

## **Jackie Brookner: A Life in Eco-Art Collection CAE2007**

### **Introduction/Abstract**

Jackie Brookner was a late 20th century American sculptor, ecological artist, educator, and prolific writer on subjects at the intersection of language, ecology, human nature, and our connection to the natural world. The materials in this archive span much of her career.

### **Biographical Note: Jackie Brookner**

Jackie Brookner (1945-2015) was born on November 20, 1945 in Providence, Rhode Island. She received a BA in Art History from Wellesley College and an MA from Harvard University. She went on to study further at Harvard under the modernist art critic and art historian Michael Fried, completing all course work toward a Ph.D. before shifting her focus to sculpture.

Her early career as an artist was influenced by Isaac Witkin, a South African artist who studied under Anthony Caro in London, and who would later become an apprentice to Henry Moore. In the early 1970s Brookner moved to New York and enrolled at The Art Students League before decamping downtown where she set up a studio in a cold-water loft in Soho. She studied with Nicholas Carrone at The New York Studio School, where she would later take on the temporary position as Associate Dean. In 1980 she began a lengthy career at Parsons School of Design / The New School where she taught until her death in 2015. In 2002, Brookner also taught at Harvard in the Department of Visual and Environmental Studies (VES).

Brookner was the recipient of numerous commissions, awards, and grants including from the Nancy H. Gray Foundation for Art in the Environment and the New York Foundation for the Arts. Her writings have been published in The College Art Association's *Art Journal*, *M/E/A/N/I/N/G*, *WEAD Magazine*, and *Paper Monument's* recent book *Draw It With Your Eyes Closed: The Art of the Art Assignment*.

Other important writings include the 1992 "Art and Ecology," a Summer issue of *Art Journal*, which she edited and that is still considered a milestone in ecological thinking. *Urban Rain: Stormwater as Resource*, a book about Brookner's water reclamation projects was published in 2009. In 2018, an interview with Brookner was posthumously published in the book *Field to Palette: Dialogues on Soil and Art in the Anthropocene*, an investigation of the cultural meanings, representations, and values of soil in a time of planetary change.

### **Scope and Content**

Jackie Brookner was a late 20th century American sculptor, ecological artist, educator, and a prolific writer on subjects at the intersection of language, ecology, human nature, and our connection to the natural world. Brookner created sculptural environments in galleries and museums throughout the United States and in Europe at Fundació Joan Miró in Barcelona. Beginning in the mid-1990s, her work focused on plant-based water remediation. She has successfully restored tracts of land and wetlands in Grossenheim Germany, Salo Finland, and locations throughout the United States.

Notable among Brookner's projects is "Of Earth and Cotton," for which she received an NEA grant. Staged as a series of gallery installations "Of Earth and Cotton" traveled for four years (1994-1998) evolving as it crossed the southern United States. Brookner followed the westward migration of the cotton belt, speaking with people who farmed and picked cotton by hand. As people spoke about their experiences, Brookner sat on the ground sculpting portraits of their feet out of soil from nearby cotton fields. These 'portraits' became the focal points of

a traveling exhibition that toured throughout the States. The exhibitions were presented in a variety of venues, and some of the 'portraits' were installed on soil or mounds of ginned cotton. Made from the myriad colors and textures of soil, the 'portraits' were a metaphor for the diversity of all of the people who manually worked cotton fields. The installations were accompanied by 40 photographs commissioned by the Farm Security Administration (FSA) under President Roosevelt. The images depict cotton farmers during the Depression Era. "Of Earth and Cotton" is now in the permanent collection of the National Civil Rights Museum in Memphis, Tennessee.

Brookner's "Prima Lingua" (First Language/First Tongue), 1996-ongoing, is a sculpture constructed of concrete and volcanic rock in the form of a larger-than-life sized tongue. The work was originally created in Brookner's Soho studio. She set up a large pool of water and designed a filtration system that pumped the water through the sculpture irrigating a plant-based eco-system of ferns, mosses, turtles, and fish. Over time, various flora and fauna such as wildflowers, snails, fungi, and liverworts, etc., began to naturally emerge in the pool and on the surface of the sculpture. This evolutionary process – fusing sculpture and nature – created a microcosm that cleaned the water and purified the air. She would later define and trademark "Prima Lingua" a <sup>TM</sup>Biosculpture. The piece is currently installed in a pond at La Plaza Cultural Community Garden in lower Manhattan where it filters polluted water and promotes clean air. Brookner's <sup>TM</sup>Biosculptures are iconic touchstones for many artists working today on clean air and water projects.

Her project "Urban Rain" was installed in 2008 on the grounds of the Roosevelt Community Center, an LEED gold-rated building in San Jose, California. Brookner was commissioned to create a sculptural solution to diminish the Center's environmental impact on the nearby Coyote Creek. Her installation consisted of two parts. One was on the roof of the building's north side where she designed chutes to channel stormwater runoff into a spiral filter basin based on an enlargement of her thumbprint. On the south side of the building, a vertical translucent rock filter made of steel, glass, and concrete contains an etching that maps the infiltration processes. It illustrates the meandering flow of the Coyote Creek watershed and is illuminated by a solarized lighting network that makes it visible day and night. A book about the project, *Urban Rain: Stormwater as Resource*, was published in 2009.

Among her outstanding international projects is "Veden Taika" (The Magic of Water), 2007-2010. Brookner was commissioned to remediate the Halikonlahti Bird Pools that were formerly used in the sewer treatment processes of the Salo Municipal Sewage Treatment Facility in Salo, Finland. She designed three floating islands consisting of hand-made rock formations that serve as nesting habitats for birds, and that cultivate plant-based filtration networks to rehabilitate water quality. "Veden Taika" was a collaboration with local volunteers, regional science experts, the students and faculty of the Salo Polytechnic Institute, the Salo Parks Department, the Office of Environmental Protection, and artist Tuula Nikulainen. An abundance of migrating and nesting birds now inhabit these pools and lagoons. "Veden Taika" is an EU-Directive Conservation site.

In 2014 and shortly before her death, Brookner was part of a team constructing an interactive eco-site, [www.thebreathproject.net](http://www.thebreathproject.net). This was a collaborative artist-designed network engaging aspects of nature in combination with data science to create a platform for interconnection between different and differing cultures. The project is an adaptable and potentially transportable interactive installation that connects to functional water restoration projects, and that will beneficially impact water resources and the communities that share them around the globe. This multi-media installation located in The Hague, known as the international City of Justice, anchors the peacemaking and unifying intentions of the project. The Jordan River Basin, rich with the history of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – a place now critically environmentally challenged – is the selected site for the water remediation project(s), including Brookner's proposal.

At the time of her death Brookner was working on a pilot project with The City of Fargo, North Dakota to transform an 18-acre stormwater detention basin into a multi-functional public commons which simultaneously

functions as a stormwater collection site preventing mass flooding. Additionally, through a fully participatory community process, the grounds were designed in collaboration with residents of the City of Fargo and a team of local artists to create public spaces reflecting the multi-cultural vibrancy of the Fargo community. “The Fargo Project” was made possible, and is ongoing, thanks to a partnership between Brookner and a \$100,000 Our Town Matching Grant from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), and a \$450,000 grant in 2014 from ArtPlace America.

Archive materials include videotapes, photographs, slides, magazines, books, writings, articles, notebooks, correspondence, proposals, plans, and models.

**This archive is currently in process.**