



OWNING EARTH

INTRODUCTION

Tal Beery

WHEN MOST OF US THINK OF CULTURE, we think of the arts, of languages and recipes and dances, design, fashion, films, paintings, and the like. But these are only the visible manifestations of something much deeper. Like a glacier, most of culture is unconscious and invisible to us. Culture as a whole allows us to attribute complex meanings and nuanced values to objects, experiences, and relationships. It makes things feel natural and right. It guides our aspirations, frames our imaginations, and limits what we believe to be possible. Culture is the hidden foundation upon which our social, political, and economic institutions are built. Culture is the dream we are all dreaming together.

Under the surface in many cultures today exists a profound link that is deeper than East versus West, deeper than communism versus capitalism. There exists a unifying belief of Man as Nature's Master, which has come to define land-use practice and has been buttressed by an ethics of domination over land that has spilled over to other aspects of society. The social theorist Murray Bookchin spent a long and prolific career elaborating convincingly on the proposition that once domination over land became extolled as a virtue, new domination relationships easily took hold: human over animal, man over woman, some groups of men over others. Humans steeped in this culture began to see strict hierarchy as an innate feature of all relations. Thus, even those who suffered at the very bottom of the social ladder accepted their circumstances, not because they were good but because they were *right*. "At least I don't live like an animal," they probably thought.

We are on the verge of a profound cultural transition necessitated by global environmental threats. We now know that the more you try to control a complex system, like an ecosystem, the more you destabilize it, causing accelerating oscillations that throw off an otherwise dynamic balance. Systems theorists contend that prudence is almost always the right approach in a crisis. But as a general principle, the culture I've described, the one that has given rise to *Owning Earth*, has not yet embraced prudence, reverence, mutualism, or respect with regards to its environment (or its people, for that matter). Instead, the most popular proposals for dealing with the imbalances created by human domination are to dominate them further: engineer supercrops, inject sulfur dioxide into the atmosphere, build giant sea walls, leave the planet altogether, and any number of other examples. If we go down any of those paths we will likely only deepen the imbalance and accelerate collapse.

We need to transition, but transition can seem impossible — and it is hardly possible to tell at this point what we might transition to. The totalizing quality of culture can make our current circumstances seem inevitable. That is why it is so important to

remind ourselves that a cultural change led us to where we are today, and another cultural change will lead us out. Culture is not destiny. It is mutable. Collectively, we are empowered to change it and offer entirely new worlds to our descendants.

In that spirit, let us declare that we can no longer tolerate the popular myth that life sucked until we embraced human dominance over Earth. That story is not working for us. It is dangerous. Our ecosystems and societies are collapsing under its influence. Nearly 100 years ago, Antonio Gramsci famously wrote that "the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear." Gramsci's "morbid symptoms" referred to the rise of fascism in 1930s Europe; when one system no longer works but there is no alternative to replace it, the resulting uncertainty leads people to follow dominant men and demagogues. Many now cite Gramsci's quote to explain the rise of fascism yet again today and the decline of democratic institutions at a time when we are in dire need of collective action. Because, indeed, the old is dying and we desperately need something new. But perhaps it is time to put to bed the self-defeating notion that the new cannot be born. The seeds of the new are already here. They just need sunlight and care to take root.



JOEL OLZAK
Drainage, Erosion, Dominion
Earthwork and cedar bridges,
Dimensions variable.

Owning Earth assumes this more empowered perspective. It presents each artwork in the show as a seed, a poetic yet actionable proposition for a mode of engagement that confronts our culture of domination and brings a mutualistic and reverential culture into being. But artists, like everyone, must use the old tools of our current culture to tell a new story. As a result, those artists who are most earnest in their efforts openly contend with their entanglement — and complicity — with systems of domination. The works in *Owning Earth* are thus not one-sided critiques of unjust systems, nor do they present reactionary utopias. Rather, they are at once visionary and ambivalent. It takes special courage to be this honest, and it has been such a privilege to be routinely inspired working alongside these artists and organizing this show.

For Alex Young and Matthew Friday's installation *Solar Sallet*, the artists painstakingly unearthed the root system of a large spruce tree and suspended it upside down with silver steel rods protruding at various angles from the earth, recalling in form one of Louise Bourgeois's famed spiders. Portions of the root system were severed and then reattached with more rods and screws. Additional steel rods jutted out of the root ball to suspend white porcelain amphorae of various sizes, in which the artists planted non-native invasive plants – pokeweed, Japanese barberry, garlic mustard, and Japanese stiltgrass. Towering over the root ball, encased in a white rectangular metal and plexiglass box, was a technological marvel invented by the artists themselves—a pokeberry dye-sensitized photovoltaic system. The contraption captures the sun's energy with plant pigment and powers a pump that pushes water through black rubber tubes that run along the root ball to each amphora, watering the plants growing within. The sculpture-slash-fountain-slash-prototype resembles a cyborg root system on life support. It resembles a futuristic hydroponic plant nursery. It wrenches, tears, and twists, yet it also suspends, embraces, and nourishes. A meditation on the notion of "non-native invasives" as applied to plants, it offers no easy outs or answers. The domination it presents is transformed into an act of care.

Jean-Marc Superville Sovak embedded a circle of Empire brand bricks into the forest floor, laid out in a pattern that enslaved women used in legendary quilts to communicate the local movements of the Underground Railroad. Consistent with much of Superville Sovak's work, the piece collapses conventional historical conceptions to weave a more nuanced history of power and racism in the Hudson Valley. It suggests hope that a path to liberation could emerge from the painful history of American industry.

Colin Lyons constructed a laboratory to test absurd geoengineering proposals for mitigating climate change, likening them to the efforts of 17th-century European alchemists. The installation resembles at once a space capsule and a chapel. Both reverential and mocking, it makes clear the inescapable link between science and faith.

Brooke Singer erected a cedar flagpole at the very center of the exhibition, a gesture that seems to suppose a land claim of some kind. But atop the pole, she flew the flag of a hitherto unknown bioregional political entity, colored by the plants and minerals found only on Unison's grounds. The sculpture demands visionary reconsideration of modern notions of territory.

The collective *how to perform an abortion* identified a ready-made monument to women's reproductive health: an un-hewn patch of healthy meadow, in which grew ten plants historically used by women to manage fertility. Each plant was identified with signage that included the plant's name and a QR code linking to more information about proper usage. This merger of ancient inherited plant wisdom and contemporary technology hints at a path forward at a time when much place-based plant knowledge has been lost.



EMILIE HOUSSART
Co-co-codac!
Forest floor, local compost,
horse manure, sand,
industrially farmed potatoes,
Dimensions variable.

Emilie Houssart's *Co-co-codac!* also demands an embrace of contradictions. The piece consists of carefully constructed rectangular pillars of brown earth in multiple locations throughout the exhibition. Houssart worked with numerous collaborators on the piece, using the slow process of building the forms as an opportunity for thoughtful dialogue about contemporary relationships with land. The top of each completed pillar resembles the surrounding landscape, giving the impression that this perfect geometric protrusion spontaneously erupted from the ground, like a pixilation glitch in the landscape. Houssart embedded dozens of industrially farmed supermarket potatoes into each pillar. As potato plants grew and broke through the sides and tops of the shapes, the overall form was held together by the roots, at least for a while, until mounting tension caused it to collapse, scattering growing potato plants over the dried leaves and twigs that littered the ground beneath.



how to perform an abortion
Found (abortion) Monument, 2021,
90' x 35' x variable height.

In another wild embrace of interdependence, Sarah Max Beck and Robert C Beck created two sculptures that are completely reliant upon each other. Sarah Max Beck's *Self-Made Straw Man* is a giant phallus that is being slowly digested by edible fungi that themselves fruit in the shape of small phalluses. Ideal growing conditions for the fungi are sustained by Robert C Beck's *Reversible Reactions*, a high-tech steel pyramid resembling a lunar landing module that acts as a circulatory system, collecting rainwater and solar power to pump water to the fungi. Aesthetically the two sculptures could not be more different, but each requires and resolves the other.

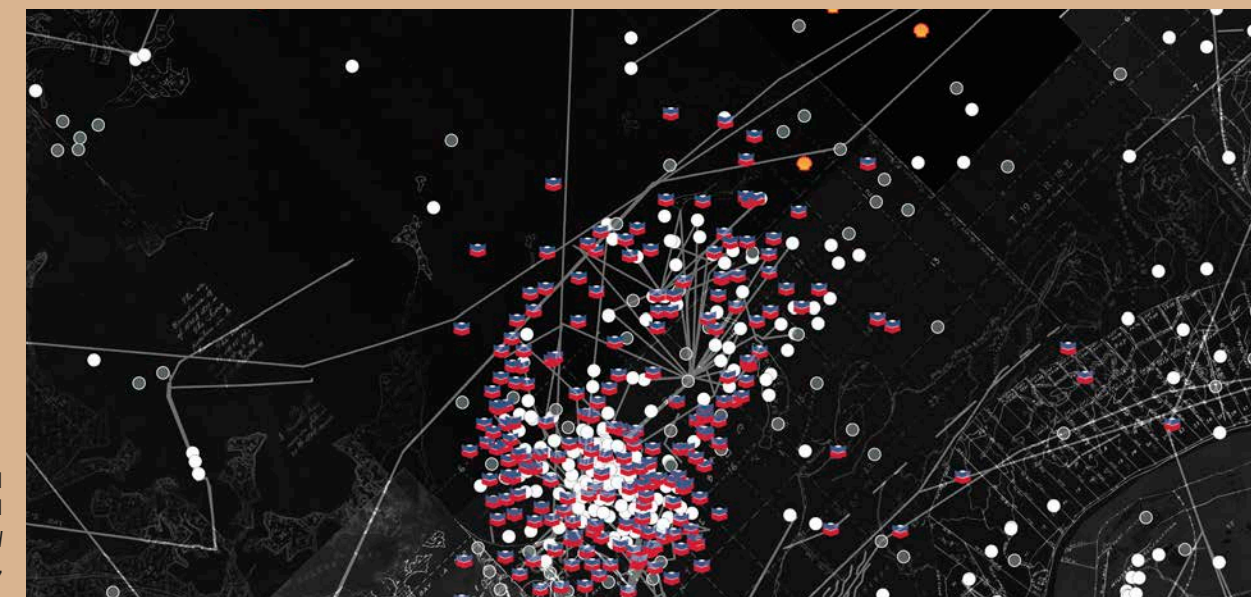


ROBERT C BECK
Reversible Reactions
Rainwater, aluminum, steel,
plastic, foil, photovoltaics,
electronics, 8' x 8' x 7'.

Sariah Park made monumental weavings with post-consumer waste. Michael Asbill and Derek Stroup sculpted modernist statues for an audience of migratory songbirds. Joel Olzak scarred the forest floor with deep trenches to remediate a floodplain that was killing cedar trees. Sam Spillman reconstructed a deteriorated bunkhouse from a decrepit utopian socialist summer camp. Eliza Evans exploited unique features of U.S. private property law to build solidarity and impede fossil fuel extraction in Oklahoma. Eileen Wold's spherical mirrors forced us to wrestle with the uneasy tensions between visibility and surveillance. Alejandro Chellet never finished a welcoming hearth and gathering space, because he was barred from entering the United States. Christy Gast bound the giant crotch of a large tree with knots made of stuffed denim, themselves resembling dozens of overlapping crotches, in a gesture of interspecies love. Eleanor King and Lucy Pullen welded a hexagonal staircase from which to observe the non-human democracy taking place in a ten-foot beehive monolith. Melinda Kiefer offered a quiet space to reflect on the possibilities of an earth-honoring Catholicism.

A tome should be written on each of the installations in *Owning Earth*, but this introduction is not the place for that. The pages that follow introduce the artists and further contextualize their work with a thoughtful essay by the art historian Sarah Warren and an interview with curator and educator Steven Lam. In lieu of an

essay contribution, a special print by the artist Imani Jacqueline Brown graces the very center of the catalog. Brown's side-by-side comparison of a star map with a satellite image of fossil fuel extraction sites in Louisiana beautifully encapsulates much of the curatorial vision of *Owning Earth*—staring at once up to the sky and down to the Earth and seeing mythic constellations in both.



IMANI
JACQUELINE BROWN
Detail from *Charted
Futures*, 2021,
Dimensions variable.

The artists of *Owning Earth* have earned my deepest admiration and appreciation, as have a number of other people who were instrumental in realizing this exhibition. Erin Lee Antonak, *Owning Earth's* brilliant assistant curator, brought great courage and ambition to the show's overall direction. Alex Baer and Faheem Haider, Unison's former and current executive director, respectively, were visionaries in the way they approached their support for *Owning Earth* and in the ways they each leveraged the show to support Unison's important mission in the Hudson Valley. Members of Unison's sculpture committee—Eliza Evans, Matthew Friday, Michael Asbill, Sarah Warren, and, for a time, Uday Joshi and Karali Pia Pitzele—were fierce advocates from the very beginning and an absolute pleasure to work with every step of the way. My partner, Eugenia Jane Manwelyan, a tremendous artist and thinker, helped to guide my thinking on this exhibition over many years. Finally, Eliza Evans has earned yet another shout-out for toiling to ensure this catalog you hold was realized.

If each work in *Owning Earth* is a kind of seed, replete with both contradictions and possibilities, it is my hope that this catalog and the exhibition it represents can, perhaps eventually, sprout something new in you.