because the machine will try to grind you into dust anyway, whether or not we speak. We can sit in our corners mute forever while our sisters and our selves are wasted, while our children are distorted and destroyed, while our earth is poisoned, we can sit in our safe corners mute as bottles, and we still will be no less afraid.[51]

[51] Audre Lorde, *The Cancer Journals* (New York: Penguin Books, 2020): 14-15. (Purposeful anti-capitalization of the word "america")

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Chapter 2: Bottled Contamination: Pope.L's *Flint Water Project* (2017)

2.1 A Brief History of the Flint Water Crisis

> *"What kinda place is it, Flint?"*
> *"Jive. No place you'd want to go to."*
> *"Thought so. Name sounds good, but I thought it'd be like that"*
>
> —Toni Morrison, *The Song of Solomon*, 1977

The Flint water crisis is a so-called textbook case of environmental racism that involves the negligence of government on the federal, state, and local level. In the mid-20th century, the city of Flint, Michigan was the birthplace of General Motors and home to nearly 200,000 people, many of whom were employed by the automobile industry. But since the industry began to decline, and GM downsized in the 1980s, the city's population has plummeted to just about 100,000, with a 54% Black population, 38% of which is living below the poverty line, according to the 2010 U.S. Census. In 2011, the state of Michigan took over Flint's finances due to a projected $25 million deficit, and Michigan Governor Rick Snyder appointed an emergency manager to save money and cut city costs. This appointment precipitated the disastrous decision to switch the city's drinking water supply from the costly Detroit supplier (Detroit Water and Sewerage Department) to the Karegnondi Water Authority, and pump water from the Flint River until pipelines were built to deliver water from Lake Huron. Using the Flint River as a water source was supposed to be a temporary solution, but inadequate treatment of the water and the failure to implement corrosion controls resulted in a series of major contamination and health hazards for Flint residents. When complaints mounted due to the foul-smelling, discolored, and off-tasting water, government and health officials ignored these claims, repeatedly assuring residents that it was safe to drink.

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The water that entered Flint homes beginning April 2014 was causing skin rashes, hair loss, and itchy skin, and mysterious diseases in children. Residents even started bringing jugs containing the discolored water to community forums to provide evidence that it was unsafe to drink. In March 2015, Flint City Council members voted to stop using river water and to reconnect with the supplier from Detroit; however, state-appointed emergency manager Jerry Ambrose overruled the vote, claiming that costs would skyrocket and that "water from Detroit is no safer than water from Flint."[52] Later that year, studies revealed that citywide levels of lead in the water had skyrocketed, and that the contaminated water was contributing to elevated blood lead levels in the city's children, endangering the health of its youngest generation. Lead was not the only issue with the water supply: the city's switch to the Flint River coincided with the third-largest outbreak of Legionnaires' disease recorded in U.S. history, killing 12 people and contaminating at least 87 between June 2014 and October 2015. The outbreak, as well as the discovery of coliform bacteria in the water was a sign of the city's failure to maintain chlorine levels to disinfect the water. Yet, the sad irony is that the city's later corrective measure, to add more chlorine to the water without addressing the underlying issues, then created the problem of elevated levels of total trihalomethanes, cancer-causing chemicals that are byproducts of the chlorination of water.[53]

In October 2015, the city finally switched back to Detroit water. In November, residents filed a federal class action lawsuit claiming 14 state and city officials knowingly exposed Flint

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[52] Ron Fonger, "Emergency Manager Calls City Council's Flint River vote 'incomprehensible,'" Michigan Live, March 24, 2015, https://www.mlive.com/news/flint/2015/03/flint_emergency_manager_calls.html

[53] Melissa Denchak, "Flint Water Crisis: Everything You Need to Know," NRDC, November 8, 2018, https://www.nrdc.org/stories/flint-water-crisis-everything-you-need-know

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residents to toxic water; and finally, Flint declared a state of emergency in December 2015. Since then, much of the crisis has revolved around legal actions and attempts to hold the city's leadership accountable. In February 2017, The Michigan Civil Rights Commission issued a report entitled *The Flint Water Crisis: Systemic Racism Through the Lens of Flint,* declaring that there was "deeply embedded institutional, systemic and historical racism"[54] at the root of the water crisis. A month later, a $97 million settlement was approved, in which the state of Michigan agreed to replace lead and galvanized steel pipelines. A $600 million settlement is also underway to the state of Michigan to establish a compensation fund that will provide direct payments to Flint residents.[55] While justice has long been denied and delayed for the people of Flint, as of January 2021, former Governor Rick Snyder and former Flint Public Works director Howard Croft were each charged with two counts of willful neglect of duty in the investigation into the Flint water crisis.[56] Though it may seem that the crisis has been largely resolved, it has caused the death of 12 and the sickness of many, in addition to severing the trust between Flint residents and the government.[57]

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[54] Michigan Civil Rights Commission, The Flint Water Crisis: Systemic Racism through the Lens of Flint (2017), 9.
[55] Jessica Schneider, "A $600 million settlement in the Flint water crisis will provide fund for city residents," *CNN*, August 20, 2020, https://www.cnn.com/2020/08/20/us/flint-michigan-water-crisis-settlement-reports/index.html
[56] Theresa Waldrop, Taylor Romine, Joe Sutton, "Ex-Michigan Gov. Rick Snyder charged with willful neglect of duty related to Flint water crisis," *CNN*, January 13, 2020, https://www.cnn.com/2021/01/13/us/michigan-former-governor-snyder-flint-water-charges/index.html
[57] Derek Robertson, "Flint Has Clean Water Now. Why Won't People Drink It?" *Politico*, December 23, 2020, https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2020/12/23/flint-water-crisis-2020-post-coronavirus-america-445459

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2.2 Pope.L: "The Friendliest Black Artist in America"

Born William Pope.L (1955, Newark, NJ), the artist either goes by "Pope.L," or as his business card reads, the "Friendliest Black Artist in America."[58] The artist's last name was improvised by his mother, who combined his father's surname (Pope) and her own initial (L for Lancaster). Pope.L is best known as a performance artist, but he also works with installation, painting, sculpture, drawing, photography and writing. His material choices are diverse, to say the least. As Aria Dean puts it, "This varied production does not merely supplement his performance work, like the material output of many other performance-oriented artists. Rather, the objects/entities circulate in some sort of fucked-up baroque Gesamtkunstwerk."[59] All of Pope.L's works are permeated by what he calls a "have-not-ness" and the formal manifestation of this interest: holes. As he mentioned in an interview, part of his obsession comes from operating in a largely white world as a Black person:

> I'm going to come from a black ghetto, and enter a conservative white school, then go into the enterprise that is the art world- it puts pressure on me to assimilate, to be a black person in white clothing. I'm interested in what happens to this person. How does this person operate? How do "have-nots" operate in a system of a presence, of plenitude?[60]

Pope.L's claim that "Blackness is one true thing defined as lack"[61] encapsulates the past 40 years of his diverse output. At the heart of his performances and other artworks are issues of economic inequality, homelessness, notions of Blackness, as he addresses different forms of social

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[58] Pope.L and Mark Bessire, *William Pope.L: The Friendliest Black Artist in America*. (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2002).
[59] Aria Dean, "The Trickster Art of Pope.L Draws Power from Negation," *Artnews*, November 20, 2019, https://www.artnews.com/art-in-america/features/popel-moma-whitney-anti-institution-1202667899/
[60] William Pope.L and Chris Thompson, "America's Friendliest Black Artist," *A Journal of Performance and Art*, Vol. 24, No. 3 (September 2002): 71.
[61] Pope.L "Some Notes on the Ocean," in William Pope.L: *some things you can do with blackness* (London: Kenny Schachter Rove, 2005), 4.

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struggle, one of which is environmental racism. One of his signature gestures consists in treating all of his subjects with some nonsensicality, putting a comic or absurd spin on everything.

Pope.L's most famous works are his so-called crawls; one of the most iconic was his *Tompkins Square Crawl* (1991) in which the artist crawled East Village's streets in a brown suit holding a small flowerpot. As part of the same exhibition, *How Much Is That Nigger in the Window* (Franklin Furnace, New York, 1991), he staged *Eating the Wall Street Journal* on the streets of New York, in which he ritually consumed the pages of the journal that promises wealth and status to its subscribers.[62] Another one of his performances addressed New York's outlawing of panhandling near A.T.M.s: the artist tied himself to the door of a Chase bank in Midtown Manhattan, using a chain of Italian sausages. He was only wearing a skirt covered in $1 bills that he planned to give away.

Apart from his most famous performance pieces, it is important to mention *Black Factory* (2004-ongoing), a participatory art project of Pope.L's, which foreshadows his approach to the *Flint Water Project* (2017)—to be discussed in the following sections of this chapter. In *Black Factory*, a white truck was touring the country between 2004 and 2006, collecting objects that represent Blackness: "A black object is anything, anything! a person believes represents blackness to him or her"[63]—as described in the project's archive. These objects were then added to *Black Factory* through performance, pulverization, and documentation. Aside from collecting objects, the truck also operated as a gift shop, selling *Factory*-altered items. There was also a charity aspect of the project: proceeds of their so-called "Twice Sold" items—canned goods with

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[62] The performance has been repeated since and staged differently each time.

[63] " The Black Factory Archive," MoMA Learning, Accessed January 23, 2020, https://www.moma.org/learn/moma_learning/william-pope-l-the-black-factory-archive-2004-ongoing/

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Black Factory stickers and the artist's signature—were sent to support local organizations such as food pantries and shelters.[64]

Valerie Cassel Olivier describes Pope.L's performances brilliantly as "existential spectacles of absurd anxiety." She gets at the core of Pope.L's works when she writes that "they feel like relentless assaults on both the artist and those who witness his discomfiting feats."[65] However, when it comes to his participatory artworks, they are characterized by empowerment and what he calls "socially responsible" activism.[66]

2.3 Flint Water Project: *Pope.L's Response to the Water Crisis*

Pope.L's involvement in the Flint's water crisis began when the artist was invited to exhibit at the Detroit-based gallery What Pipeline by owners Alivia Zivich and Daniel Sperry. It was the artist's idea to address the ongoing water crisis, which was happening on the periphery of Detroit at the time. In addressing the crisis, Pope.L was determined that whatever work he created "it should not re-victimize the city as had been done too often in the past."[67] *Flint Water Project* (2017) thus became "an installation, a performance, and an intervention" as described on

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[64] In 2005, when the truck visited the Wexner Center in Ohio, the proceeds went to the Big Brothers and Big Sisters of Central Ohio.
"The Black Factory William Pope.L," Wexner Center, Accessed January 23, 2020, https://www.wexarts.org/public-programs/black-factory-william-popel
[65] Valerie Cassel Olivier, "Canonizing the Cannibal," in *member: Pope.L* ed. Stuart Comer with Danielle A. Jackson (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2019), 108.
[66] Ross Simonini, "An Interview with Pope.L," *Believer,* January 1, 2018, https://believermag.com/an-interview-with-pope-l/
[67] " Pope.L: Flint Water at What Pipeline," Kickstarter, Accessed January 23, 2020, https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/whatpipeline/popel-flint-water-at-what-pipeline

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the project's Kickstarter page, which helped launch the project through a fundraising campaign.[68] To get the initial funds for the projects, different packages with merchandise or works from Pope.L's studio were offered based on the amount contributors donated to the campaign via Kickstarter. For example, backers donating over $9,999 were offered a "Dinner on Pope.L's Lap."

After a successful Kickstarter campaign, What Pipeline was transformed into a bottling facility and a boutique store selling the bottled and branded Flint tap water (*Figures 16-22*). During the exhibition (September 7 - October 28, 2017) assistants in safety equipment bottled the water at the gallery space and sold it as art objects. The labels on the bottle were designed by Pope.L, featuring an image of the Flint Water Plant. The bottle was playfully described as "16 fl. Oz. non-potable" and the backside notes that the water may contain lead, E. coli, Trihalomethanes (THMs), and Legionella. The tap water for the bottling facility was collected from Flint resident Tiantha Williams' home[69] and transported to the gallery space in a 180-gallon tank, which was also part of the installation.[70]

The gallery walls of What Pipeline were filled with *Flint Water* stickers and the bottles were displayed on single shelves, clothed in the disguise of consumer products. Breaking the grid of the bottles, Flint-based photographer Eric Dutro's images were also on display, including a

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[68] Pope.L: Flint Water at What Pipeline," Kickstarter, Accessed January 23, 2020, https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/whatpipeline/popel-flint-water-at-what-pipeline

[69] Williams was deeply impacted by the crisis: her young son was born prematurely due to complications from her consumption of Flint water during pregnancy.
Matthew Piperi, "Selling Flint's Water? Art installation raises funds and awareness for Flint, Detroit water victims," *Model D Media,* October 10, 2017,
https://www.modeldmedia.com/features/flint-water-project-100917.aspx

[70] According to a Times article, Williams was reimbursed by What Pipeline paying her water bills for two months
Megan O'Grady, "Answering Society's Thorniest Questions, With Performance Art," *The New York Times,* March 2, 2018,
https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/02/t-magazine/pope-l-artist.html

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photo of a baby with an empty Fiji water bottle (*Figure 18*), and a graffitied "nope" after the slogan "Flint Lives Matter." Also, a selection of water themed artworks from the collection of What Pipeline, curated by Pope.L were on display, and even a letter from Flint's Mayor, Dr. Karren W. Weaver describing the ongoing water crisis was framed and displayed on the wall—the space also functioned as an information center about the crisis, submerging fiction with reality.

On the gallery floor were piles of bottled water in different sizes of cardboard boxes; for example, the six-pack—six bottles numbered and signed by Pope.L—which cost $1000 and came in an edition of 40. In total, 1,200 bottles were made; visitors could walk out with an unsigned bottle for $20 or a signed one for $250. The final packs can still be purchased through the website of What Pipeline, so in that sense, the project is ongoing.[71] As an important aspect of the project, the proceeds from the sales of the bottled water are donated to two organizations: United Way of Genessee County, a local organization helping Flint to alleviate the crisis, and Hydrate Detroit, a volunteer-lead non-profit organization fighting for affordable water in Detroit. *The New York Times Style Magazine* poignantly described *Flint Water Project* as "a theatrical provocation that combines scathing satire with heartfelt activism."[72]

2.4 Duchampian Provocation or Something More?

As Pope.L said in a lecture, "Many of the aesthetics of this work, *Flint Water*, are concerned with the immaterial. Vulnerability, community, betrayal, yet a sense of connectedness.

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[71] The bottles can be purchased here:
"Flint Water," What Pipeline, Accessed January 23, 2021, http://whatpipeline.com/exhibitions/37popel/1.html

[72] Megan O'Grady, "Answering Society's Thorniest Questions, With Performance Art,"

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Are we not all in this together?"[73] It is indeed a savvy way of connecting all the invisible issues the *Flint Water Project* was meant to address with the materiality of the work: water. One striking aspect of the work is its evident Duchampian gesture of using the contaminated water as a sort of readymade, such as *Air de Paris* (1919), an empty glass ampoule filled with "Parisian air," which Duchamp gifted to his friend and patron Walter C. Arensberg. But of course, the work is more than mere "Dadaist hoo-ha."[74] By turning the toxic water into bottled designer works, Pope.L not only bends our ideas of what art can be, but he also plays with the "business as usual" operations of the art market. In a sense, Pope.L's approach can be compared to the Warholian gesture of exploiting the terms of art's production and circulation by selling his "mass produced" soup cans. It can be argued that the setup of the bottling facility at What Pipeline echoes Warhol's Factory, even if these two artists had remarkably different artistic approaches and concerns. Instead of critiquing the capitalist workings of the art market, Pope.L, just as Warhol, used it for his own ends.

If the absurdist gesture of transforming toxic water into art is in question, there is another artwork that must be mentioned alongside *Flint Water Project*: David Hammons' *Bliz-aard Ball Sale* (1983). In this piece, Hammons laid out snowballs of different sizes in graduated rows on a rug in Cooper Square, New York, and acted as a salesman to transform his artistic output into hard cash. The work Pope.L has been creating for the past 40 years very much resonates with Hammons' sense of humor, and his approach of bringing art and absurdism to the streets. Interestingly, Pope.L also worked with snow as a material in his *Snow Crawl* (1991-2001) to

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[73] Pope.L, UC Berkeley artist talk, September 21, 2020. Courtesy of the Artist.

[74] Ross Simonini, "An Interview with Pope.L," *Believer,* January 1, 2018, https://believermag.com/an-interview-with-pope-l/

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address the all-encompassing whiteness of Lewiston, Maine, where he was teaching at the time at Bates College.

Naturally, it is easier to associate the whiteness of the snow with commentary on society's notions and stereotypes of race, but writer and curator Adrian Heathfield entertains a thought experiment that brings the representation of Flint's toxic water into this question:

> If white perception were just a material—rather than the all-pervasive camouflaged eye of Western culture, its malignant and relentless machinery of violence—what substance would it be? Perhaps the contaminated tap water from Flint, Michigan, that Pope.L purchased, bottled and resold (*Flint Water Project*, 2017), or the turbulent air that flayed and tore apart his altered American flag (*Trinket*, 2008), or the gloopy mayonnaise slathered over his skin as he performed in the window of Franklin Furnace (*I Get Paid to Rub Mayo on My Body*, part of *How Much Is That Nigger in the Window*, 1991). It would be an elemental or common material for sure, something encountered every day, a supposed sustenance that is in reality unbearable for black life.[75]

The branding of the contaminated Flint water, which was responsible for the deaths of 12 people and the sickness of many, as the symbol of the negligence and outright environmental racism of city, state, and federal officials is a jarring aesthetic decision that makes the work powerful through its materiality.

The design of the installation itself echoes Pop art aesthetics, even the minimalistic arrangement of the bottles and the grid of the wallpaper; but Pope.L chose to hang some works of local artists to "soften the edges of the show."[76] As Sara Rose Sharp writes, the choice of "[h]anging art over an art installation reinforces the aesthetic of the Water Shop as a capitalist boutique."[77]—a boutique, in which a performance took place through the bodies of the assistants bottling and selling the water and engaging visitors in conversation about the water crisis. The

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[75] Adrian Heathfield, "Black Milk," in *member:Pope.L* ed. Stuart Comer with Danielle A Jackson (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2019), 78.

[76] Sarah Rose Sharp, "Pope.L's Conceptual Bottled Water Project Calls Attention to the Crisis in Flint," *Hyperallergic*, October 17, 2017, https://hyperallergic.com/402175/in-flint-pope-ls-conceptual-bottled-water-project-calls-attention-to-a-crisis/

[77] Ibid.

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roles of commerce, art, and an information center were submerged in What Pipeline's gallery space, where the boundaries between "theatrical provocation" and real-life engagement with Flint's water crisis was blurred.

2.5 The Use of Water in Pope.L's Oeuvre

A month before Pope.L's grandiose exhibition *Instigation, Aspiration, Perspiration* (October 10, 2019 – March 8, 2020) opened organized by the joint efforts of the Whitney Museum of American Art, The Museum of Modern Art, and the Public Art Fund, a short video appeared on the Whitney Museum's website. In the video, titled *Flint Water Meets the Mighty Hudson*, Pope.L is seen walking down a pier on Manhattan's West Side, putting on a trench coat, and pouring a bottle of Flint water designed by the artist into the Hudson River. Delightful music is playing, couples dance on the pier, and the night comes. In the meantime, he keeps pouring the water into the river in an elongated gesture, as if he had a bottomless bottle. The video connects the *Flint Water Project* to his later work, *Choir* (2019), which was exhibited at the Whitney Museum in 2019 (*Figure 23*).

As the press release states, *Choir* expanded on the artist's "ongoing exploration and use of water" and the work was "inspired by the fountain, the public arena, and John Cage's conception of music and sound."[78] It was an installation dominated by a thousand-gallon plastic water storage tank, an old drinking fountain hanging above it, suspended upside down from the ceiling, and some piping. The fountain was sending water into the mouth of the tank with great noise,

[78]" Pope.L: Choir," Whitney Museum of American Art, Accessed January 23, 2021, https://whitney.org/exhibitions/pope-l

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until it filled up and the water drained through the network of pipes. The curators of the exhibition described the water tank as "a void that is filled with a roar, only to be pumped out and replenished again in a Sisyphean act."[79] The entire process resulted in a cacophony, suppressing the soundbites of 1930s Black field recordings, and African-themed Hollywood soundtracks. On the walls were fragmented vinyl texts, reading "NGGR WATER," "HLLOW WTR," "NDVSBL WTR." The installation undoubtedly had a heavy undertone, recalling Jim Crow era segregated water fountains.[80]

Pope.L's use of water was dramatic in both *Choir* and the *Flint Water Project*, yet, using some of the same elements (such as the water tanks), he managed to create an entirely different tone, aesthetics, and context for the two works. To complete the list of his works with water, a third project ought to be mentioned: *Well* (*Figure 24*). A very simple work, it borders on installation, sculpture, and even the readymade, which has had many iterations over the past few years, the last one accompanying *Choir*. All iterations involved filling various numbers of drinking glasses with water and exhibiting them on single shelves anchored to gallery walls. They were either left to evaporate or were refilled after a certain point. When asked about the connection behind these three projects, Pope.L wrote:

> the connection between all three works is water and how it is interacted with— all three are about process— *Flint* is about the fantasy of saving a someone— *Well* is about the domestic as altar or lab where you dress a material in the robes of home and then you leave to physical forces much larger— Choir is about singing and sound as noise text-[81]

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[79] Christopher Y. Lew, Nancy Poses, Fred Poses, "Something from Nothing: On Pope.L's *Choir* and Other Waters," Whitney Museum of American Art, Accessed January 23, 2021, https://whitney.org/essays/popel-choir

[80] This sense of play with language through abbreviation is echoed in the most recent films of Tony Cokes, *4 Videos*, which focus on police brutality and mass mourning through the words of John Lyndon, Judith Butler, John Lewis, and Elijah McCain.

[81] Email correspondence with the author, January 6, 2021.

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Though all three projects are very different, at the core of each lies the "have-not-ness" so important in the work of the artist: the water that is often taken for granted is in fact a highly political matter. Water is the very source of life, but it can also uphold segregation in the form of a drinking fountain. Pope.L's three works call attention to this politicization of water, which in most cases is far from visible, and always jeopardizes lives along color lines, via the effects of segregation, environmental racism, and increasingly, climate change.

Pope.L's water works could be compared to a few European artists' works, which have also used water as material to demonstrate environmental concerns. One of them is the early work of Hans Haacke's, *Rhine-Water Purification Plant* (1972). In this work, the German-born artist set up a chemical treatment plant at the Museum Haus Lange in Krefeld (former West Germany) and worked with charcoal and sand filtration to treat polluted water from the Rhine River. The purified water was collected in a large basin, filled with swimming goldfish to prove the success of Haacke's technology. For another work of the same exhibition, entitled *Krefeld Sewage Triptych* (1972), Haacke recorded the level of untreated sewage that Krefeld dumped into the Rhine River annually, exposing the city's polluting activities. As art historian T.J. Demos argues, Haacke's works "not only intervened in a degraded ecosystem, but also identified the causes of its situation and worked to draw public attention to the broader political and economic culture of environmental abuse.[82]

Another work by Danish artist Tue Greenfort came to mind after watching Pope.L's elongated gesture of pouring the contaminated Flint water into the Hudson River in his teaser

[82] T.J. Demos, *Decolonizing Nature: Contemporary Art and the Politics of Ecology* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2016), 48.

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video for the Whitney Museum of American Art. In *Diffuse Einträge* (*Diffuse Entries*, 2007) a site-specific installation for the Skulptur Projekte Münster, Greenfort brought a fertilizer truck to shoot a jet of Iron (III)-Chloride-infused water into the city's Lake Aa. It was a Sisyphean attempt to treat the phosphate pollution and the growth of algae of the water caused by the meat industry. Greenfort's attempt to improve the conditions of the lake was "purely cosmetic," reflecting on the city's approach to tackle the problem with adding chemicals into the lake instead of imposing regulations on industrial farming and the meat industry.[83] While the absurdist spin Greenfort put on Münster's environmental pollution definitely resembles Pope.L's approach, it remains strictly in the realm of art. To the contrary, *Flint Water Project* introduced art into everyday life through sales and donations, making a positive impact that far exceeds a mere cosmetic fix. In the following section, I will take a closer look at the project's socially engaged, or as Pope.L would call it, "socially responsible," aspect.

2.6 Social Engagement and Long-Term Effects

Flint Water Project was not only a multi-layered conceptual artwork, which incorporated elements of performance and installation, but it was also an intervention. The selling of bottled Flint water was a key aspect of the piece, which has a long-term, positive impact on the local community. Between 2017 and January 2018, the project raised over $30,000 for Hydrate Detroit and the United Way of Genessee County, local organizations fighting for water accessibility in the cities of Detroit and Flint. As all funds and artist fees connected to the project are still

[83] Jenny Hoedemaker, "Tue Greenfort," Skulptur Projekte Archiv, Accessed January 23, 2021, https://www.skulptur-projekte-archiv.de/en-us/2007/projects/136/

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donated to the United Way of Genessee County, Pope.L's support of the people of Flint is ongoing. Up until April 2020, approximately $34,000 has been donated in total.[84]

Through fundraising, the *Flint Water Project* has made a real-life contribution to alleviate the crisis. Of course, compared to settlements in the amounts of $97 million and $600 million (discussed on pages 8-9), one's impression might be that the artist's contribution is merely a drop in the ocean; but it is a meaningful one, one that goes directly to organizations led by local activists and does not involve the leadership of the city, state, or federal government that had continuously let the people of Flint down. Pope.L's studio donated most of the proceeds from the sales to the United Way of Genessee County, they felt that "they were aware of players in the community" who were doing the real work on the ground.[85]

In such a complex artwork, where the artistic is merged with real life social engagement, sometimes the lines between the role of the artist and the activist—or a person who is determined to help a community—are blurred:

> well, when you do these sorts of projects, where you are dealing more so with people, where people in a sense are a key material, it is difficult at times to separate yourself as a person from yourself as an artist. you try to set boundaries in the beginning but they always fray along the way.[86]

When asked about the extraordinary nature of this project, and the way he managed to reconcile the artistic aspect of the work with the fact that it needed to raise funds in order to work, Pope.L wrote that he foregrounded what the community needed:

> i did a 4 or 5 or 6 year year project called the Black Factory which had similar concerns. people as material. interactions with people, strangers would be a key element. in the BF i foregrounded these interactions, in Flint i did not. instead i focused on creating wealth that i'd leave behind for the community. in these projects, you always start out in which

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[84] This was the most up to date number Pope.L's studio could provide. (Email correspondence with Pope.L's studio, January 22, 2021.)

[85] Email correspondence with the author, January 22, 2021.

[86] Email correspondence with the author, January 6, 2021.

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> the sky is the limit but i knew with Flint from many years of experience to focus my efforts, listen to what people say they need, etc not what the project per se needs.[87]

As Pope.L mentions, before planning out his artwork, he listened to the people of Flint: he visited the city to talk to locals and find a way to create an artwork that not only avoids to "revictimize them," but empowers them.

It is most important in social practice or a socially engaged art project that the artist listens to the needs of the local community before embarking on a project. Otherwise, the work might impose conditions on local people that they are not comfortable with. For example, Swiss artist Thomas Hirschhorn's *Gramsci Monument* (2013), which he built in a Bronx housing project with the involvement of locals, was vehemently criticized by some. Ken Johnson of *The New York Times* wrote that it was "another monument to his monumental ego."[88] By some, Hirschhorn was seen as a rich, European (meaning white) intruder, who worked with the Bronx community in a sort of "guilt-cleansing exercise."[89] On the other hand, Suzanne Lacy's *The Oakland Projects* (1991-2000) was never accused of the same. In this large-scale project which spun over the course of 9 years, Lacy worked with collaborators in Oakland, California to produce workshops and classes for youth, media intervention, and policy development. While the length of this thesis does not permit to go into details on either of these two projects, it is important to note that long-term commitment as well as a close working relationship with locals is needed for socially engaged art projects to empower a community.

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[87] The repetition in the text is not a typo.
Email correspondence with the author, January 6, 2021.

[88] Ken Johnson, "A Summer Place in the South Bronx," *The New York Times,* July 25, 2013, https://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/26/arts/design/a-visit-to-thomas-hirschhorns-gramsci-monument.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0

[89] Howard Halle's comment on the blog of Art F City quoted in: Whitney Kimball, "How Do People Feel About the Gramsci Monument, One Year Later?" *Art F City*, August 20, 2014, http://artfcity.com/2014/08/20/how-do-people-feel-about-the-gramsci-monument-one-year-later/

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Through the analysis of both its artistic and social merits, and comparisons made with other ambitious works of environmental art or social practice, it becomes obvious that Pope.L's *Flint Water Project* is a successful work of art that is excelling on all levels.

In an interview with Martha Wilson for *BOMB Magazine*, when asked about whether the purpose of art is to change the world in a tiny way, Pope.L said:

> I believe you have to leap into the void and say, "I have faith we can make it a little better." It's not that I have the arrogance to believe that I know what should be done, in fact, I'm afraid of the responsibility, but something should be done. And if I can construct works that allow people to enter themselves, thus, enter the mess—then it's a collaboration and maybe, possibly, who knows, why not—I've nudged something.[90]

[90] Martha Wilson, "William Pope.L," *BOMB Magazine*, April 1, 1996, https://bombmagazine.org/articles/william-pope-l/

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Chapter 3: Lead Poisoned No More: Mel Chin's *Fundred Dollar Bill Project* (2006-)

3.1 A History of Environmental Racism in the City of New Orleans

starving there, sitting around the bars,
and at night walking the streets for
hours,
the moonlight always seemed fake
to me, maybe it was,
and in the French Quarter I watched
the horses and buggies going by,
everybody sitting high in the open
carriages, the black driver, and in
back the man and the woman,
usually young and always white.
and I was always white.
and hardly charmed by the
world.
New Orleans was a place to
hide.

—Charles Bukowski, *Young in New Orleans*

The city of New Orleans is part of what became known as "Cancer Alley" in Louisiana—an area stretching between New Orleans and Baton Rouge along the Mississippi River. The area used to be called the "petrochemical corridor," accommodating a vast number of petrochemical plants, but as reports surfaced of the high numbers of cancer occurring in the primarily Black and low-income, rural communities on both sides of the river, the entire area became known as Cancer Alley.[91] Sociologist Beverly Wright, who lives in New Orleans, described the region as an "environmental sacrifice zone, a dump for the rest of the nation's toxic waste."[92] Sociologist

[91] Taylor, *Toxic Communities*, 20.
[92] Beverly Wright, "Living and Dying in Louisiana's 'Cancer Alley'," In the Quest for Environmental Justice: Human Rights and the Politics of Pollution ed. Robert D. Bullard (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 2005), 88.

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Robert D. Bullard, who is known as the "father of environmental justice" has written extensively about the rampant racism of the city:

> There is another truth about the city of New Orleans that is probably known only by those of us who have lived here most of our lives and have experienced the almost strangling grip of racism that operates just under the radar, never detected by most visitors to our city. New Orleans was probably more racialized before Katrina, and remains so after Katrina, than it had been since the civil rights battles of the 1960s and 1970s.[93]

The city, troubled by petrochemical pollution, the second-highest cancer death rate in the country,[94] and vast racial disparities, was hit by the devastating, category 5 Hurricane Katrina in 2005, essentially flooding 80 percent of New Orleans. The catastrophic storm surge effectively wiped out the Lower Ninth Ward, a majority Black neighborhood in the city, as several levees broke in the area. Though natural disasters do not discriminate based on skin color, the lack of infrastructure in certain neighborhoods was indicative of racial disparities, which were further perpetuated by the city's rebuilding strategy. Bullard described these rebuilding efforts as a "second disaster" in his book *Race, Place, and Environmental Justice After Hurricane Katrina* co-edited with Wright:

> This "second disaster" of environmental and racial injustice has left its mark on residents in the low-income neighborhoods of the Ninth Ward and the mostly black middle-class neighborhoods of New Orleans East ravaged by Katrina, many of whom are convinced that federal, state, and local officials will not prioritize their communities for clean-up and rebuilding.[95]

It was in this context, after the devastation of Hurricane Katrina, that artist Mel Chin arrived in New Orleans, with the hopes that he could offer something to the devastated communities.

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[93] Robert D. Bullard, Beverly Wright, ed. *Race, Place, and Environmental Justice After Hurricane Katrina: Struggles to Reclaim, Rebuild, and Revitalize New Orleans and the Gulf Coast*, (New York and London: Routledge, 2008), 15.
[94] According to the National Center for Health Statistics and Centers for Disease Control, 2002, in Taylor, *Toxic Communities*, 20.
[95] Bullard and Wright, ed. *Race, Place, and Environmental Justice After Hurricane Katrina,* 18.
For more on Hurricane Katrina and race: Michael Eric Dyson, *Come Hell or high water: Hurricane Katrina and the color of disaster* (New York: Basic Civitas, 2006)

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Visiting the city numerous times, he discovered that "the disaster was in the soil before the disaster"— thirty percent of the childhood population of New Orleans had been lead poisoned before Katrina.[96] Lead poisoning is a serious health hazard, which can cause brain damage, lowered IQ, behavioral problems, and in extreme cases, death. There are also studies linking lead poisoning to juvenile delinquency and violent crime[97]— as a consequence, the health hazard can lead to future incarceration. As New Orleans has one of the highest murder rates in the United States,[98] the connection between lead poisoning and violent crime is of special significance.

Lead poisoning is especially damaging at an early age, and thus children are most vulnerable to its effects. In the United States, it mostly occurs when there is exposure to lead-based paint in pre-1987 buildings (when its usage was finally banned by the federal government), in addition to contaminated soil, air pollution, or contaminated drinking water from deteriorated lead pipes—as in the case of the water crisis in Flint, Michigan. Recent studies indicate that Black children have two to five times higher odds of having elevated blood lead levels than white children,[99] describing it as a "significant nationwide racial disparity."[100]

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[96]" Paydirt," Art21, June 19, 2008, https://art21.org/watch/extended-play/mel-chin-paydirt-short/

[97] For example, Howard M. Mielke and Sammy Zahran, "The urban rise and fall of air lead (Pb) and the latent surge and retreat of societal violence," *Environmental International*, Volume 43 (August 2012), https://doi.org/10.1016/j.envint.2012.03.005

[98] Ramon Antonio Vargas, "New Orleans was fourth-deadliest U.S. city in 2019. Here's what 2020 ranking could look like," *Nola.com*, September 29, 2020, https://www.nola.com/news/crime_police/article_255bf308-0276-11eb-a38f-4f890c23241b.html

[99] According to the CDC, there is no safe blood lead level in children. Until 2012, children were identified as having a blood lead "level of concern" if the test result was 10 or more micrograms per deciliter (µg/dL) of lead in blood. "Blood Lead Levels in Children," Centers for Disease Control, Accessed January 23, 2021, https://www.cdc.gov/nceh/lead/prevention/blood-lead-levels.htm

[100] Deniz Yeter, Ellen C. Banks, and Michael Aschner, "Disparity in Risk Factor Severity for Early Childhood Blood Lead among Predominantly African-American Black Children: The 1999 to 2010 US NHANES," International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, (February 2020), doi: 10.3390/ijerph17051552

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In fact, if there are any positive aspects to be found in Hurricane Katrina's flooding of New Orleans, it is that it has significantly decreased the amount of lead contained in the topsoil, which, as a result, also lowered children's blood lead levels. This was discovered when researchers compared data gathered between 2000-2005 to data from 2011-2016 in a study[101] co-authored by Howard W. Mielke, one of the most prominent lead-poisoning experts in the US, who has dominated lead-poisoning research in New Orleans. However, this same study found that Black children in New Orleans were three times more likely to have elevated blood lead levels than white children. As of 2016, about 11 percent of kids under the age of 6 indicated significantly elevated blood lead levels (5 micrograms per deciliter) in New Orleans, which is still far higher than the national average of 2.5 percent—and double the rate in Flint during the water crisis there, when 5 percent of children had blood lead levels that high.[102] These reports mark New Orleans as the epicenter of a lead poisoning epidemic, which disproportionately harms the bodies and minds of Black children. In an article discussing lead poisoning crisis of New Orleans, Vann R. Newkirk wrote,

> For people living in precarious financial, environmental, and social conditions, black skin often carries with it a life of additional traumas. Strata of segregation and exclusion manifest in the most fundamental factors of life—from the air people breathe to the water they drink—and even when they don't kill outright, they often exacerbate existing issues. For those in the poisoned generation and beyond, blackness is a tightrope, and lead poisoning is just one of the ways to fall.[103]

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[101] Howard W. Mielke, Christopher R. Gonzales, Eric T. Powell, Mark A. S. Laidlaw, Kenneth J. Berry, Paul W. Mielke Jr., and Sara Perl Egendorf," The concurrent decline of soil lead and children's blood lead in New Orleans,"*Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, (October 2019), https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1906092116

[102] Nidhi Subbaraman, "Poison in the Pipes," *BuzzFeed News*, November 4, 2019, https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/nidhisubbaraman/new-orleans-lead-water-hidden-report

[103] Vann R. Newkirk II, "The Poisoned Generation," *The Atlantic*, May 21, 2017, https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/05/the-poisoned-generation/527229/

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3.2 Mel Chin: Artist, Activist, and Catalyst

Mel Chin was born in Houston, Texas in 1951 to Chinese immigrant parents. Growing up in Houston's Kashmere Gardens, a majority Black neighborhood, and working at his parents' grocery store, he was exposed to the realities of racism and poverty at an early age. He also started making art as a kid, and his family encouraged him to explore painting, drawing, and photography. As a high school student, he organized the first ecology club at Bellaire High School.[104] At university, he was immersed in ceramics, exploring the works of Marcel Duchamp and Joseph Cornell. At the beginning of his career, his practice was primarily focused on object-making. But for his first public art commission in Hermann Park, Houston, Chin began his lifelong exploration with earth and soil as material: he created *The Earthworks: See/Saw* (1976), two 6-by-6-foot squares of earth, which were embedded in the ground, connected by an underground cylinder system, and moving up and down by the weight of the people stepping on them. However, it was in 1989, after his first solo museum exhibition, *Directions: Mel Chin* at the Hirschhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, DC, that he completely abandoned object making:

> Here I was, after my first museum show, going around saying, "The future is plants, the future of sculpture for me will be plants." People thought I had lost it. They were saying, "Wow, man, you better go make some *art*," and I said, "It will be art." I remember being so convinced by this notion of plants transforming landscapes, by the fundamental power of this conceptual and physical process involving social engagement. That's why I was so excited about it.[105]

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[104] Lisa A. Crossman, "Don't Look Back: A Chronology of the Career of Mel Chin," in Mel Chin: REMATCH, ed. Miranda Lash (New Orleans and Ostfildern, Germany: New Orleans Museum of Art and Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2014), 202.

[105] D. Eric Bookhardt, "From Field Testing to Even Exchange: Mel Chin," Art Papers, Vol. 3, Issue 1. (January/February 2009), https://www.artpapers.org/from-field-testing-to-even-exchange-mel-chin/

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Just two years later, Chin began an ambitious project, *Revival Field,* 1991-1993 (*Figure 25*), with the collaboration of scientist and research agronomist Rufus Chaney. *Revival Field* merged Chin's artistic approach with scientific knowledge in a groundbreaking experiment to extract heavy metals from contaminated soil with the help of special hyperaccumulator plants. As described by Chin, it is a "conceptual artwork with the intent to sculpt a site's ecology" using science to address an environmental hazard, but also considering aesthetics as an important aspect of the work. As Lucy Lippard writes, the earthwork, first carried out at Pig's Eye Landfill, a State Priority Superfund site near St. Paul, Minnesota, took on a mythological form, resembling the representation of earth and heaven in Chinese iconography.[106] With this ambitious artwork aiming to remediate the contaminated soil, Chin's name became part of the history of environmental and ecological art, yet distinct from land art practitioners, who were mainly concerned with formal or aesthetic qualities when sculpting the Earth. *Revival Field* can be compared to key environmental works of the era, such as Hans Haacke's *Rhine-Water Purification Plant* (1972), Alan Sonfist's *Time Landscape* (1978-ongoing), or Agnes Denes' *Wheatfield: A Confrontation* (1982). Combining a well-articulated ecological concern with innovative, scientific solutions and an aesthetic sensibility, *Revival Field* foreshadowed Chin's even more ambitious artistic project, the *Fundred Dollar Bill Project*—which will be discussed in the following sections—and most recently, *Unmoored* (2018). As part of the artist's exhibition *All Over the Place* at the Queens Museum in 2018, *Unmoored*, a mixed-reality digital app developed in collaboration with Microsoft, provided an augmented reality experience for Times

[106] Lucy Lippard, The Edge That Cuts, in *Inescapable Histories: Mel Chin*, ed. Benito Huerta and Lucy R. Lippard, exh. cat. (Kansas City, Missouri: ExhibitsUSA, 1996), 9.

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Square visitors, offering a glimpse into New York City's future boat traffic, once the city becomes underwater due to rising sea levels. As part of the same exhibition, Chin also addressed the Flint water crisis in a collaboration with fashion designer Tracy Reese entitled *Flint Fit* (2018): at Chin's initiation, over 90,000 used bottles were collected and bought from the people of Flint, made into fabric by a textile manufacturer in Greensboro, North Carolina, to then provide material for the capsule collection of designer Reese. To further engage the distressed city of Flint in this collaborative project, the garments were sewn by residents at the St Luke N.E.W. Life Center in Flint.

Chin's vast artistic output spanning over the past 50 years is characterized by ecological and political concerns paired with a collaborative mindset and an openness to work with different professionals, materials, and situations. According to Chin, art is "a catalytic structure that ultimately sets up a condition for communication to be formed"[107]—which is conveyed perfectly in his most ambitious, socially engaged art project, *Fundred.*

3.3 Fundred and Post-Katrina Restoration in New Orleans

Mel Chin arrived in the city of New Orleans in June 2006 in the company of his friend, the artist and activist Rick Lowe, co-founder of Transforma, a collective formed to help the recovery of the city after Hurricane Katrina with the power of art and social justice. Chin was invited to collaborate with Transforma to create an art project, and he returned to New Orleans several times before formulating his response to the city's post-Katrina problems. In a video for Art21, he explained what it was like to visit the city for the first time after the natural disaster hit:

[107] Martha Rees and Mel Chin, "A Composite Interview with Mel Chin," in *Inescapable Histories: Mel Chin,* 44.

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"as a creative individual, I felt hopeless and inadequate, and I was flooded by this terrible insecurity that being an artist was not enough to deal with the tragedy that was before me."[108] In an interview with the artist, he described that he was completely unprepared for the level of devastation he saw, and was very much affected by talking to people who survived the storm. He became obsessed, visiting New Orleans several times to come up with a project of "equivalent magnitude."[109] At the suggestion of Dr. Rufus Cheney, with whom Chin kept in touch after the conclusion of *Revival Field*, he contacted scientist Dr. Howard Mielke, a leading expert on lead poisoning from Tulane University.

> Dr. Mielke showed me maps of New Orleans, which I call the "red lead map," which was concentrations of lead in the soil of New Orleans neighborhoods. I saw where the concentrations were, they were mostly in the poorer neighborhoods, and Black neighborhoods—mostly Black, you know. But I didn't know what the numbers meant, until he translated it for me this way: 30 to 50 percent of the inner-city childhood population of New Orleans was poisoned with lead before Katrina, and there was no effort they knew of at the time, or very little resources going to transform what I felt was a crisis.[110]

New Orleans was one of the worst lead-contaminated areas in the country, with 86,000 lots contaminated with lead levels up to six times more than the maximum permitted by the EPA for play areas.[111] Frustrated upon learning about the severity of this problem, Chin asked how much it would cost to clean up the region:

> Dr. Mielke mentioned this number, 300 million, and it didn't take me more than 30 seconds to tell him: "Well, we'll have to *make* that much money!" We—in other words, I saw a project where, essentially these children that were being poisoned needed an opportunity to have their voice and the value of their future expressed. It was more than a representational project, requiring much more than me."

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[108]" Paydirt," Art21.

[109] Zoom interview with the author, February 19, 2021.

[110] Zoom interview with the author, February 19, 2021.

[111]" Art Imitates Remediation As First Step in City Cleanup," Engineering News Record, Accessed January 23, 2021,
https://www.enr.com/articles/3102-art-imitates-remediation-as-first-step-in-city-cleanup

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After initially researching scientific solutions, working with Mielke, and then with Dr. Andrew Hunt, an environmental health scientist at the University of Texas in Arlington, who utilized *Apatite II*, a fish-bone-derived phosphate to neutralize lead in the soil,[112] Chin set out to come up with a plan to cover the enormous amount needed for the complete rehabilitation of the area. Initially, he named the project *Operation Paydirt* in 2006 with optimism, referring to a term from the American gold rush, when prospectors exclaimed "Pay dirt!" when they found gold.[113] Chin was determined to "make" $300 million, and eventually conceived of the *Fundred Dollar Bill Project*—a wordplay on "fun," "fund," and "hundred." In order to come up with the money, Chin decided to initiate a large-scale socially engaged artwork and creative campaign, in which he asked children from New Orleans to make "Fundreds" —hand-drawn hundred-dollar bills. Chin's goal was to come up with a total of three million *Fundreds*, drawn by children from all over the country, and then deliver them to Washington D.C. to demand an even exchange for real funds to resolve lead contamination in the city. The key aspect *Fundred* was including those who are most vulnerable to the crisis, and yet have no political agency: children. Chin wanted to create a platform to enable their hopes to be expressed for a lead-free environment through creating "original works of art," hand-drawn interpretations of hundred-dollar bills.[114] The *Fundred Dollar Bill Project* was officially launched in 2008, after Chin presented the project at the National Art Education Association with the support of Art21, and with the opening of

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[112] In 2010, he was awarded $498,138 by the US Department of Housing and Urban Development to examine the effectiveness of his method to tread lead contamination on properties in New Orleans.
Crossman, "Don't Look Back," 220-221.

[113] Linda Weintraub, *To Life! Eco Art: In Pursuit of a Sustainable Planet* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2012), 138.

[114]" The Fundred Project," Fundred.org, Accessed January 23, 2021, https://fundred.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Fundreds-Toolkit_030718.pdf

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Safehouse, 2008-2010 on October 4. *Safehouse* was a formally derelict building in the St. Roch neighborhood of New Orleans, transformed into the first temporary headquarter for the Chin's project, and hosted the first batch of *Fundreds* drawn by youth living in the area (based on a template provided by the artist, *Figures 26-30*). The main entrance of the building transformed into a 10-foot bank-vault door, symbolizing the value of the *Fundreds* collected and safeguarded in the building.

Chin's decision to transform a derelict building into the first headquarter of *Fundred* must have been influenced by his artist and activist friend Rick Lowe's *Project Row Houses* (1993). Lowe began his complex and evolving project by purchasing a row of abandoned houses slotted for demolition in Houston's predominantly Black and low-income Northern Third Ward district and transforming them into a flourishing center for its residents with funding from the National Endowment for the Arts. Over time, the project has grown from 22 houses to 40, which provide essential social services, low-income housing and art programming to the local community.[115]

Fundred quickly expanded with the participation of schools not only from New Orleans, but from all over the country, and soon he was invited to group exhibitions in Houston and New York City to engage youth.

> In 2010, I was still thinking in this maybe unrealistic way of an even exchange of the drawings to capital, to support this transformation. I felt that 300 million might not be enough to transform the United States, but there were a lot of hopes at the time, that if we could pay for the transformation of the city that is damaged and left alone in this crisis, it could be a rescue city for other cities like an example.[116]

[115] Nato Thompson, "Rick Lowe: Project Row Houses," in *Living as Form: Socially Engaged Art from 1991-2011.*
[116] Zoom interview with the author, February 19, 2021.

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Though Chin, with his staff of two, Mary Rubin and Amanda Wiles, made heroic attempts to collect 3 million *Fundreds*, the original plan proved unrealistic. Instead of waiting for years to gather 3 million *Fundreds*, they sent off the "Sous Terre" armored truck to collect *Fundreds* in six months between 2009-2010: the truck drove over 18,000 miles, activating 117 events and collected over 400,000 drawings from schools and museums nationwide (*Figure 31*).

During the past 10 years, the *Fundred Project* has become a multifaceted, continuously expanding project, operating through community engagement, awareness raising campaigns, and developing school curricula. Apart from relentlessly collecting *Fundreds*, their highlights include a video featuring local drama students talking about the history of lead contamination, and ways to prevent exposure in 2013 in Charlotte, NC, as part of a program integrating arts and lead poisoning prevention.[117] In 2014, the project also launched a two-part animation about lead poisoning entitled *Now You See It*,[118] which premiered on 2000 metro buses in Los Angeles, reaching millions of riders. Yet another one of their achievements: they collaboratively developed a special university course with the Art Academy of Cincinnati and the Health Department's Childhood Lead Poisoning Prevention Program, which engaged students in creative projects and public events to raise awareness of local lead problems.

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[117] Fundred Project, "Fundred Dollar Bill–Public Service Announcement," YouTube, May 30, 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ImDMNnAz4fA

[118] Fundred Project, "Now You See It - Part 1 – by Mel Chin," YouTube, October 2, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ztov8RxpLJk

Fundred Project, "Now You See It - Part 2 – by Mel Chin," YouTube, October 2, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LsngfmxFE_I

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3.4 Art and Political Lobbying: Fundred in Washington D.C.

According to Chin, it quickly became apparent to his team that "changing national policy could be more beneficial on the longer run [than demanding an even exchange for *Fundreds*]; and building a sustained role that would let the project go beyond the artworld."[119] Thus, in 2016, the *Fundred Dollar Bill Project* moved its headquarters to Washington D.C.,to involve local schools and policymakers. *Fundreds* were exhibited at the historic rotunda of the Corcoran School of the Arts and Design, just across the street from the White House. The exhibition, entitled *Fundred Reserve* displayed 453,168 hand-drawn *Fundreds*, the bank-vault door of the *Safehouse*, a project archive, and new student works related to the issues of lead (*Figures 32-37*). The same year, the *Fundred Dollar Bill Project* was presented at the National Lead Summit in Washington D.C. where 250 experts and leaders convened to end lead poisoning in five years. Along with nationwide workshops and exhibitions, the *Fundred Reserve* was exhibited in two more locations in Washington D.C.: at H Space in 2018 and at Eaton DC in 2019 (*Figure 38*). Parallel to the exhibitions, political lobbying became a significant aspect of *Fundred*: in 2018 and 2019, Chin and the organizers of the campaign met with over 10 members of Congress, including then-House Democratic Leader Nancy Pelosi, who visited the exhibition at the Corcoran School along with Representative Dan Kildee. Pelosi was part of Congress' bipartisan effort to pass a $170 million settlement to alleviate the water crisis in Flint. In her speech welcoming the *Fundreds* in Washington, she said, "The arts can be the place, the vehicle to bring people together. They are a place where we share laughter, tears, enthusiasm."[120]

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[119] Zoom interview with the author, February 19, 2021.
[120]" Fundred Reserve Project Illustrates Cost of Lead Poisoning," GW Today, March 13, 2017, https://gwtoday.gwu.edu/fundred-reserve-project-illustrates-cost-lead-poisoning

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On April 25, 2018 as part of the *Fundred Dollar Hill Day*, on the fourth anniversary of the Flint water crisis, *Fundred* artists and organizers held a joint news conference as well as Congress visits at the Capitol with residents of Flint, Michigan. They presented the *Fundred* bills to policy makers and addressed the Flint water crisis, as well as the issue of lead poisoning—a national issue which spans from Louisiana to Michigan. Congressman Dan Kildee, Representative of Michigan's 5th congressional district also participated in the press conference, and in his speech, he said: "I am sick to death of poor communities being treated like it's their own fault, the conditions they are forced to live in. This is the United States of America."[121]

In the past 12 years, the *Fundred Dollar Bill Project* has been exhibited at the Contemporary Art Museum in Houston, the New Orleans Museum of Art, and the Queens Museum, among other art spaces all over the country. According to the latest count on Fundred.org, 455,820 *Fundreds* have been collected from schools and workshops nationwide.[122] The project is still ongoing and will be displayed at the Smart Museum of Art at the University of Chicago in July 2021 next. At this moment, *Fundreds* are still being collected by the organizers, yet, the *Fundred Reserve* has already been accepted to the permanent collection of the Brooklyn Museum, securing the afterlife of the project for the future.[123]

3.5 "A Drop of Blood"

In 2011, when Mel Chin was asked about the ideal way to present the scope of the *Fundred Project* in an exhibition setting, he gave a striking answer: "It should be a single clean

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[121] Fundred Project, "Fundred Dollar HILL DAY," YouTube, July 30, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XDQtdfoOABk&feature=emb_logo

[122] The latest count was as of January 2021.

[123] Fundred Project, "CAPITAL TO CAPITOL: The Story of Fundred," YouTube, October 27, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yIwKTwyuZ7A

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drop of blood coming from a child no longer suffering from lead poisoning. The exit from the exhibition would open onto the city of New Orleans, which is the final product of the artwork."[124] The complex web of awareness raising, community engagement, and political lobbying—which has included the participation of almost half million children—would be encapsulated in a single drop of blood, representing the project. As Miranda Lash, co-author of his catalog entitled *REMATCH*, has pointed out, Chin's answer might seem absurdist at first, but in fact, he has always used art as a "Venus flytrap" to attract the attention of viewers.[125] Instead of developing a signature style, Chin has always sought out the media and materials most effective to lure viewers in to think about his message—in the case of *Fundred*, the hand-drawn hundred-dollar bills.

For the city of New Orleans to be the "final product," it would have to eliminate lead poisoning, requiring the cooperation of leadership on the federal, state, and local levels with the residents of the city, regardless of their class or race. As Lash notes, this concerted effort would turn New Orleans into a Beuysian "social sculpture."[126] Indeed, Beuys' conception of art offers a fruitful analogy to Chin's *Fundred Project*. Beuys once said that "Only art is capable of dismantling the repressive effects of a senile social system that continues to totter along the death line: to dismantle in order to build a SOCIAL ORGANISM AS A WORK OF ART."[127] His notion of the social organism, along with his belief "Jeder Mensch is ein Künstler" (Everyone is an artist) resonates deeply with what Chin aims to achieve in the *Fundred Project*.

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[124] Miranda Lash, "Endless Rematch: The Perpetual Evolution of Mel Chin," in. *Mel Chin: REMATCH,* ed. Miranda Lash, 37.
[125] Ibid., 37.
[126] Ibid.,
[127] Joseph Beuys quoted in Caroline Tisdall, *Joseph Beuys* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1979): 268.

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Fundred, as well as works of Beuys such as *7000 Oaks* (1982-1987) stem from a deeply immersive and collaborative urge; they require participation, organizing, and the strategic merging of art and life in order to work. These projects are conceived with the aim of achieving large-scale social transformation, yet they do not neglect to bring aesthetics, and poetics into play:

> To me, art is defined by poetics. What's the overall conception as understood? There's a poetic dynamic to [*Fundred*], even if we don't fulfill policy change. The poetics is that at least there's a conception that believed in the people and offered opportunities to be educated by them and supported by them. […] It's poetic to think that you can *sculpt an environment* through this process, and there's a tool and an action that can make it reality. With *Fundred*, it is the people's voice and their value, and this notion of capital, as part of this idea of lead pollution and environmental racism.[128]

For *Fundred* to be successful as an artwork, transformation does not exist without poetics. But for the project to work as a real-life intervention, it requires transformative energy, and the support of people. All of this is to point out that projects such as *Fundred* do not merely boil down to visual works of art, waiting to be placed in and contextualized by the canon of art history. They simultaneously dwell in and exceed existing categories of the canon, utilizing art as a toolbox to foster meaningful and lasting social change. In regard to any tension between fulfilling his artistic vision or the larger goal of "making" money to help New Orleans, Chin said:

> It's all about the money, it was the goal. But being an artist, you have to apply your own vision. What is even more valuable than the currency? It is the people's value on the long run. The vision never wavered from that understanding; using money was just a way of giving it a form, shape, and tangibility that is unmistakable. Individual expression-- we got half a million *Fundreds*, which is 50 million dollars in exchange, but it is a half a million voices that may be fundamental to assist in making a policy shift in the way the US deals with childhood lead poisoning.[129]

Chin's artistic vision was conceived as a reaction to the dire need for financial support, yet the problem also became part of the solution: hand-drawn hundred-dollar bills gave form and shape

[128] Zoom interview with the author, February 19, 2021.
[129] Zoom interview with the author, February 19, 2021.

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to the artist's poetic thinking about the value of human life and expression. In this sense, not only the problem and the solution, but the artistic and social goals of the project have been inherently interconnected from the beginning.

3.6 Long-term Impact and Community Engagement

As Chin has argued, "There has to be a certain elegance and logic to a project just as a great project can deliver its message with a wonderful economy of words.[130] His poetic yet pragmatic approach to artmaking is what makes the *Fundred Project* a success. Chin has continuously returned to the metaphor of the virus to describe his work in the social realm (a comparison that takes on very different connotations in the context of the-Covid-19 pandemic): acting as a catalyst to spread awareness from the classrooms of kids in New Orleans to the Capitol in Washington D.C. When asked about the tangible effects of *Fundred*, Chin mentioned progress around policymaking with the recent introduction of the Lead-Safe Housing for Kids Act[131] to Congress:

> The project cannot claim that the Lead-Safe Housing for Kids Act is the outcome of our effort, but at least it is in the *zeitgeist*. A policy has been finally written up at least, though it is still sitting in Congress. I believe that policymaker education is key… So, we have been visiting policy makers.[132]

The scope of Chin's approach bears comparison with the largest ongoing and pioneering community arts project, the *AIDS Memorial Quilt* conceived by gay rights activist Cleve Jones in 1985. The project was first displayed on October 11, 1987 on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., during the National March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights, showcasing 1,920

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130 Eleanor Heartney, "Going Viral: Mel Chin's Activist Art," in *Mel Chin: REMATCH*, 57.
131 "All Information (Except Text) for S.1583 – Lead Safe Housing for Kids Act of 2019," Congress.gov, Accessed February 23, 2021.
https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/senate-bill/1583/all-info
132 Zoom interview with the author, February 19, 2021.

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handmade quilt panels, commemorating those who died of AIDS.[133] Today, the project serves as an ever-growing, living memorial, with more than 48,000 panels dedicated to over 100,000 individuals.[134] The *AIDS Memorial Quilt* has had unprecedented success in raising awareness, mobilizing volunteers and collecting funds for AIDS service organizations (not to mention that the organizers were nominated for the 1989 Nobel Peace Prize). The *Fundred Project* carries analogous potentials to be a sea change in the public awareness of the environmental calamities that assail poor black populations. Almost half a million children have created their *Fundreds*, imagining a lead-free future, and their voices have been heard in Washington D.C. by the nation's policymakers and representatives: this alone is proving to ignite change.

Chin's strategy of achieving participants' emotional investment through sharing their personal narratives also brings to mind activist tactics. For example, the *Climate Ribbon* is an open-source project that invites participants to create their own iteration. The instructions to create this participatory, socially engaged artwork can be downloaded from the project's website—just as the *Fundred* template can be accessed through Fundred.org. The first iteration has been created for the 2014 People's Climate March in New York to raise awareness around the issue of the climate crisis. Artists, activists, and students asked participants to write an answer to the question "What do I love and hope to never lose to climate chaos?" on a ribbon and then tie it to the *Tree of Life* sculpture, creating a collaborative art installation.[135] What the *Climate Ribbon* lacks in contrast with *Fundred* is a single author or initiator, which goes against

[133]" The History of the Quilt," National AIDS Memorial, Accessed January 23, 2021, https://www.aidsmemorial.org/quilt-history
[134] "The History of the Quilt," National AIDS Memorial.
[135]" The Climate Ribbon," The Climate Ribbon, Accessed January 23, 2021, http://www.theclimateribbon.org

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the ideology of individualism dominating the canon of art; to recognize this open-access, collaborative work as part of art history would perhaps require another step of removal from our dominant notions of what art can and cannot be.

During the past fifteen years, Chin's imaginative art project has come a long way with the creation of *Safehouse*, the *Fundred Dollar Bill Project*, the *Fundred Reserve*, and all the multidisciplinary aspects of the work. While Chin's ambitious socially engaged project depends on the voices, drawings, and participation of each and every child who can participate, the project's contributions to the elimination of lead poisoning will have the most substantial impact on improving Black children's health all over the country.

When asked if he still felt "hopeless and inadequate" as an artist about the situation in New Orleans after over fifteen years of working on the *Fundred Project*, Chin gave a more optimistic answer:

> I still feel inadequate and hopeless—*I* feel inadequate. Collectively, after all these years, I feel that we can be more hopeful, because we have something. From a critical level, you understand in a socially engaged project that once you go there, it definitely cannot be your own. That the whole goal of the project is transformation. It's about a joint effort, and I'm more hopeful there.[136]

[136] Zoom interview with the author, February 19, 2021.

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Conclusion: Collective Power and Social Transformation

"What matters is not to know the world but to change it."

—Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*

While the effects of toxic exposure, natural disasters, and other environmental hazards cut across race, the federal, state, and city governments' efforts seem to favor certain lives over others. My three case studies focusing on Braddock, PA, New Orleans, LA, and Flint, MI shed light on the layered vulnerabilities that many Black Americans have to endure in the United States to this day. As the consequence of 20th century racist policies such as redlining, racial zoning, and racially restrictive covenants, Black communities often still face dire living conditions, such as close proximity to hazardous facilities and dilapidated housing. The disparities in living conditions harm the bodies and minds of Black Americans by exposing them to disproportionate amounts of lead and other toxins, contaminating their water, soil, and air. As I have investigated throughout this thesis, significant nationwide racial disparities still prevail in the environmental prospects as well as health conditions of Americans—from children's blood lead levels to cancer rates—awaiting eradication.

As the works of LaToya Ruby Frazier, Pope.L, and Mel Chin demonstrate, artists can successfully disentangle these complex relationships, expose systemic injustices, and offer creative solutions to alleviate environmental crises. The three artists approach the issue of environmental racism via distinct artistic media, methodologies, and rhetoric, yet they all succeed in bringing the nation's attention to their neglected communities and the injustices

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perpetuating their lived experiences. I have chosen to highlight the different tactics and methodologies of Frazier, Pope.L, and Chin through comparisons, focusing on their projects' artistic approaches, real-life impacts, and participatory levels. All three artists have been actively challenging the antiquated notions of artistic autonomy, acting instead as catalysts, inviting collaborators or participants to achieve social transformation through their collective power.

The Notion of Family is a deeply personal and intimate collaboration between Frazier, her grandmother, and her mother. One of the greatest strengths of her approach: she turned the camera onto *her own* body, family, and town, instead of working with other communities. Frazier has put her own flesh and experience on the line to bring our attention to the injustices many families like hers have been facing. Her evocative images display the joys and struggles of multiple generations, ranging from deindustrialization through the war on drugs to healthcare inequality. Through establishing a personal narrative, Frazier's intimate photographs move the viewer emotionally; using the camera as a weapon, she brings visibility to issues of communities and families most often overlooked by the mainstream media. Frazier's artistic decision to utilize the black-and-white aesthetics of 20th century social documentary is in perfect harmony with her goal of rewriting Braddock's history, and subverting prevalent representations of working-class Black families, such as hers.

While Frazier worked closely with her family to create the poignant images for her photo series, Pope.L relied on the involvement of visitors instead to fulfill the mission of his *Flint Water Project*. Had there been no visitors to buy his bottles of contaminated Flint water as pieces of art, the entire project would have fallen apart. Pope.L had very much built on the interaction

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with the audience and used “people as material”[137] in order to bring the *Flint Water Project* to fruition and thus help financially support the people of Flint. His theatrical provocation, and absurdist spin on the Flint water project not only highlights the grotesque situation that the people of Flint have been going through, but it also unfolds into a real-life, positive presence for the community. The *Flint Water Project* has involved residents on a practical level—from the selling of water bottles to the operation of the bottling facility as a performance—and has had a tangible impact on the community’s life by providing funds to alleviate the water crisis. Pope.L’s long-term commitment to the people of Flint is indicated by the project’s ongoing financial support of the United Way of Genessee County, a local organization helping Flint to alleviate the crisis. Any artist fee associated with the *Flint Water Project* that Pope.L receives (for example, for artist talks at Hunter College or at the University of California, Berkeley in 2020) are still donated to the organization.

Despite his reliance on audience participation, Pope.L has remained in the role of the “puppet master” behind his participatory art project, while Mel Chin’s *Fundred Dollar Bill Project* has elevated participatory art to yet another level. By collaboratively creating the *Fundred* drawings with half a million children, Chin has left the end result open-ended in an evolving, multidisciplinary, multi-year project. His belief that an artist is not an omnipotent creator, but a catalyst is clearly conveyed though his approach towards the country’s lead poisoning crisis. While the *Fundred Project* was conceived and authored by Chin, “It was a vision that meant nothing until someone else drew a *Fundred*, until someone else believed that

[137] Email correspondence with the author, January 6, 2021.

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their voice was meaningful,"[138] as he said. The project's course and progress have been inevitably determined by the actions of the many facilitators and participants, who have formed something like a Beuysian "social sculpture" in the process—progressing even beyond the lifetime of the artist. The *Fundred Project* has utilized educational workshops, awareness raising through animation, video, etc., and political lobbying, along with the power of collective artmaking, to address the epidemic of lead poisoning on a local as well as national level. While the ultimate goal of exchanging the *Fundreds* for money has been replaced with the aim of achieving large-scale policy change; it is safe to suggest that Chin and the *Fundred* team have had an enormous impact on tackling the lead contamination crisis from New Orleans to Flint.

Despite their diversity in terms of approaches and methodologies, all three artists have successfully interwoven artistic merit with social engagement and awareness raising around the issue of environmental racism. Through creating visibility via photographs, installation, performance, workshops, and the more pragmatic tools of fundraising and political lobbying, Pope.L, Frazier, and Chin have brought attention to the toxic pollution of neglected communities in the United States and offered solutions to improve their future prospects. All three artists have undeniably and successfully utilized art's language and aesthetic sensibilities to achieve their environmental and social justice endeavors.

In regard to the mobilization of an audience through these, "socially responsible"[139] artworks, Paul Ramírez Jonas has rightly pointed out that," The public has a form and any form can be art."[140] As Chin has argued, projects dealing with injustices of this magnitude require

[138] Zoom interview with the author, February 19, 2021.
[139] Per Pope.L's preferred term.
[140] Nato Thompson, "Living as Form" in *Living as Form: Socially Engaged Art from 1991-2011.* (New York, NY: Cambridge, MA: Creative Time Books, MIT Press, 2012).

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more than an artist: long-term commitment and creative, collaborative ways of working with the impacted communities. Frazier, Pope.L, and Chin not only achieve social transformation through commitment and engagement, but their projects are also cloaked in poetic thinking and visual expression that renders them intelligible in the realm of art. They contribute to redefining and enriching the art history canon, while also aiming to exist and evolve beyond the realm of art through their real-life impacts. These three projects invalidate the premises of Bishop and Foster, who have argued that the artistic merit and social impact of socially engaged works are almost mutually exclusive. To the contrary, in the works of Frazier, Pope.L, and Chin they are interconnected: the social worth and artistic merit enhance each other, and they create a continuity between the artistic vision and the community's needs.

This paper attempts to contribute to the formulation of a new genre of art history that has not yet been written. Volumes remain to be produced on forms of art that operate in an Environmental Justice context: documentaries, for instance, offer great opportunity for artists to bring the awareness of environmental injustices to large audiences. Just to give two examples, Spike Lee's *When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts* (2006) raises attention around the devastation of Hurricane Katrina and the racial disparities in the government's rebuilding efforts, while the recent Netflix-release *There's Something in the Water* (2019) directed by Elliot Page and Ian Daniel sheds light on the toxic pollution in Nova Scotia.

Though it might seem at first that art is inadequate to battle the dire situations of mass contamination, natural disasters, and the systemic racism of the country's leadership, the works of Frazier, Pope.L, and Chin give us a live demonstration of art's cogency, and its vital role in

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alleviating crises. Through long-term commitment and collaboration with activists, policymakers, or with those most vulnerable to toxic hazards, Pope.L, Frazier, and Chin prove that artists are capable of working toward a more habitable and equitable environment for all of us.

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ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure 1: Protests against dumping PCB contaminated soil in a Black community, Warren County, North Carolina, 1982. Source: Jenny Labalme, 1987.

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Figure 2: LaToya Ruby Frazier, Grandma Ruby and Me, 2005. Gelatin silver print. Courtesy of the artist and Gladstone Gallery.

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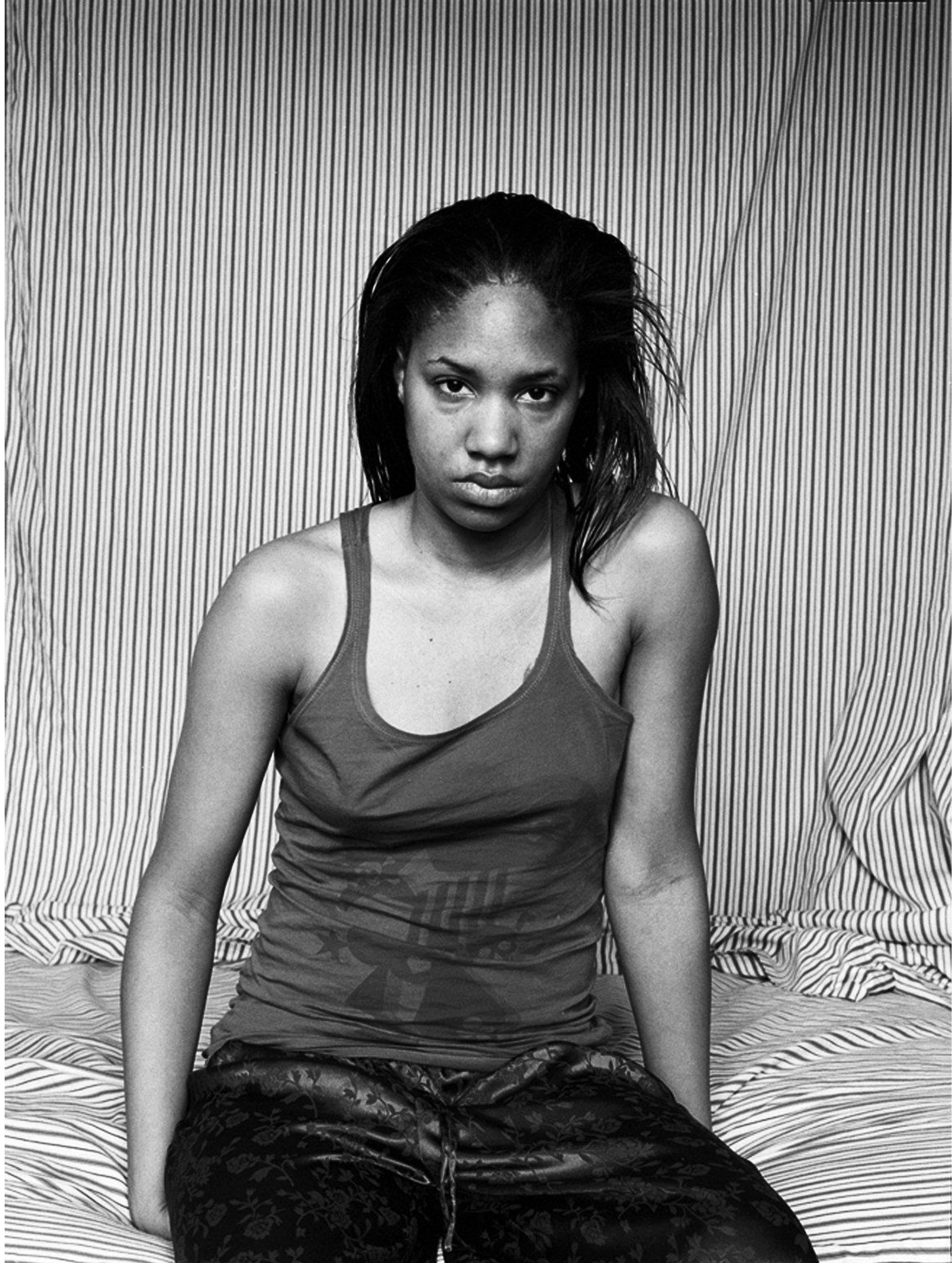

Figure 3: LaToya Ruby Frazier: Self-Portrait March (10:00 am), 2009. Gelatin silver print. Source: brooklynmuseum.org

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Figure 4: LaToya Ruby Frazier, Self-Portrait in Gramps's Bedroom (227 Holland Ave), 2009. Gelatin silver print. Courtesy of the artist and Gladstone Gallery.

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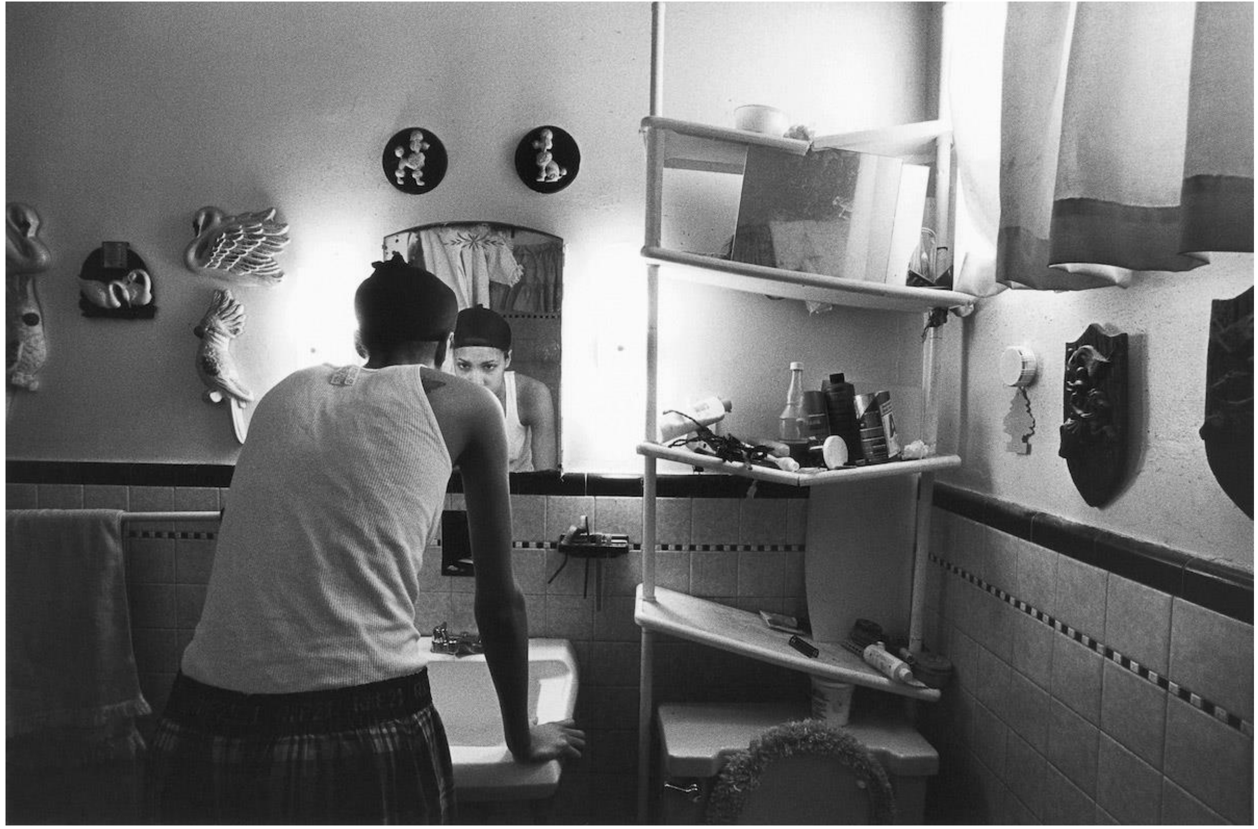

Figure 5: LaToya Ruby Frazier, Self-Portrait in the Bathroom, 2002. Gelatin silver print. Courtesy of the artist and Gladstone Gallery.

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Figure 6: LaToya Ruby Frazier, Momme (Shadow), 2008. Gelatin silver print. Source: ago.net

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Figure 7: LaToya Ruby Frazier, Momme Silhouettes, 2010. Nine gelatin silver prints. Source: ago.net

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Figure 8: LaToya Ruby Frazier, Epilepsy Test, 2011. Two gelatin silver prints. Courtesy of the artist and Gladstone Gallery.

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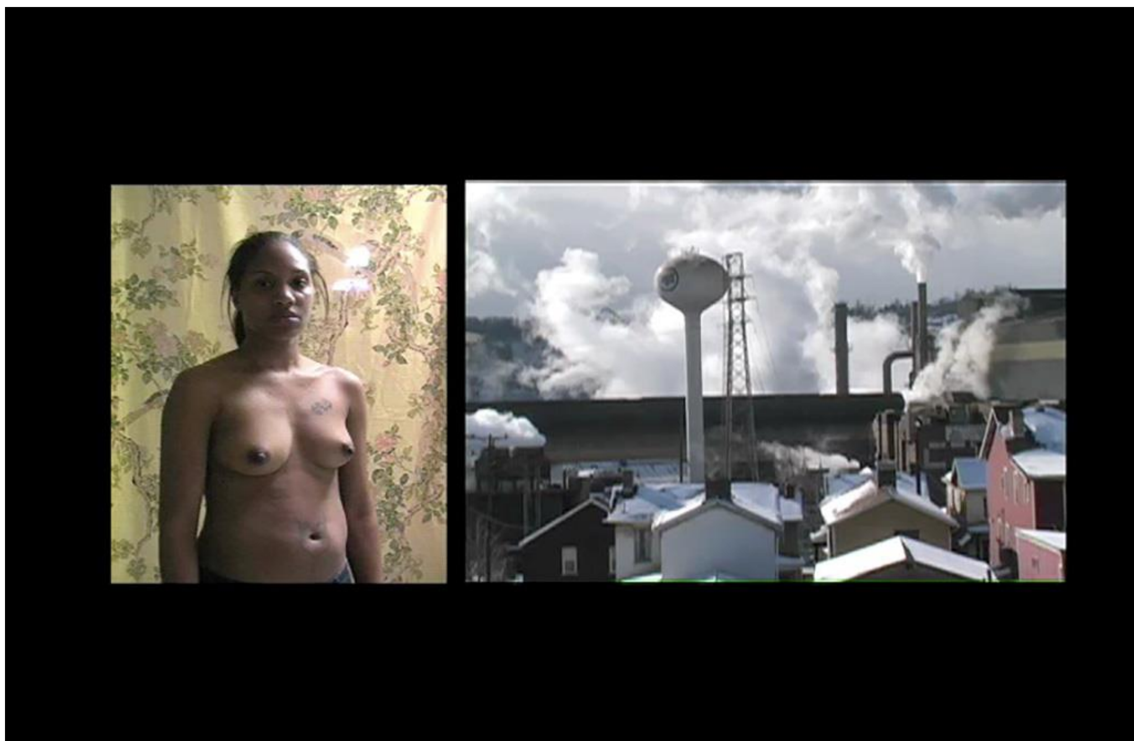

Figure 9: LaToya Ruby Frazier, Self-Portrait (United States Steel), 2010. Film still. Source: latoyarubyfrazier.com

Figure 10: LaToya Ruby Frazier, DETOX Braddock UPMC, 2011. Film still. Courtesy of the artist and Gladstone Gallery.

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Figure 11: UPMC Life-Changing Medicine, 2012. Gelatin silver print. Courtesy of the artist and Gladstone Gallery.

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Figure 12: LaToya Ruby Frazier, Fifth Street Tavern and UPMC Braddock Hospital on Braddock Avenue, 2011. Gelatin silver print. Courtesy of the artist and Gladstone Gallery.

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Figure 13: LaToya Ruby Frazier, 1908 Eight Street Market on Talbot Avenue, 2007. Gelatin silver print. Courtesy of the artist and Gladstone Gallery.

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Figure 14: LaToya Ruby Frazier, Huxtables, Mom, and Me, 2008. Gelatin silver print. Source: ago.net

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Figure 15: LaToya Ruby Frazier, Mom Making an Image of Me, 2008. Gelatin silver print. Source: ago.net

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Figure 16: Pope.L, Flint Water Project, What Pipeline, Detroit, September 7 – October 21, 2017. Installation view. Courtesy of the artist and What Pipeline.

Figure 17: Pope.L, Flint Water Project What Pipeline, Detroit, September 7 – October 21, 2017. Installation view. Courtesy of the artist and What Pipeline.

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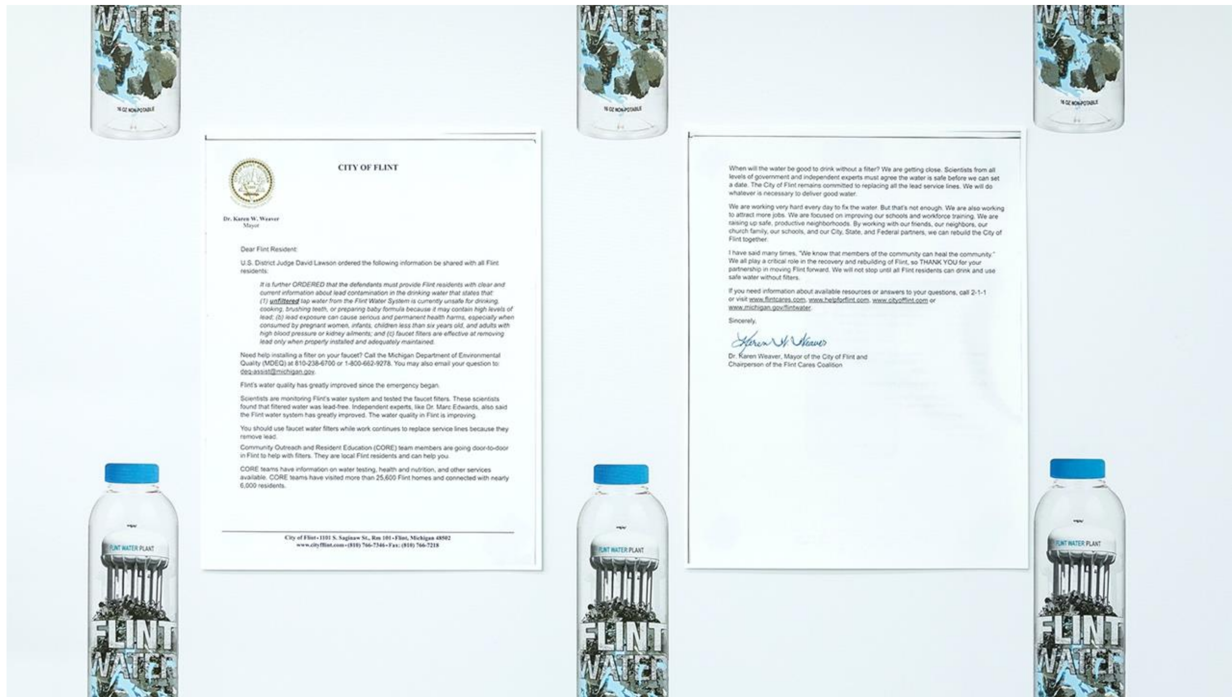
Figure 18: Pope.L, Flint Water Project What Pipeline, Detroit, September 7 – October 21, 2017. Installation view. Courtesy of the artist and What Pipeline.



CITY OF FLINT

Dr. Karen W. Weaver
Mayor

Dear Flint Resident:

U.S. District Judge David Lawson ordered the following information be shared with all Flint residents:

> *It is further ORDERED that the defendants must provide Flint residents with clear and current information about lead contamination in the drinking water that states that: (1) **unfiltered** tap water from the Flint Water System is currently unsafe for drinking, cooking, brushing teeth, or preparing baby formula because it may contain high levels of lead; (b) lead exposure can cause serious and permanent health harms, especially when consumed by pregnant women, infants, children less than six years old, and adults with high blood pressure or kidney ailments; and (c) faucet filters are effective at removing lead only when properly installed and adequately maintained.*

Need help installing a filter on your faucet? Call the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality (MDEQ) at 810-238-6700 or 1-800-662-9278. You may also email your question to: deq-assist@michigan.gov.

Flint's water quality has greatly improved since the emergency began.

Scientists are monitoring Flint's water system and tested the faucet filters. These scientists found that filtered water was lead-free. Independent experts, like Dr. Marc Edwards, also said the Flint water system has greatly improved. The water quality in Flint is improving.

You should use faucet water filters while work continues to replace service lines because they remove lead.

Community Outreach and Resident Education (CORE) team members are going door-to-door in Flint to help with filters. They are local Flint residents and can help you.

CORE teams have information on water testing, health and nutrition, and other services available. CORE teams have visited more than 25,600 Flint homes and connected with nearly 6,000 residents.

City of Flint • 1101 S. Saginaw St., Rm 101 • Flint, Michigan 48502
www.cityofflint.com • (810) 766-7346 • Fax: (810) 766-7218

When will the water be good to drink without a filter? We are getting close. Scientists from all levels of government and independent experts must agree the water is safe before we can set a date. The City of Flint remains committed to replacing all the lead service lines. We will do whatever is necessary to deliver good water.

We are working very hard every day to fix the water. But that's not enough. We are also working to attract more jobs. We are focused on improving our schools and workforce training. We are raising up safe, productive neighborhoods. By working with our friends, our neighbors, our church family, our schools, and our City, State, and Federal partners, we can rebuild the City of Flint together.

I have said many times, "We know that members of the community can heal the community." We all play a critical role in the recovery and rebuilding of Flint, so THANK YOU for your partnership in moving Flint forward. We will not stop until all Flint residents can drink and use safe water without filters.

If you need information about available resources or answers to your questions, call 2-1-1 or visit www.flintcares.com, www.helpforflint.com, www.cityofflint.com or www.michigan.gov/flintwater.

Sincerely,

Karen W. Weaver

Dr. Karen Weaver, Mayor of the City of Flint and
Chairperson of the Flint Cares Coalition

Figure 19: Pope.L, Flint Water Project, What Pipeline, Detroit, September 7 – October 21, 2017. Installation view. Courtesy of the artist and What Pipeline.

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Figure 20: Pope.L, Flint Water Project, What Pipeline, Detroit, September 7 – October 21, 2017. Installation view. Courtesy of the artist and What Pipeline.

Figure 21: Pope.L, Flint Water Project, What Pipeline, Detroit, September 7 – October 21, 2017. Installation view. Courtesy of the artist and What Pipeline.

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Figure 22: Pope.L Flint Water Project. Illustration. Courtesy of the artist and What Pipeline.

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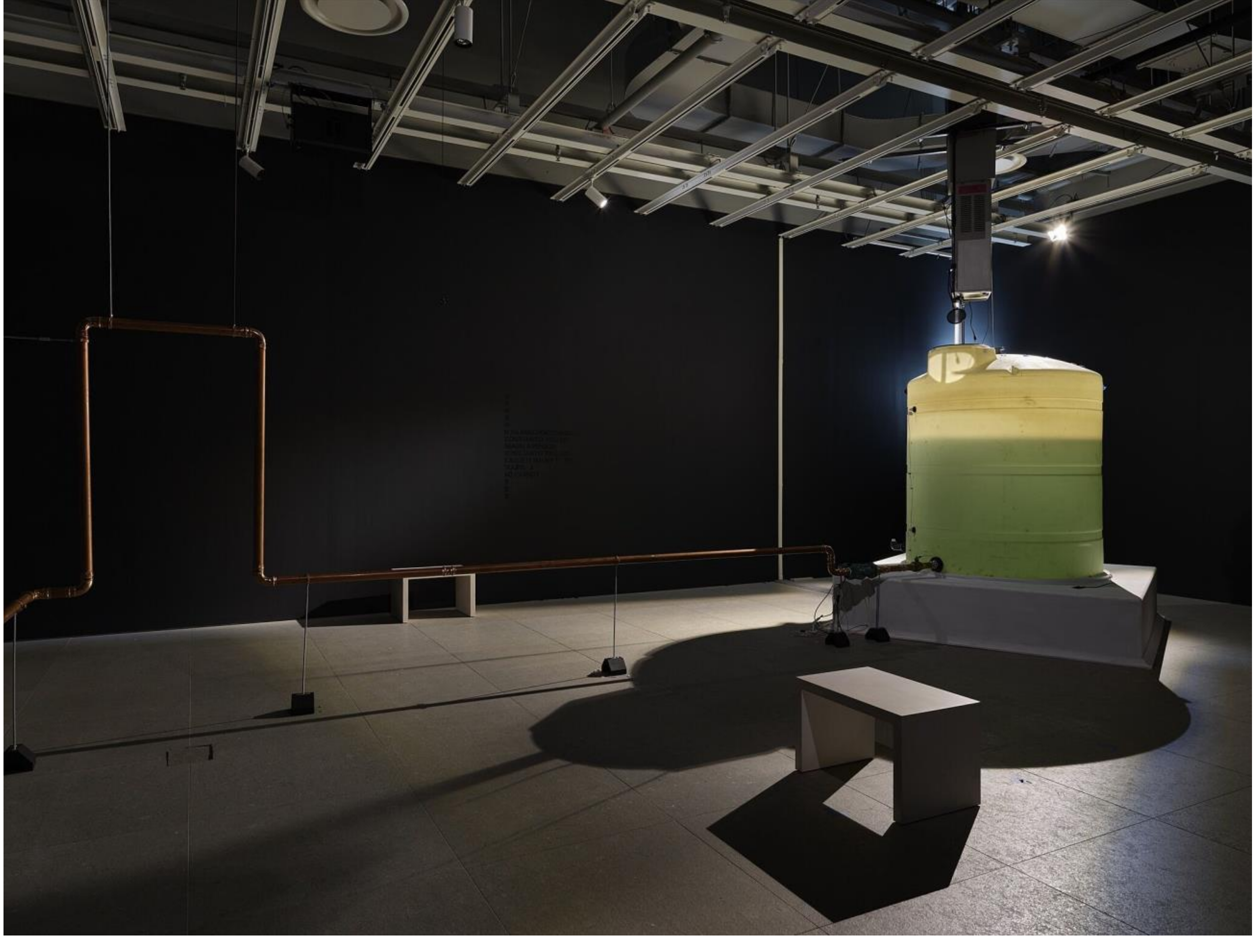

Figure 23: Pope.L: Choir, installation view at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, October 10, 2019–March 8, 2020. Courtesy of Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York and Pope.L. Photograph by Ron Amstutz.

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Figure 24: Pope.L, Well (Whitney version), 2019 (installation view, Pope.L: Choir, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, October 10, 2019–February 2020). Courtesy of Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York and Pope.L. Photograph by Ron Amstutz.

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Figure 25: Mel Chin, Revival Field, 1991. Pig's Eye Landfill, St. Paul, Minnesota. Plants, and industrial fencing on a hazardous waste landfill; approximately 60 x 60 x 9 feet. Courtesy of the Artist.

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Figure 26: Mel Chin, Safehouse, 2008-2010, St.Roch, New Orleans. Courtesy of the Fundred Project.

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Figure 27: Kids in the Safehouse, 2008-2010, St. Roch, New Orleans. Courtesy of the Fundred Project.

Figure 28: Mel Chin, Safehouse, 2008-2010, St. Roch, New Orleans. Installation view. Courtesy of the Fundred Project.

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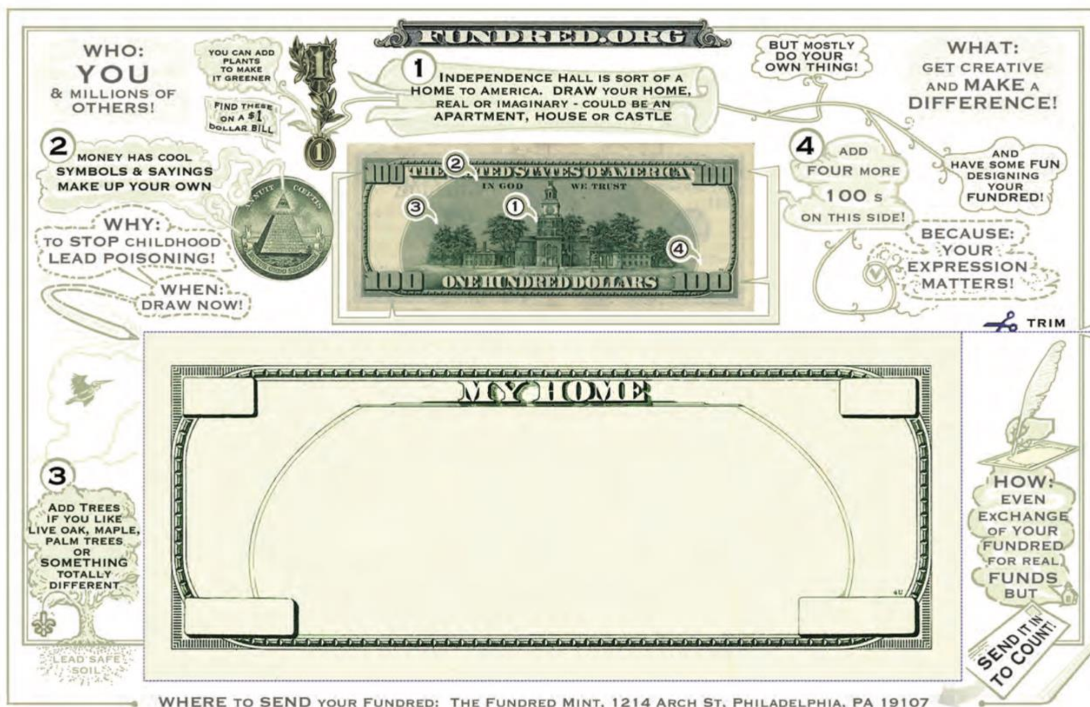

Figure 29: Fundred Dollar Bill template. Courtesy of the Fundred Project.

Figure 30: Fundred Dollar Bill template. Courtesy of the Fundred Project.

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Figure 31: Fundred Armored Truck in Nashville, 2010. Courtesy of the Fundred Project.

Figure 32: Fundred Reserve at the Concoran School of the Arts and Design, Washington D.C., February 23 – May 21, 2017. Installation view. Courtesy of the Fundred Project.

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Figure 33: In front of the Fundred Reserve Exhibition, Concoran School of the Arts and Design, Washington D.C., February 23 – May 21, 2017. Courtesy of the Fundred Project.

Figure 34: Fundred Reserve at the Concoran School of the Arts and Design, Washington D.C. February 23 – May 21, 2017. Installation view. Courtesy of the Fundred Project.

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Figure 35: Installing the Fundred Reserve, Concoran School of the Arts and Design, Washington D.C., February 23 – May 21, 2017. Courtesy of the Fundred Project.

Figure 36: Fundred Reserve at the Concoran School of the Arts and Design, Washington D.C., February 23 – May 21, 2017. Courtesy of the Fundred Project.

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Figure 37: Nancy Pelosi speaks at the Concoran School of the Arts and Design, Washington D.C., 2017. Courtesy of the Fundred Project.

Figure 38: The Fundred Reserve at Eaton DC, Washington D.C., February 23 - June 10. Courtesy of the Fundred Project.

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