In November 2016, Donald Trump won the presidential election against Hillary Clinton, ushering in a new era of anxiety in American life. Around the time of Trump’s inauguration in January 2017, Patty Chang and her family moved from New York to Los Angeles. It was in this tense personal and public moment that Chang began to collect her fears. She explains, “I was looking at copies of the novel The Octopus, A Story of California about the historical conflict between farmers and the Railroad in California history—octopuses are metaphors for monopolies. As a new transplant, I brought my environmental anxieties with me, now obsessed with the lack of water, fossil fuel usage and the extreme heat leading to fires.” In a study room at the Huntington Library, where she had hoped to do research, she instead produced a list of fears that had been pressing on her since the move.

Death
Leroy’s future death
Death of the human species
Death of the earth, but that is irrational
Flood, drowning in a flood
Fire, burning in a fire
Heights
Smog
113 degrees, everyday
Water running out

The Huntington Gardens and Library is a space of absolute calm, no matter the heat in the San Gabriel Valley. Chang describes how she “always loved research libraries—conditions perfect for quiet focused attention, temperature no higher than 70 degrees, stable humidity, no talking, no distractions.” The serene environments bear little trace of the history of Western expansion connected to its founder, Henry E. Huntington, of the Pacific Electric Railway, including water scarcity, undocumented labor, and urban sprawl. In this way, the Huntington reflects Los Angeles, a city whose bubbling veins of tension is just beneath the sun-drenched earth except in those historical moments—1968, 1992, 2020—when the surface breaks. Says Chang, “I couldn’t compartmentalize my anxiety and had to make a list of fears. I used the pink Huntington lined research notepaper supplied to all readers and made my list of four pages of fears in one sitting. I immediately felt a little better.” Milk Debt expands on themes in Chang’s prior body of work, The Wandering Lake, presented at the Queens Museum and the Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (ICA LA), which was anchored by themes of water scarcity, reproductive labor, and the artist’s Chinese-American identity.

The Wandering Lake’s marriage of familial and environmental mourning rituals with the daily tension of balancing prestige work and care work affected me deeply. I first learned about this work in an artist talk that I coordinated with Chang in my prior role at UC Berkeley in 2011. At that time, I was a relatively new parent, still nursing my toddler. Her work, in particular the image of the artist washing a dead sperm whale in freezing waters off Newfoundland, stayed embedded in my memory. When we reconvened in 2017, I did a studio visit in Chang’s new Altadena home, sitting gingerly on a broken chair assigned to her young son in a house that was equipped strictly for a two-adult, one-child situation. The daily complexity of working motherhood was already our condition, and the fears that kept building emerged from a set of social values that places these two creative ways of being at odds with one another.

As Chang developed the work, she began to collect fears from friends and colleagues. She was working deliberately, but without a clear plan for what would emerge. For a while, I would ask her how things were going and she would respond with uncertainty, as if balancing prestige work and care work affected me deeply. I first learned about this work in an artist talk that I coordinated with Chang in my prior role at UC Berkeley in 2011. At that time, I was a relatively new parent, still nursing my toddler. Her work, in particular the image of the artist washing a dead sperm whale in freezing waters off Newfoundland, stayed embedded in my memory. When we reconvened in 2017, I did a studio visit in Chang’s new Altadena home, sitting gingerly on a broken chair assigned to her young son in a house that was equipped strictly for a two-adult, one-child situation. The daily complexity of working motherhood was already our condition, and the fears that kept building emerged from a set of social values that places these two creative ways of being at odds with one another.

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Collective Memories
By Anuradha Vikram

Milk Intelligence
By Anuradha Vikram

In one, over two years, and the essay is Vikram’s reflection on the project in process within the context of Chang’s larger artistic practice.
"Pump-and-dump" is also an economic term, meaning to inflate the value of a stock investment in order to drive up the price and then sell off a large amount of shares, driving the value down for others. A form of insider trading, "pump-and-dump" reflects both the misgivings at the heart of the seemingly neutral language of finance, and indirectly relies on breast milk as a rhetorical equivalent for currency. Writer David Graeber, whose book Debt: The First 5,000 Years is the source of the phrase "milk debt," refers to a spiritual insufficiency that can never be resolved, in which the mother has nurtured them to independence. This metaphysical liability is eternal and can never be paid with cash.

Chang has always made work about her family. The Wandering Lake featured a poignant two-channel video, Invocations/Que Sera Sera, made with both the artists’ parents while her father lay dying in 2014. In one channel, the artist sings softly, “Que Sera Sera,” bouncing her son against her torso as she occupies the roles of parent and child simultaneously. Her care work reverses the customary relationship between these two archetypes, and reflects the concern with the parents’ end of life or their afterlife that underpins the concept of "milk debt." Fears factor into this work as well, as on the opposite channel Chang’s mother swipes through a list of invocations that include “fear of laughing or crying inappropriately” in a tense and delicate situation. In Milk Debt, unlike in previous works, neither Chang nor her family are visible, but their presence is none-theless felt everywhere in the work.

One of the ways Chang has responded to her parents’ trauma has been to make work in China. Born in San Leandro, California to Chinese immigrants, from the time she began to work abroad with Shangri-La (2005), Chang’s work in China has called attention to her complicated status as an American of Chinese descent operating in a politically restrictive environment where she enjoys distinct if limited privileges. In 2019, Chang was invited to an artist residency at Hong Kong University, which d

The exhibition at 18th Street Arts Center was supposed to open in May 2020, but early March it was clear that the date would be postponed due to coronavirus. Suddenly housebound, Chang began to collect fears again and to make videos with performers online. She describes how “because of quarantine, the performances were forced to be moved onto online platforms—Zoom, Skype, Facetime—reflecting our lived experiences. I called the performers through the digital apps and they performed for an audience of one, which I recorded.” On May 22, Chang and I had a public conversation about the project over Zoom. Chang about the killing of an unarmed Black man, George Floyd, who was killed by a Minneapolis police officer on May 25. The death of Floyd sparked protests throughout the United States and around the world. Chang’s conversation with me was part of a series of conversations with artists about their work in relation to the current social and political climate. She described the process of making the videos, the themes of fear and anxiety, and the role of the performer in the work.

The anxiety felt in Hong Kong a year ago, like the panic, has settled in here at home. Still, there is reason for hope. The worse things get, the more opportunity we have to find out what we’re truly capable of. Survival may be about how we face our fears and go where the milk flows. Patty Chang’s Artist Lab Residency and exhibition was generously supported by the National Endowment for the Arts, the City of Santa Monica’s Cultural Affairs Department, the Los Angeles Department of Arts and Culture, and 18th Street Art Center’s generous community of donors.