

JENNIFER MANCUSO

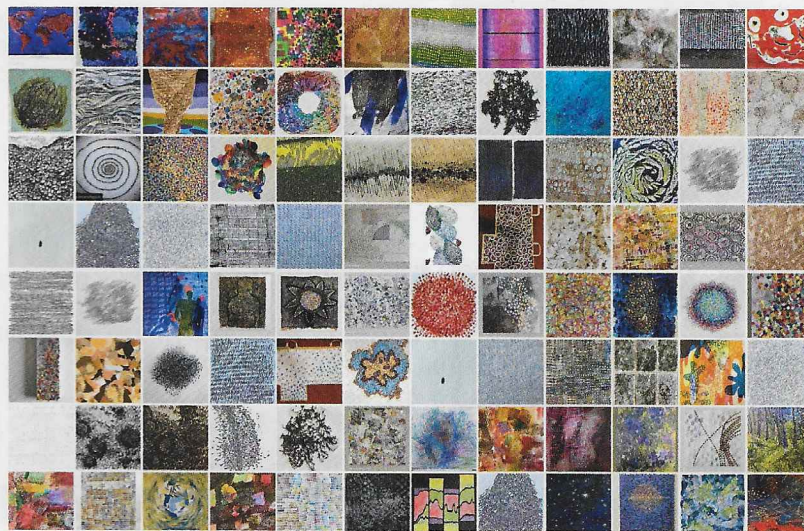
The Arithmetic of Compassion

Elizabeth Awalt struggled to make sense of the pandemic when she woke up last December, 2020, to see the number of COVID-19 related deaths had risen to 287,000 in the United States. A painter rooted in the natural world, Awalt was moved to create a painting of one thousand marks to comprehend this magnitude of loss. “Working toward a thousand marks, I found the process to be akin to prayer or meditation.” The Concord-based visual artist then sent an invitation to her art community to add pieces to her initial work, thus creating the Marking Lives Project. Her goal was to have the marking represent all lives lost to the virus as a memorial. The call for submission asked each artist to use any medium and generate at least one thousand markings, a figure that seemed manageable compared to the death toll. The participating artists then photographed their work for a digital exhibit on Instagram. Now the works are being collected for a show this fall at The Broad Institute at MIT and Harvard, a fitting location for the exhibition—The Broad offers an environment that allows scientists and artists to work together for the benefit of each.

An engineer turned fine artist, Guhapiya Ranganathan’s work lies in the interaction of art and science. With medical news becoming mainstream during the pandemic, Ranganathan, based in Cambridge, MA, used her background in mapping and memories to create her submission to the project, a series of patterns on paper using sumi, acrylic, and markers. “The experimentation and continuous effort involved in research mirrors the process of creating art and becomes a metaphor for the experience of life.” A former artist-in-residence at The Broad, Ranganathan used her time there to collaborate with scientists. The residency allows artists to partner with researchers in ways that are beneficial to each other’s field and bridge the gap for scientific based artists. “Art and science are ways in which we try to explore our place in the world,” says Shannon Humphries, project manager at The Broad.

Awalt has watched her initial painting spiral into an artistic movement. At the time of this printing, COVID-19 deaths in the U.S. have exceeded 625K. The project has amassed 308 works by 192 artists who have shared on Awalt’s Instagram, [markinglivescovid19](https://www.instagram.com/markinglivescovid19). Participating artists have used fabric, barbed wire, crayon, wood, and even blood to create 402,460 markings to symbolize lives lost.

Pamela Moulton, a Portland, ME, based artist, has always been fascinated with denim and the healing properties of indigo. She used denim as her medium for Marking Lives because it’s a global material that crosses generations—a comfortable, familiar textile for a moment in time to which everyone could relate. While teaching as an artist-in-residence, Moulton engaged virtually with students of



Above: Elizabeth Awalt, founder of the Marking Lives Project, in her studio in front of the first piece she created for the *MLC-19* project; *MLC I*, December 2020, ink, 1,000 marks, 22 x 30". Photo: Ilana Manolson.

Left: A collection of 96 artworks from the *MLC-19* project. Photo: Michaelann Ferro.

with their pieces. Yvette Dubinsky, an artist based in St. Louis, MO, created five pieces for the project using paper with cyanotype, acrylic, printmaking. Dubinsky added names of the dead to her work to connect to the memorial. “If I was making work about people who had died, I needed to use names,” writes Dubinsky.

When society looks back on a tragedy, art often becomes an entry point of remembrance. The undertaking for the project is to mark every life lost due to COVID-19 in the U.S. At that time, Awalt hopes it will “serve as a memorial to this

tragic era,” much like the AIDS Quilt. And, perhaps offer solace and a glimmer of hope to those who have lost loved ones.

Jennifer Mancuso holds her MFA in Writing from the New Hampshire Institute of Arts. Raised in the shadow of the Boston Busing Crisis, the writer is completing a set of novels based on her experience growing up biracial while passing.

the Maranacook Middle School of Readville, ME, on a multi-participant project entitled STACKS where denim circles were piled into measurements of 1000. In a second piece, she used one thousand stick pins in the fabric to represent vaccinations. “Liz’s project was so concrete and approachable, and it really made me think, this [stick pin piece] *only* represents a thousand lives lost,” said Moulton.

One of the bright spots were declarations of creativity from the participating artists. Feeling isolated and displaced from their studios, many creators were inactive during quarantine. Some participating artists have reported that Marking Lives fueled their productivity and inspiration. Others send along tributes

Marking Lives: Broad Institute of MIT and Harvard
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<http://broad.io/MarkingLives>