



OWNING EARTH

INVENTORY OF CHANGE

Steven Lam in Conversation with Tal Beery

STEVEN LAM IS THE DEAN of the School of Art at California Institute of the Arts. A trained artist, Steve has spent much of his career as a curator of boundary-pushing exhibitions and as an educator in various university settings. He was an important mentor for me while I was in graduate school at SUNY Purchase, where he served as Director of the School of Art + Design. Over two years, we spent many hours discussing art and politics, ecological practices, and institutional interventions. I cherished our conversations, which led to *Sinking Cities*, a show we co-curated for SUNY Purchase in 2017. For this catalog, Steve and I chose to record and transcribe a dialogue on *Owning Earth*. As usual, I found the process with Steve both insightful and energizing. The transcript has been edited for length and clarity.

—Tal Beery, Curator, *Owning Earth*

BEERY: Why did your early curatorial practice focus on ecological issues and environmental practices? How did that catch your attention?

LAM: In the beginning of my curatorial work I was thinking about issues of secrecy. This was a few years after 9/11. I was interested in the redacted document and how these documents suggest a kind of counter-archive. My curatorial work in the beginning was centered around institutional reordering and how artists can build archives, collectives, images that respond as a form of resistance. The artists that I was interested in had a desire to make work about memory and correcting it.

At the same time, I was starting to think beyond bodies in institutional spaces. What about the ground that institutions sit on? How might that ground also be reconfigured?

Occupy Wall Street and Superstorm Sandy hit right around the time of my first curated ecological show, an exhibition about issues of mining and rare earths. I showed artists that wanted to reverse extractionist logics, to examine environmental devastation, and to exceed and compensate for governmental neglect during rescue efforts. After that, multi-species discourse, questions of the non-human, thinking about how plants can serve as active agents, and considering indigenous methods and concerns — all these disciplines became very exciting for me and still keep me inspired and hopeful.

BEERY: Your development occurred over such momentous decades: 9/11, the financial crisis of 2008, Occupy Wall Street, and Sandy...two decades of repeated demonstration that the West is no longer the stable center of civilization. Could we be living through the end of Western humanism?

LAM: The problem in itself is Western epistemology, or white epistemology, a way of ordering the world then creates a hierarchy in which non-humans are inferior and humans are outside the web of life. Within this order, certain classes of people are also not considered human. I think what's interesting now is how this is shifting. How can there be a reordering of the logic of the institutions and how might that create other subjectivities? Can one reconcile the imposition of racial inferiority by certain epistemologies within a multi-species framework? I'm not so sure.

I grew up in Houston, Texas. In parts of Houston, the suburbs are right next to chemical plants, which are right next to lakes, and gun stores are right next to libraries. The historical index is always erased. It's a type of perpetual clearing, where buildings and places are cleared, redone, and remade. We talked about institutional ordering, but it is also important to consider the practices of forgetting and clearing. Lately, I see it as my practice as an educator to always situate our agency in relation to such clearing, to defy forgetting, and to insist on connecting the dots with our ancestors.

BEERY: I love this idea that the role of education is to connect us with ancestors. It reminds me of this notion of *rooting* we have touched on in previous conversations. It strikes me as a non-Western paradigm for educating. That education could contribute to a broader sense of connection is both beautiful and necessary.

LAM: Yes. There's that now meme-able Angela Davis quote that "radical simply means 'grasping things at the root.'" Maybe there is a difference between rooting and rooting out. You have to put roots down, but you also have to fix the toxicities, to pull it out to prevent it from reproducing itself.

BEERY: How does this rooting paradigm connect with pedagogy?

LAM: The rooting paradigm means that one is obligated to a community. As it pertains to the context of this catalog, maybe this paradigm means that one is obligated to *not* own Earth. It may demand a different kind of ethical arrangement, that one is called upon to act beyond the self. It means there is some sort of interconnection. How this connects to pedagogy may be in the way it evaluates the purpose of education. Is education about private advancement, individual gain? I am not so sure. Education instead could offer a sort of ethical corrective that is visible through the knots of our collective wellbeing. I came across this book by educational scholar Gholdy

Muhammad, *Cultivating Genius*, that offers a counter-history of schooling as exemplified by the Black literacy clubs of the 1800s. These were literacy clubs that taught individuals not only the skills to read, but also created a repository for identity, the conditions for communal thriving, a clear understanding of who their community is, where they came from, and their histories. These literary societies have a very different history than those of modern educational institutions that created tests and grades, schools in which identities and histories of the students do not matter. One can argue those “modern” and institutional habits prioritized progress over deep education and were imported from industrial practices. After all, the history of grades is connected to the history of the meat industry, where the ABCD grades were originally applied to the quality of factory-produced beef.

BEERY: It seems rooting is a constant process. It is never completed fully. Do you have expectations for your students once they are sufficiently rooted? How do you measure what your students accomplish or your impact as an educator?

LAM: Going back to my point about the Black literary communities, pedagogy may not be outcome-based. It’s not just about getting skilled up.

BEERY: I tend to agree with the direction. But I find this complicated by the fact that we face immense and urgent problems and the timescale of consciousness reorientation just feels so slow. In the meantime, ecomodernists are pushing Western epistemologies to their limits and proposing very persuasive and very extreme interventions in non-human systems. Theirs is a recipe for disaster. What is our response?

LAM: Speaking of climate disasters, have you read *Lilith’s Brood* (1987)? It’s part of Octavia Butler’s *Xenogenesis* trilogy from the 1980s. The series is a commentary on reproduction and change, one that centers difference in its most radical manifestation. It tells a story of nuclear fallout, after which these aliens come to Earth, called Oankali. And they are ugly! Or horrendously scary (that’s how Butler characterizes that shock from humans upon first contact). And the reason they look scary is that they survive by mating with other species across the universe and they have this technology that archives DNA through cross-species sex. They’re basically DNA engineers. And they’re particularly interested in how humans are one of the few species across the galaxy that have a self-destructive feature (cancer). They are intrigued by DNA that has this dynamism, that isn’t static.

The Oankali harvest and collect DNA from all species, and it goes in a collective biological inventory, a genetic memory, that helps them and others heal and survive. The Oankali don’t have homes. They are nomadic creatures and don’t know where they’re from. They don’t care about that.

They don’t care about a fixed mythical origin story. They’re products of mutations and rely on wildly contaminating interactions (intergalactic sex!) between all species they come into contact with. The drive for the Oankali is regeneration through difference (not sameness). In fact the Oankali are stupefied by human tendencies of destruction, domination, and hierarchy. These are useless habits and worldviews for the Oankali, as they are species that are propelled to heal and evolve, and that biological necessity creates cultural structures of cooperativism and knowledge sharing.

In the trilogy, Earth is ruined and dying, and human species are destined for species extinction. An inter-species collaboration is created where the aid of the Oankali allow new Oankali/human hybrids to heal. The main character, Lilith, is in a quandary: share human DNA with the Oankali and permanently change the human race to survive or go into cold storage and not be alive. She decides to mix DNA, but she worries that she’s a species traitor. In fact, there are humans that resist her. They fear change and hate the aliens, and wish to destroy them, despite the fact that human species will die without their aid.

This all can be seen as a very useful allegory for pedagogy. We need mutant transformation to survive. Rooting here is not a nostalgia for the past but a recognition that change, care, memory, survival needs to last for generations. Imagine if we had that deep time and deep education. Unfortunately, the institutional models we have thrive on stability, predictability, speculation, forecasting, authority, discipline.

BEERY: It is a beautiful allegory. But is it harkening back to ideas of pan-cultural humanity or pan-human culture? Does this allegory lead us to believe that human survival relies on incorporating the best parts of each of us into some monolithic whole? I’ve been excited by another vision lately, a possible future that is much more diverse than that. I admit that part of my vision is a bit retrograde, a bit nostalgic for a time when different worlds coexisted maybe not even knowing about each other. But perhaps then there was some more difference and richness in the world. I don’t know if that’s possible anymore.

I’m also concerned that the Oankali appear in this allegory to be colonists of some sort, looting DNA from untold numbers of species rather than rooting themselves in place.

LAM: When thinking about knowledge and ethics, the key is to consider who the knowledge is for, how it is gained, and how it will be used.

For the Oankali, they are not interested in taking DNA to perpetuate domination, nor does that knowledge stay confined for personal edification. The Oankali are intergalactic healers. It’s a pedagogic plus a genetic impulse.

Genetic knowledge for them is a form of reconciliation.

I understand many people are particularly sensitive to the practices and histories of cultural appropriation today. And it makes sense—our society and economy demand we fight for ownership and control over one's story. But I think this allegory is indeed a calling for difference. Humans need to mutate to survive and not remain fixed.

BEERY: These tensions between mutation and ownership are, in a sense, what fueled the curatorial vision for *Owning Earth*. I am not suggesting that these are mutually exclusive strategies. But the exhibition does aim to highlight a variety of approaches to land and power that might sit uneasily between those themes. I wanted one approach that overidentified with domination in a way that makes it clearly visible, heightening a sense of domination to the point of precarity. The piece that stands out here for me is Sam Spillman's *Bad Mouth*. This work is rich and multilayered, so I am not trying to reduce it to one theme. But it does force an audience experience that is not entirely comfortable. Also, it is a powerful (and controversial) imposition on the land and pond it sits on.

There is also the approach of embracing power in the effort to heal. Joel Olzak's *Drainage, Erosion, Dominion* created deep scars in the landscape that perform a powerful and necessary ecological function, alleviating the flooding that began killing cedar trees after all the ash trees were destroyed by the emerald ash borer. Sarah Max Beck's *Self-Made Straw Man* hits on this theme, too, as a kind of meditation on forms of power that might digest and destroy patriarchal institutions.

An entirely different approach within that theme included those artists who self-consciously embrace the practices and aesthetics of science and engineering as pathways to deeper connection with land. This includes the works by Alex Young and Matthew Friday, Robert C Beck, Colin Lyons, and, in an extended sense, Eliza Evans. One thing I particularly appreciate about Lyons' *The Laboratory of Everlasting Solutions* is that the whole thing demeans ecomodernist sensibilities by comparing present-day engineering efforts to control environmental complexity to the practices of ancient and early modern alchemy. But it does this while standing as a sort of chapel, a kind of spiritual space that treats these practices with disarming reverence.

The bulk of the artists are really reflecting on mutualistic approaches to land-based work. Michael Asbill and Derek Stroup's *Secret Hearts*, as well as Lucy Pullen and Eleanor King's *Politics and Pollinators*, create conditions for interspecies engagement and learning. Christy Gast's *Blake's Hitch, Ladder Tie, Limb Loop (Treetopping)* beautifully gestures toward interspecies love and a queering of our relationship to trees. Melinda Kiefer's *Bathtub*

Grotto repurposes a common Catholic shrine to propose an Earth-honoring spirituality. Sariah Park's *Unearthed*, giant weavings made with post-consumer waste hint at a threshold, is a kind of doorway into a new sensibility.

LAM: You have a rich variety of propositions here.

BEERY: Yes, for sure! And then there is a project that has lately been on the top of my mind, Jean-Marc Superville Sovak's *Burying of White Supremacy*. In the performance, audience members were asked to bring and bury everyday artifacts of white supremacy. Superville Sovak built a casket, a large group of us dug a grave in the hard clay soil there, and he led a ceremony where we laid the artifacts in the casket and shoveled dirt on it. It was really a wonderful thing to be doing as a community. But I started thinking, what is the difference between a burial and a planting? What grows from the soil where we buried white supremacy? It has led me to think a lot about the process of transformation, about how white supremacy and racism never actually leaves us. It doesn't die and go away. It transforms. It becomes the seeds for something better, more beautiful, more life-affirming.

LAM: Interesting. It is so important to refuse toxicity and not let it be reproduced. We need more stories that heal, versus stories that hurt. On one reading, this performance is almost like the opposite of what the Oankali do in the allegory we discussed. Or maybe it is a parallel practice. Rather than capturing DNA to use it or change it, the artist is capturing these sick artifacts and burying them, giving them closure so they don't mutate into something more destructive.

But I also think there's something really interesting about the idea that it is a kind of reverse landfill. A kind of compost. How do you compost white supremacy? What grows on that compost?



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