

Feminist Value(s) of NFTs: Jill Miller and Alexandra Juhasz in conversation
January, 2023

In 2006 and again in 2013, the musician Ariel Pink released an album, *Thrash and Burn*, with a huge unauthorized photo of the artist Jill Miller on the cover. On January 21, 2023, she dropped a related NFT project, *ARIEL STINKS*, on the “curatorial forum” [TAEX](#). Not aware of Miller’s work, but rather mystified and a bit repulsed by the hype around the non-fungible form, I hoped that engaging with her about her project might provide an opportunity to converse with another feminist artist about the use and stakes of this new technology and economy. We spoke for 45 minutes over Zoom about her 50 alternative album covers. This is an edited version of our conversation.

Alex Almost all of the discourse surrounding NFTs focuses on value in light of economics and the law: markets, ownership, copyright, and even community albeit by way of cash. But I don’t think about art this way, so I’m excited to have a conversation about an NFT project that is asking different questions and seeking different answers. What do you think are the feminist values that animate your work as an artist?

Jill One work that stands out to me is my maternal piece, [The Milk Truck](#) (2011-2012). Also in [Unsung Hero](#) I’m wearing a GoPro, doing mom stuff: a new kind of GoPro hero. Then, there’s the [Women of Wikipedia Editing Group](#) (2015-2016). I mentored about 35 high school age women in a six-month project where they actually became regular users and editors.

Where in the landscape of our culture do women still have to stake a claim? There’s so many places, not just in the art world, but in the world in general—especially thinking about how Roe was repealed in 2022—for feminists to demand equality. In my work, even when it’s not an overtly feminist action or theme, an underlying sense of care and responsibility, and really the joy in setting something up for another generation, is at play.

Alex Well, look at that ... I have a body of queer mothering work myself, and a quick Google search finds our “[tales of motherhood](#)” pictured in the same piece of 2012 feminist art criticism! And I was one of the co-founders of FemTechNet: a collective that introduced [Feminist Wikistorming](#) to some serious rightwing [handwringing](#) and virtue signaling. Like you, my interest in these projects might start with representing the undersung things that women do, or putting women and other marginalized people into techie places where patriarchy has impeded entry. But I’m more interested in how the affective terms you’ve already used, and their linked political and formal commitments, can be a frame for a feminist approach to NFTs: care, responsibility, and joy as blueprints for productive art engagements made with hope and love for others.

Just so, there are two projects on your website that stood out for me. [The Platform Artspace @UC Berkeley](#) (2021 - ongoing) facilitates projects that are “collaborative, performative, community-centered, and thrive outside of a traditional gallery setting.” Can these methods that define a relational or social art practice stay resonant in the NFT space?

Jill I'm an assistant professor at Berkeley. When I began my position in 2018, there was this 3,700-square-foot outdoor space. It was like a junkyard – sculptures were going there to die. I wanted to turn it into a community space where people could get together and connect. I hoped to make a safe space for students who may have otherwise felt that they didn't quite fit into a top tier research institution. Transfer students, students who are parents, people of color, people with disabilities, trans students. And everything about the way we run it is very much in line with what I think of as feminist values: it responds to its site, and the students have a stake in creating a space that feels like theirs while inhabiting the values of my art practice, which is dialogic and care-centered.

Alex So, you ascribe feminist value to place and conversation, people but maybe also things. In [Objects Made Safe](#) you work collaboratively in a supportive group to “unpack the stress, loneliness, and anxiety that primary caregivers experience yet seldom discuss in an open environment.” When I think about feminist values in my own and others' work it is less about the experiences or needs of females and others in relationship to gender, sexuality, or identity and more about a set of ethics and methods, a relationship to making both work and feeling.

But perhaps another way to understand feminist value is to know what it is not. How would you name the values of Ariel Pink?

Jill It's tough for me to name because I haven't listened to very much of his music. I've never listened to the entire album with my picture on it because I don't want to give it time. But I think it's pretty clear where he's coming from. He's a self-proclaimed contrarian. He's starting from a place of agitation and disagreement. That just feels completely different from the way that I operate in the world or even understand the world, actually.

Alex He was a January sixth insurrectionist.

Jill Well, he was at the Stop the Steal Rally. I don't know if he went inside the Capital. But he did go on Tucker Carlson after his record label and tour company canceled him because of his appearance at the rally. On Tucker Carlson, he talked about how mean people were being to him. Then he released a new song and video with a former band member from Mumford and Sons, Winston Marshall, who had left the band because he too was espousing some white supremacist ideas. They released a song together about Hunter Biden's laptop. And then they went on Fox

News to Tucker Carlson because now they have a platform. And so now he's directly trying to play into the radical right, becoming a darling for them.

Alex I'm sorry to hear about that. It's unfortunate that you have to be linked with such a nasty person and thus have to think about him and even listen to him. With ARIEL STINKS you're offering a technological, and I'd say ethical model to work through an uncomfortable but perhaps rather common predicament in our current national culture: how to engage or share space with people who don't share your political or artistic perspectives. Your unfortunate pairing with Pink, one you didn't choose, is reactivated but also perhaps somewhat repaired through a different logic than the dominant, white supremacist tactics of agitation, confrontation, virility, and the petty, mean-spirited abuse that drives so much of contemporary digital discourse and the [real-world violence it engenders](#).

Jill: There is something about him that is very defensive. But I have chosen to find some levity in these dire circumstances. Adaptability is a strategy that feminists use to operate in the world. I also come from a working-class family. I'm the first person to go to college. So, I want to engage with a joyful lens, to find some lightness in a struggle. I feel that is also a value that so many women have. So, for me, this piece, this whole drop, there's humor in it. I don't sit here and stew about Ariel Pink. I'm not mad at him. He made a mistake. I'm correcting that, and I'm doing it with humor.

Alex You also said that you were responding to his illicit use of your image by using art rather than the legal system. I really like how in the images, but also the structure of the project, you're adding levity, joy, lightness, and flexibility to both the space of NFTs and also your engagement with one boor. These are modes of living and making art that I want to think about as feminist, which is why I wanted to have this conversation with you. If you look at those terms, and many of the other words that we've already used—collaborative, performative, dialogic, care-centered—those are not typical for discourse around NFTs, which is overwhelmed by terms linked to capital: accumulation, tracking, speculating, profiting. Don't get me wrong, thinking about markets and money and labor can be a critical feminist project, just not one that motivates me intellectually or interpersonally. Those are not the art questions I am asking. You explain that ARIEL STINKS allows you to have control over your image. Is that fundamentally a legal or financial power, the ones commonly understood as the driving purview of the NFT?

Jill The project intentionally sidesteps litigation because I chose not to sue him even though I could have. Learning about my image being on this person's record without my consent or knowledge, having a conceptual feminist background, and looking at where we're going with technology, the project seemed to come together in a way that felt completely appropriate to the work. It's important that we talk about how the AI application was really critical to my practice because I didn't want to create 50 handmade drawings of Ariel Pink. The technology enabled me

to make the work in a way that wasn't too labor intensive. The AI made a base layer, and I was able to adjust, assemble, and essentially make a digital collage on top of the layer.

Alex This is not an eye-for-an-eye ethics or morality. You're not matching his bad behavior with more. You are attempting not to pay attention to him; a don't-feed-the-trolls attitude. And yet you aren't walking away with your head down either. You are engaging him directly but on your terms as an artist.

Jill As a woman artist, I felt somewhat concerned about his trolls coming after me when releasing the project in the public sphere, so working with TAEX allows me to have some distance because they're representing me almost like a gallery. TAEX has taken a slightly more aggressive approach than I would, but I don't mind. I have no anger toward Ariel Pink. I feel like I exorcized him from my mind. Making all those album covers, I would just die of laughter. They were so funny. The process of using AI to make NFTs offered some great joy and helped me process the situation.

Alex Meeting male anger or just anger; meeting male violence or just violence; meeting that kind of bullying that defines so much of the internet and the other cultural spaces writ in its likeness and instead entering with humor, love, art, an open heart, this seems like both a way to care for yourself in the face of that sort of abuse, but also a different model of being in the (art) world. Is this a project about feminist reparations? The words revenge, reappropriation, or redistribution have been used around Emily Ratajkowski's 2021 [NFT project](#) making new use of the image of her that was stolen by Richard Prince. What words work for you?

Jill I think of revenge as something that's tied to anger where you're trying to hurt somebody, whereas I think of reparations as something owed to somebody, making things even. This project is reparative and joyful. That's where the power of humor lies: when you find something funny, it means that you're at such an indifferent place, you can't be hurt.

Alex In a video recording of an event in the MCA Denver's 2022 series "[NFTs: Putting the Fun into Non-Fungible Tokens](#)," Dred Scott says about his "conceptual" NFT project [White Male for Sale](#) that artists are mainly in the NFT medium to get paid. So, his piece is about payment, albeit not really his own. The work connects ownership and humans, markets and degradation, reclamation and art. He's more interested in thinking: why this medium? He claims an artist's preoccupation with medium specificity: how does any work effectively and conceptually engage the medium itself. Is there something about NFT or AI technologies, as distinct media formats, that you're working through in ARIEL STINKS?

Jill There's a lot of NFT diarrhea. It's just endless: the racist ape-like collector cards coming out, for example. But in some ways, that's really exciting because anybody can make one, and I like

that aspect of NFTs. When something really interesting like the Dred Scott work comes up, it generates a lot of excitement. We're just at the edge of all the possibilities.

Alex I spoke with Jenn McCoy in preparation for this conversation who is in partnership with Kevin McCoy who made the [first NFT](#) in 2014 (which recently made a huge sale in the current speculative market). She said, "Women do well in a shadow market." She was thinking about the history of women in performance art and video. Like early cinema as well, these are art scenes and engines for expression that are still chaotic, that aren't yet consolidated as markets or burdened by stylistic conventions. And so, there's still room for women and other disenfranchised folks to enter and experiment.

Jill If you're left out of the dominant art apparatus - why not create your own space for exhibiting art and connecting with other artists? Nobody's in control of the NFT world yet. And so, I feel that that excitement could be happening here in the world of NFTs. But there's an endless stream of NFTs made by people who don't care about art - but they do care about making money.

Alex I went to an event at MoMA about the [Third Web](#) in October that was part of their R&D Salon. I left feeling dirty. Erudite and sophisticated thought leaders, curators, and digital artists had somehow been transformed into hucksters and Ponzi-scheme-shills beholden to an understanding of art as driven by the logics of capital. Again, there's nothing wrong with thinking about markets and ownership and value and the art world. But as an activist, as a feminist, as a queer mother and scholar, there are so many other concerns that bring me to art and move me when I am there: those that started our conversation—care, community, collaboration. And it's not that you can't think about markets in light of those concerns, hence so much current work around Mutual Aid. I just don't want to be in a room with people who are talking about art *only* in that way. And so, what drew me to ARIEL STINKS, and this conversation with you about it, was how you use that same fungible object to mobilize trade on your terms: not with the speculative project of getting rich, or even tracking or controlling sales, but rather about trade as repair.

Jill My God. I'm selling them for \$500, in a series of one.

Alex And I love the way that you explain that you want *him* to buy them all and use *your* images of him on all his future records. You're focused on how they will be used, not how much they cost or how much you make. Maybe he'll learn to feel differently after making sense of your play with his image.

Jill This is the performative aspect of this NFT project. If he had just said from the beginning, "Right, oh, gosh, I'm really sorry," rather than defending himself on all kinds of media outlets –

if he just said, “Hey, you know what? This project is hilarious. I’ll buy them all.” We would have come out of this differently. Instead, he’s the person who’s prolonging the performance. I suspected that this would happen. I set up this elaborate performance and he’s doing his job correctly.

Alex Yup: to inflame the racist and sexist values of combat and defensiveness that help shape this moment; not backing down, or apologizing, or seeing the other person as human. But you are suggesting another role, the feminist NFT artist: using this technology as a way to recognize both of your humanity, both of your subjectivity, along with your ownership of your image. Offering that to him openly; he’s the one closing doors. Two very different relationships to exchange.

Jill: Most NFTs are made using generative algorithms to automate the process of making. The people making them are sort of removed and probably haven’t even looked at every single NFT they’ve made. They focus on the commodity. So that’s another way that artists are different. For example, I could have made 5000 Ariel Pinks. Absolutely. But I decided that I would create a relatively small series, so I could participate in the making of each one. In *Ariel Stinks*, there’s always a connection between the art and my hand.