



DIARY

DEAR WORLD

October 08, 2019 • United Nations, New York • Mary Ellen Carroll on Climate Week NYC



Lady Bunny aka Greta's Mom on the stairs of NYC's Department of Education. Photo: Mary Ellen Carroll.

Part I. Youth Climate Strike in NYC

September 19

“Fossil fuel to the climate strike? We should take public transport.”

“We have a drag queen in heels in a forty-pound wig. Tell her that.”

STRIKING WITH GRETA'S MOM requires its own hair and makeup detail. Aside from Greta, only New York's reigning drag queen Lady Bunny could part the sea of young strikers during last week's blistering Friday, when #ClimateStrikeNYC protesters marched from Foley Square to Battery Park. It was as if Bunny's presence completed the unfinished third act of *Moses and Aaron* by Arnold Schoenberg, who laconically noted about his life: "I am an intruder everywhere, welcome nowhere." Except, Bunny is welcome everywhere. The founder of Wigstock knows a thing or two about exits and crowds.

Anticipating the love, I enlisted Eyespy Films' Michael Isabell and climate ally and art adviser Mary Hoeveler (my interlocutor in the above text exchange). Fitting the wig and our poster board signs necessitated an Uber XL (for height, not girth). Our driver apologetically dropped us blocks from the start of the march and we self-consciously exited with Lady Bunny, whose sign declared, "I AM GRETA'S MOM."

No one would argue with that.

Aptly inaugurating her strike by ascending the stairs to NYC's Department of Education at Tweed Courthouse in heels, Bunny turned to face the "peoples" and, amid a phalanx of shutters, started lobbing *bon mots* to the multitudes in a fake Swedish accent. "How proud I am of my daughter Greta, for her bravery and forceful activism in the climate crisis!" (Thunberg's biological mother is the opera singer and 2009 Eurostar contestant Malena Ernman.) Canarsie high schoolers descended upon Lady Bunny, shrieking, "We love you! Can we pleeeeeease get a selfie?"

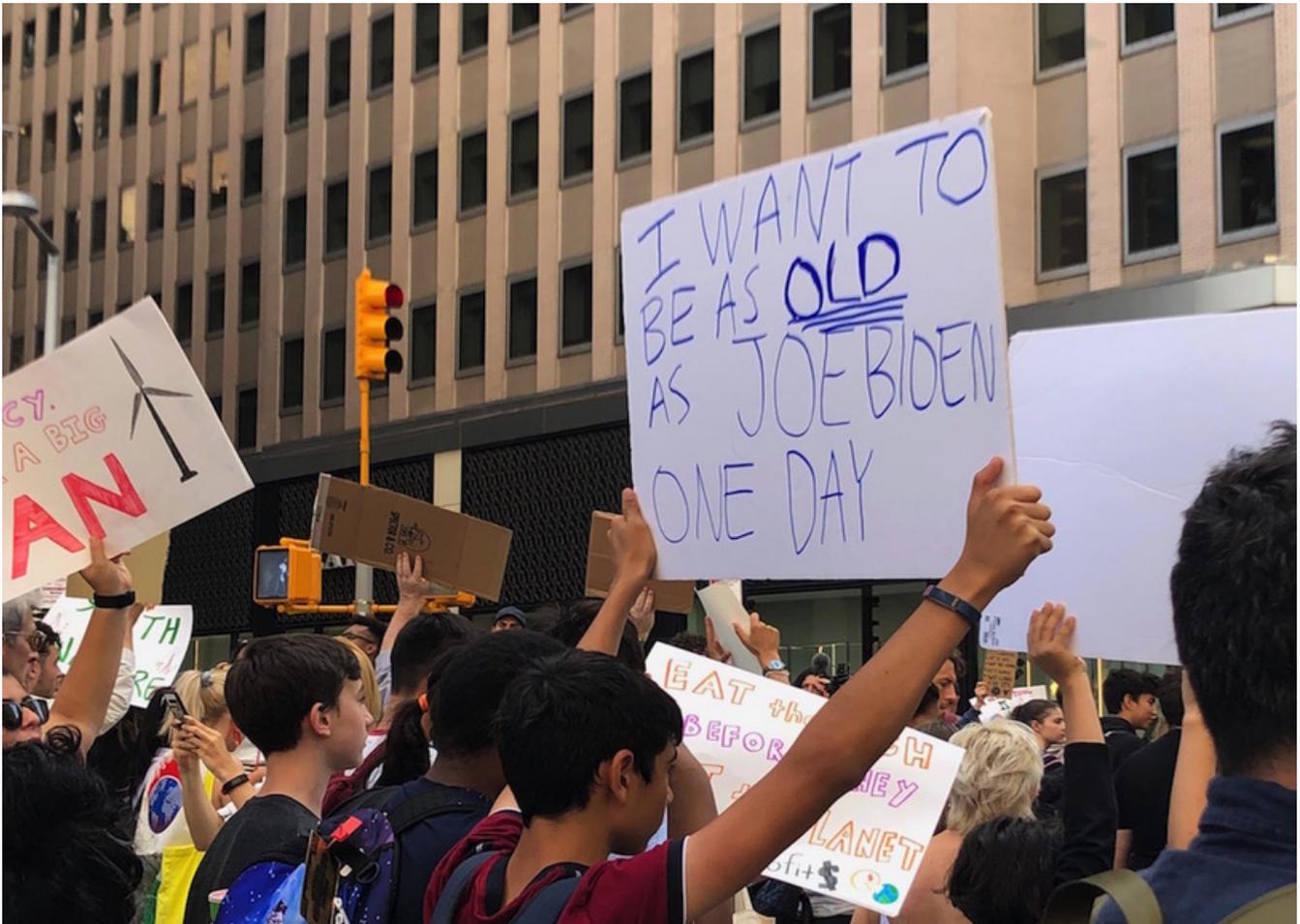


Lady Bunny with climate strikers. Photo: Mary Ellen Carroll.

Lady Bunion, as she temporarily rechristened herself, joined the resolute youths in chanting, “Sea levels are rising and so are we!” and occasionally ad-libbing: “Sea levels are rising and so is my cholesterol!” The variety of signs reflected the diversity of the participants, ranging from the unappealing (“I WANT TO BE AS OLD AS JOE BIDEN ONE DAY”) to the tween-centric (“THE ONLY THING THAT SHOULD BE *BURNING* UP IS THE JONAS BROS”) to the accurately earnest (“SCIENCE isn’t an alternative FACT”).

Four hours later, we arrived at the rally in Battery Park after running into the artist and activist Molly Gochman and the designer, gardener, and painter Simone Frazier, who were filling in cracks in the sidewalk for the public participatory artwork Red Sand Project. It was time for Bunny to pull out the flats from the Tory Burch bag and reapply makeup before the speeches began, and this time, “Please, no photos, please.” I escorted Lady

Bunny to the corner, where, miraculously, a yellow cab materialized. Bunny and her wig climbed into the backseat, passing me the torch. Now I was Greta's Mom.



Young climate striker. Photo: Mary Hoeveler.

After a panel at CUNY School of Law with Dr. Warren Binford on the detention of kids at the US border, we all decamped to the UN to catch the last cycle of New Zealand artist Joseph Michael's nearly three-hour video installation mapped onto the UN headquarters, *Voices for the Future*, which portrays footage of an iceberg breaking apart. The work is an iteration of Michael's *While You Were Sleeping*, originally projected onto Auckland's historic War Memorial Museum in 2007. I asked about the addition of the scrolling texts, taken from six youth climate activists in the six official languages of the UN. "Even a work of art needs to go through a diplomatic process," the artist told me. "The UN's Department of Global Communications prudently suggested the addition of the youths' texts, inadvertently becoming a collaborator."



Climate strikers. Photo: Mary Hoeveler.

The exuberance of the strike still hung in the air like Lady Bunny's hairspray (I know). An estimated 7.6 million people took to the streets globally, mostly the children and grandchildren everyone keeps talking about saving the planet for. Heading downtown, I deleted Uber and prepared my UN press pass for tomorrow morning's first-ever Youth Climate Summit.

Part II. UN Youth Climate Summit

September 21

THE ONLY TIME TO EVER SET FOOT ON THE HIGH LINE is before 7:45 AM. I walked up from Chelsea and took the 7 train to Grand Central, and then headed east for the UN. The visitor entrance was swarming with official youth delegates (1,024 were in attendance) from 140 countries, their official Climate Summit IDs swinging from lanyards around their

necks. I met Zero Hour's founder, seventeen-year-old Jamie Margolin. The organization developed out of the constitutional climate lawsuit *Juliana v. United States*, in which the plaintiff alleges that the government, through its "affirmative actions that cause climate change," has "violated the youngest generation's constitutional rights to life, liberty, and property."



Climate strikers. Photo: Mary Hoeveler.

Nearby was Nigerian climate activist Dr. Daniel Gbujie Chidubem, whose nonprofit, Team 54, "advocates for climate solutions in vulnerable communities in Africa's fifty-four countries and beyond." No small thinking there. As a kid who grew up surfing behind the "orange curtain" in Santa Ana, California, I was one of the twenty million who took to the streets on the first Earth Day, on April 22, 1970. I have rhetorically asked myself since the '80s: "What the fuck happened (besides Reagan)?" Climate change was science then; it is science now. The kids' accusations that we have abdicated our responsibility for justice and the stewardship of the planet are correct. We have.

Up in the Niemeyer/Le Corbusier building, I thought I smelled burning sage. "Huh," I figured, "the kids are vaping in the UN." I looked down to see Makasa Looking Horse

performing a Lakota blessing to open the summit, a gesture to “heal anyone in leadership.” Following the prayer, we were all invited to join her outside to smoke the Čaḡnúḡpa. Let’s hope some leaders did.



Jepe Hein’s *Breathe with Me*. Photo: Marc Latrique.

Outside, I ran into the Swedish prime minister Stefan Löfven en route to Michael Pinsky’s Pollution Pods. Holding my breath, I walked through the geodesic domes, which were filled with air that mimics pollution levels from various cities. I then returned to the visitor center to queue up for Jepe Hein’s interactive performance *Breathe with Me*. Participants inhaled and dipped a brush in paint, then raised the brush to the top of a temporary wall installed in the lobby. We began to paint a line, exhaling until we ran out of breath, or wall. In Hein’s words, the work is a “collective breath for the world and for the climate we all share.” My phone pinged and an encrypted message came through from Extinction Rebellion for the October 7 climate action.

Part III. UN Climate Action Summit

September 23

THE ASSEMBLED collectively witnessed that the United States was *not* participating in the 2019 UN Climate Action Summit—no surprise, given that the Trump administration pulled out of the Paris Agreement. However, they were present for the announcement that Russia is now participating in the 2016 accord. Ad-out Russia. In his opening address, Secretary-General António Guterres proclaimed that the situation facing humanity is “not simply appalling” but “apocalyptic.”



Greta Thunberg. Photo: Mary Ellen Carroll.

Leave it to Greta Thunberg to tell it like it is. Thunberg’s power lies in her insistence on trusting science and taking responsibility. Her presence that morning was no different.

Every person in that room metabolized her impassioned plea, including . . . Harrison Ford, who held forth at the High-Level meeting of the Alliance for Rainforests that afternoon. He began by talking about how rainforests have been talked about for thirty years, and continued talking. “Whatever,” was the comment from a youth climate activist from Guatemala who asked to remain unnamed. Ditto for the esoteric speech from *Game of Thrones* star and Charlie Chaplin’s granddaughter, Oona Castilla Chaplin, whose vague musings on the “equinox” elicited the response: “We want to watch celebrities act, we don’t want to listen to them. But they *can* support our causes.”



Zurab Tsereteli, *Good Defeats Evil*. Gifted to the United Nations by the USSR in 1990 on the occasion of the forty-fifth anniversary of the UN and created from fragments of Soviet SS-20 missiles and United States Pershing nuclear missiles destroyed under the terms of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty of 1987. Photo: Mary Ellen Carroll.

The general debates were kicked off by Brazil, where the Amazon continues to burn and whose President Bolsonaro used his nationalistic address to “reject the attempts to exploit

and use the environmental agenda and indigenous policy agenda to further the economic interests of foreign countries.” Later, while watching Boris Johnson deliver his punk’d-out, dystopian, and truly bizarre speech, I *vipassana*’d beyond the impulse to slink into the smoking area outside the UN cafeteria and bum a fag from the British EU sympathizer I met on the media bridge in the GA Hall. As he skirted around the unmentionable, Boris’s lone reference to Brexit flatlined as a joke in the near-empty chamber.

There were heroes, too—like the prime minister of Barbados, Mia Amor Mottley. Unfortunately, the PM had to leave early to assess her country’s catastrophic flooding, but not before saying: “In good conscience, I cannot give the speech that I prepared. We, as a small state, are used to being treated as if we didn’t exist.”



Barbados prime minister Mia Amor Mottley. Photo: Mary Ellen Carroll.

Part IV. UN General Assembly, 74th General Debate

September 24 and 25

AT THE START OF THE “OFFICIAL” PHOTO OP, we were informed that questions were out of the question. If one chose to ignore this, one would promptly be removed and one’s press privileges would be revoked. The risk wasn’t worth it. For an arts publication to get a media pass after the official UN deadline, well, let’s say it was Promethean. I had just been escorted down from the thirty-eighth floor of UN HQ, where the past thirty seconds were spent shooting the former rom-com star party to Trump’s impeachment scandal, Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky, who posed with the Secretary-General.



Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky holding up a bullet. Photo: Mary Ellen Carroll.

Before Zelensky’s address—a weirdly postmodern yarn that passed through Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms*, Warhol’s “fifteen minutes” of fame, and the 2016 sniper killing of Ukrainian baritone Wassyl Slipak (who fought against pro-Russian separatists under the Faustian *nom de guerre* Meph, short for Mephistopheles)—the elder-statesmen of the

photo pool joked about how “funny it would be” if the Ukrainian president read the “‘Not verbatim’ transcript of his July 25 call with the White House by the Notetakers in the Situation Room.” I was thinking the same thing. I imagined a dance theater piece of that title with Meg Stuart’s company *Damaged Goods*, sent an email to Stuart, and registered a domain name. Of course, who knows whether political theater is still possible when we are witnessing—as curator Florian Malzacher once told the experimental composer and producer of Itinerant Interludes Laurie Schwartz and me at a performance of Rimini Protokoll’s *Mein Kampf, Vols. 1 and 2*—“the disabling of political potential in reality.”

I looked out the window and the Pollution Pods were gone.

— Mary Ellen Carroll



Participant in the Red Sand Project. Photo: Mary Hoeveler.



Michael Pinsky in the Pollution Pods. Photo: Mary Ellen Carroll.



Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky and Secretary-General António Guterres. Photo: Mary Ellen Carroll.



Climate striker. Photo: Mary Hoeveler.



Makasa Looking Horse performing a Lakota blessing. Photo: Mary Ellen Carroll.



Swedish prime minister Stefan Löfven. Photo: Mary Ellen Carroll.



Daniel Gbujie Chidubem of Team 54. Photo: Mary Ellen Carroll.



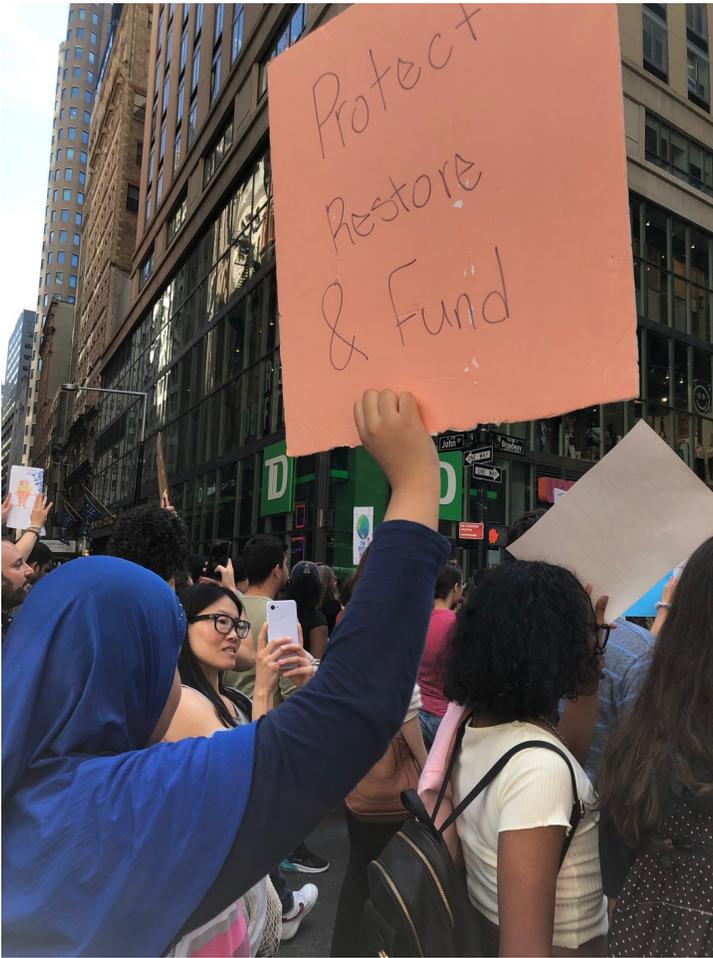
Berlin Wall section at the UN sculpture garden. Photo: Mary Ellen Carroll.



Joseph Michael. Photo: Michael Isabell.



Laurie Arbeiter at the security entrance to the UNGA. Photo: Mary Ellen Carroll.



Young climate striker. Photo: Mary Hoeveler.



UN Youth Climate Summit Green Ticket Winners. Photo: Mary Ellen Carroll.



Zero Hour at the UN Youth Climate Summit. Photo: Mary Ellen Carroll.



Kimberly Guilfoyle and Tiffany Trump at the General Assembly. Photo: Mary Ellen Carroll.

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