

# D/A

Trickster: Refining Right Relationship or,  
All That You Touch You Change

2021 Annual Theme: EARTHSEED

KAYA JOAN, LAURA JOY PIETERS, SHAMICA  
RUDDOCK AND WHITNEY FRENCH + LUE  
PALMER

CURATED BY YERO TIMI-BIU + JACLYN  
QUARESMA



| Image | Alpha Centauri star system | ESA/NASA

Durham Art Gallery's first-ever digital residency, [Trickster, Teacher, Chaos, Clay Digital Residency](#) took place over the course of the 2020 exhibition year as a means to support the creation of artwork, safely and at a distance while introducing the next year's annual theme, *Earthseed*.

In partnership with Yero Timi-Biu, Crate Studio + Project Space (Margate, England) and Raven, Whippersnapper Gallery (Toronto, Canada), five emerging artists, Kaya Joan, Laura Joy Pieters, Shamica Ruddock and Whitney French + Lue Palmer were supported in their individual engagements with science fiction author Octavia E. Butler's *Earthseed Series*.

Octavia E. Butler authored two of the planned six books in her *Earthseed* series before her untimely passing. As part of the Durham Art Gallery's 2021 theme, *Earthseed*, Yero Timi-Biu and Jaclyn Quaresma reconsider the work of Kaya Joan, Laura Joy Pieters, Shamica Ruddock and Whitney French + Lue Palmer in a digital feature and accompanying essay.

Yero Timi-Biu and Jaclyn Quaresma present *Trickster: Refining Right Relationship, or All That You*

*Touch You Change*, that engages the physical to reach the digital. Placed with intention throughout the gallery grounds and the town of Durham, Ontario, QR codes are installed in the environment and will direct viewers online to each of the works created in the residency. A walk through the landscape becomes a walk from the present into the unfinished future Octavia left for us as participants experience the path set by each of the five artists. Find the map [here](#).



## A LETTER FROM THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS

The pandemic that ripped through the world, Canada, Ontario and settled into our region in 2020 is something of a life-changing event for our community, for us as individuals, and for the Durham Art Gallery. Many public spaces and art galleries, including the Durham Art Gallery, have been required to temporarily close in response to new regulations in Canada and around the world. The safety of our treasured staff, visitors and community is our priority. We responded to the shifting regulatory framework through to 2021 with the focused efforts and talents of our staff. Uncertainty with respect to the pandemic and regulations about public spaces abounds to this day and it is accompanied by the unpleasantness of isolation for us as individuals. Sadly, in some ways, it seems Community has been lost in the pandemic.

The Gallery very aggressively pivoted to an online presence as a safe way to connect and to fulfill its mandate to expose people to the arts, exchange ideas, perspectives and facilitate conversations. We experienced connection with many other places as a

result of our shift online. It was delightful and a bit amazing to hear of people around the world – Australia, Czech Republic, Indonesia, Sweden, the UK had been to the Gallery’s website. Community is now something different in the minds of the directors, and we hope in the minds of the membership and the local and regional community. The Durham Art Gallery is on the world map!

Going forward we will continue to expand our connectivity with the world, and to the local community through our online presence. We are excited about the extension of this outreach effort in 2021. You’ll hear more and we invite your participation going forward! We recognize that this new connection isn’t the same as the old connection, and many of us long for that old type of connection. As social beings, we long for that more traditional, in-person sense of community. But there is a way forward and we are obliged to pursue this way forward in order to full fill the obligations to our traditional community and our larger, newer, dare we say ‘global’ community.

The Gallery has evolved in the past three years. The contributions of Ilse Gassinger to the

management, to the survival of the Gallery, must be acknowledged here. It is regularly acknowledged around the board table and something of an inspiration to those of us working at building an enduring public space. The contributions of past directors are also significant. I would like to acknowledge the efforts of our recently retired members. David Sugarman considerably contributed his talents extending from the founding of the Gallery until 2021. Michele Bossi, Gerri Grant and Pat Morden provided insights into fundraising and organizing from their past experiences. Stella Coultas and Daniela Bosco shared their keen eye and support for artists and Ingo Huesing always provided a wonderful balance of practical advice and a progressive artistic vision.

I am pleased to report that our current slate of dedicated and passionate directors are also knowledgeable, have experience in the arts community and a deep appreciation for running a public gallery. Their contributions to development are very valuable as we build something sustainable.

Building and supporting arts in the community takes effort, and there are many tasks to be done of

course. If those reading this would reach out to me, or the Curator Jaclyn Quaresma I believe we could find ways to reward the community-mindedness of each and every one of you. We welcome contributions from all members of the community as volunteers, members and of course we need directors to help shepherd the Gallery into the future.

We are building something that we expect to endure and contribute to the people of Durham, West Grey, the region and the world writ large now. With best wishes for your safety and security going forward, we remain,

Yours Truly,

Peter Allen,

President and Chair , on behalf of the Board of Directors

## TAKING ROOT AMONG THE STARS: A note from Durham Art Gallery curator, Jaclyn Quaresma

Against the stars or what is foretold, this is what *disaster* really means. The word comes from the Italian word *distaro*, *dis-* meaning *in negation* and *astro*, *the stars*. Disaster is, in effect, to counter the wisdom and warning gleaned from the stars. It is to act despite, it is knowing better but doing anyways. 2020 is the result of disaster. 2020 is the year the privileged could no longer pretend that the societal systems in place were built to benefit all, if only some worked harder.

We see the results of this belief heightened by the manifold of symptomatic crises that arose over time from disastrous policies informed by oppressive ideologies. These crises include the subjugation of women, gross intersectional inequality based on race, sexuality, gender, class and ability, as well as environmental collapse. One only needs to consider the disproportionate illness and death among Indigenous, Black, and economically disadvantaged peoples, as well as the record levels of domestic

violence reported during the current Coronavirus pandemic and subsequent lockdowns, for an illustration of the continuous severity of oppression.<sup>1</sup> There is no denying that the insidious, multifaceted oppression that is the cause of the listed symptoms, is deeply rooted in the systems, institutions and organizations that govern our ways of being. In other words, these *disastrous* systems are not broken. They are working exactly as they were designed (and people are dying).

Durham Art Gallery's 2020 annual program was curated around the theme of *Community*. This almost seems ironic now as we in West Grey only recently emerged from the second, historic lockdown that separated families and strained friendships. These social sacrifices were made in the name of keeping each other healthy and safe. Could there have been a more challenging time to contemplate community? Or perhaps we can look at this from another perspective: Could there have been a more opportune moment to reconsider how we act in

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<sup>1</sup> Amanda Taub. "A New Covid-19 Crisis: Domestic Abuse Rises Worldwide." The New York Times. The New York Times, April 6, 2020.

community, how we build connections, how we sustain ourselves in relation, and how we support one another both in community and across borders? These are the questions that guided the Durham Art Gallery Team through the pandemic and that inform us today.

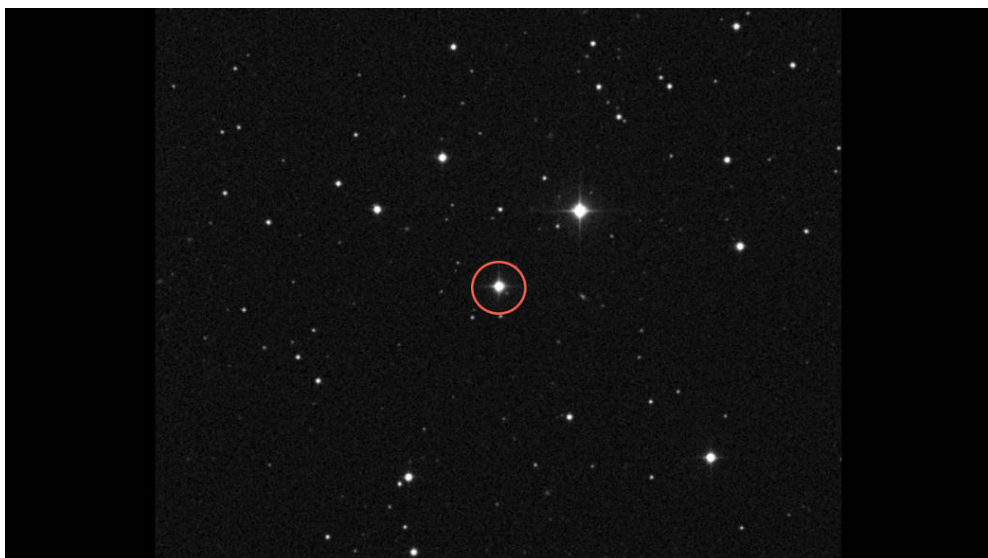
Creative practitioners across the country and globe are looking to the future and responding to these very issues from a position of radical love, anti-oppression and collectivity. An unfolding of five exhibitions will take place throughout 2021 at Durham Art Gallery and the MacLaren Art Centre (Barrie). Each one will explore the possibilities of and define an extra-planetary feminist imaginary, guided by Octavia E. Butler's *Earthseed Series*, exploring what it can provide for living in and with the contemporary state of the world. The creative practitioners collaborating with Durham Art Gallery imagine then generate the possibilities that come from beginning again and living otherwise. While we shelter in place, physically distanced from community, the 2021 annual theme *Earthseed* seeks the stars as a reminder to look up as well as ahead, to consider ourselves as pinpricks in the fabric of time, as

historically oriented in the expansive space we inhabit, as one of many, and as capable of dispelling disaster through collective action.

The Earthseed Series, written in the 1990s by the prolific Black, science fiction author Octavia E. Butler, provides us with tools to maneuver through, with and in spite of oppression. These tools come in parable form. The books chronicle the life of a fictional, young, Black hyperempath named Lauren Oya Olamina beginning in 2024. Lauren forms an eco-feminist religion called Earthseed in response to the hardships she lives through and witnesses in Octavia's apocalyptic near future. A white-supremacist, patriarchal, authoritarian ruler comes to power after an extremist populist movement, fires destroy the homes of human and more-than-human relations, a drug epidemic plagues the country, slavery is not-so-subtly reinstated, the gap between the wealthy and poor grows at an alarming rate, there is an exodus from urban centres to the rural outskirts... Octavia's fictional apocalypse meets our reality face on.



Of the six planned books in this series, Octavia completed only two during her short life.<sup>2</sup> *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents* reimagine the biblical parables of the same name, laying the groundwork for a future beyond patriarchy, systemic inequality and unjust governance on Earth. The goal of Earthseed is not solely spiritual or ethereal, on the contrary, it is concrete and specific: To take root among the stars. The four remaining, incomplete books are believed to have been guided by new parables under the Earthseed teachings as the main characters put them into practice on another planet located in the closest star system to Earth, Alpha Centauri.



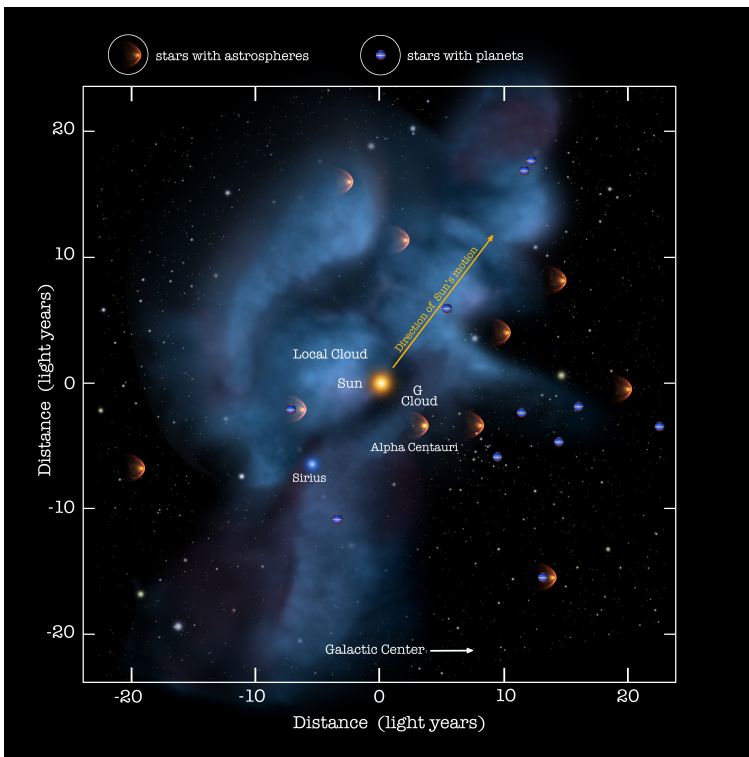
Borrowing from one of Earthseed's most recognizable passages from *The Books of the Living*, this year's exhibitions are titled *Trickster, Teacher, Chaos, and Clay*.<sup>3</sup> As we collectively imagine what the next four parables in the series may have been, the yearlong series will speculate the outcome of each of the unwritten books. What if the parables Sower, Talents, Trickster, Teacher, Chaos and Clay were the founding principles of society? What is possible then? And, how does one rebuild without a blank slate? These are the questions that Octavia gifts us, and these are the questions that centre our 2021 exhibitions.

Rebeka Tabobondung, Debbie Ebanks Schlums, Adrian Kahgee, Whitney French, Lauren Fournier and Ashely Jane Lewis as well as other creative practitioners who will be collaborating with Durham Art Gallery this year, not only reimagine the future but also reconsider what the exhibition can be in an age when distance is prevalent above all else

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<sup>3</sup> Octavia, E Bulter. *Parable of the Sower*. New York: Warner Books. 1993. 26. *The Books of the Living* are fictional books of poetry and guidance written by the protagonist of the Earthseed Series, Lauren Oya Olamina. Passages from *The Books of the Living* greet the reader at each chapter. The namesake passage can be found for the first time on page 26 of *Parable of the Sower*.

and yet connection must be maintained for survival's sake. Durham Art Gallery then embodies what Alpha Centauri may have been. Where Octavia imagines a planet elsewhere among their stars for the Earthseed colony to take root, artists, curators, practitioners and writers reimagine the exhibition as a live site of praxis, where Octavia's hexology of parables are alive and working against disaster, informing us, and challenging us to create change for the future, together, here and now.



| Image | Alpha Centauri in relation to the Sun | NASA/Goddard/Adler/U.

## | FEATURE |

### TRICKSTER: REFINING RIGHT RELATIONSHIP, OR ALL THAT YOU TOUCH YOU CHANGE

Yero Timi-Biu and Jaclyn Quaresma

Sower, Talents, Teacher, Trickster, Chaos, Clay. These are the parables that were meant to make up the six-part Earthseed Series authored by Octavia E. Butler. Only the first two parables we completed before Octavia's untimely death. Durham Art Gallery's 2021 exhibition year is programmed under the theme of *Earthseed* and speculates the possibilities of the four unwritten parables.

We are pleased to present *Trickster: Refining Right Relationship or, All That You Touch You Change*, as the first exploration into the Parables. This essay features the work of Kaya Joan, Laura Joy Pieters, Shamica Ruddock and Whitney French + Lue Palmer that was produced during the 2020 digital residency supported by Durham Art Gallery, Crate Studio + Project Space and Whippersnapper Gallery.

*Trickster: Refining Right Relationship, or All That You Touch You Change*, is a meditation on the

pandemic through the central theme of Octavia E. Butler's unwritten book *Parable of the Trickster* in relation to adrienne maree brown's notion of living in right relationship, and the Earthseed principle of Change.

The Earthseed series begins with the *Parable of the Sower*. In it author Octavia E. Butler introduces a future world eerily similar to the one we live in today. A young woman named Lauren Oya Olamina endeavours to solve some of the deepest rooted issues of her (our) time through a set of guiding principles that she calls Earthseed and practices them in a community of seekers called Acorn. The second book, *Parable of the Talents*, documents the growth of Acorn alongside a separate powerful, political, religious movement, Lauren's upturn in fame and the fulfilment of Earthseed's primary goal: to take root among the stars.

The series begins with the biblical parables and was meant to morph into Earthseed's own parables. After completing the first two books of the series, Octavia passed away before she could finish it. She intended the unwritten novels to document an escape from the Earthly authorities, imagining the possibilities of a society untethered to its Terran origins and guided by an anti-oppressive set of

founding tenets. The series never reached its utopian promise.

Through Octavia's extensive archive at the Huntington Library, Art Museum and Botanical Gardens in California, scholars and admirers have caught glimpses of the future Earthseed. The next book in the six-part series, *Parable of the Trickster*, was left in its beginning stages. Octavia's papers reveal a myriad of tales that explore the potential landing of the Christopher Columbus Starship that carried seeds of Earth, in the form of earthling members of the original Acorn community, to be planted on a mysterious planet in another star system.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Octavia, E. , Butler. *Parable of the Talents*. New York: Grand Central Publishing. 1998. 406. *Parable of the Talents* is written from the point of view of the protagonist's daughter reading her mother's journals. The book projects the Acorn effort into the future and ends with the partial realization of Earthseed's central goal, to take root among the stars. However, its realization has been co-opted by the political leaders to become a colonial effort. This is exemplified in the ironic, yet poignant, naming of the spaceship that carries the Earthseed practitioners to their next home, after a horrific colonizer of the United State of America, Christopher Columbus. As found in the end of *Parable of the Talents*, Lauren writes in her journal: "I object to the name. This ship is not about a shortcut to riches and empire. It's not about snatching up slaves and gold and presenting them to some European monarch. But one can't win every battle. One must know which battles to fight. The name is nothing."

One of the *Trickster* storylines found in the archives reveals a planet that is sentient, responsive, and maybe, has a spirit of its own. In a defensive effort against the new inhabitants, the planet begins to react to the residents, or perhaps the residents begin to react to the planet. The settlers become blind, in one case their vision becomes inhibited by the planet's atmosphere and in another version they are still blinded but develop more suitable sensorial responses to what living on the new planet may have required.

These are just two examples of the many instances of planetary trickery that unfold in the unfinished narrative. In this parable, the planet itself takes on the role of the trickster. True to the nature of the literary archetype, the trickster has the potential to reveal deep-seated inequities and problems in the Earthseed colony. Octavia explains,

...of course, the people have brought all their human problems from Earth to complicate the ways in which they deal with the many problems the planets give them.<sup>5</sup>

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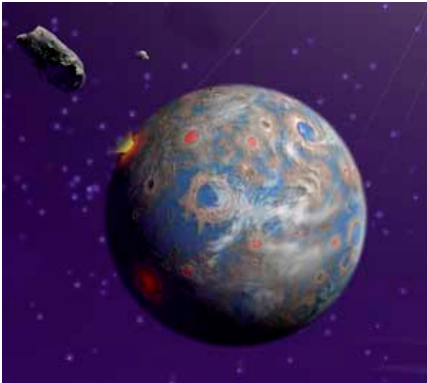
<sup>5</sup> Gerry Canavan. *Octavia E. Butler*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2016.

As a result of the extra-stellar trials,

... (s)ome [inhabitants] are terrified; many are bored; an increasing number teeter on the brink of severe psychological crisis; nearly all are deeply unhappy.<sup>6</sup>

This is the toll of the trickster: before the need for systemic change is exposed, there is suffering. But is that suffering attributed to the trickster's play? Or, do the trickster's games reveal the opportunities for

| Image | Possible habitable planet rendering | NASA/JPL



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<sup>6</sup> OEB 1017 and OEB 1018 and 4522 as cited by Gerry Canavan. *Octavia E. Butler*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2016.



revelation, right relationship and the need for revolution?<sup>78</sup>

Might we say that 2020 was the Year of the Trickster? Or perhaps that the Pandemic has trickster-like qualities, both grave and revealing? Emerging from each wave of the pandemic, revelations are made, opportunities for refining right relationship are afforded and the potential for revolution gathers. When read through the lens of the title theme *Trickster*, Octavia's potential extraplanetary storylines unveil a possible parable of mutual and reciprocal

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<sup>7</sup> Anupa Mistry. "On Vulnerability, Playfulness, and Keeping Yourself Honest." adrienne maree brown on vulnerability, playfulness, and keeping yourself honest – *The Creative Independent*. *The Creative Independent*, July 17, 2019.

Right Relationship is a term by adrienne maree brown from her book *Emergent Strategies* (AK Press, 2017). In an interview for *The Creative Independent* in July 2019, adrienne describes it in this way: "I always make the distinction between "right" versus "right relationship." So not [just] doing something that's right for the entire planet in terms of how we're supposed to be, but having the right kind of relationship to the planet. That is something we can feel our way into, and the most devastating thing on Earth right now is that there's so many people who've been cut off from being able to feel that."

<sup>8</sup> We can define these three terms in relation to one another. Let's consider revelation as the act of coming to know, revolution as the result of the action taken to change what is known, and right relationship as the method by which revolution becomes possible.

changes and growth, but not always for the better. It brings us to the central question of the exhibition year: How does one rebuild without a blank slate? In other words, how can we live in right relationship with ourselves, others and the planet given the history that precedes us? And how do we maintain right relationship as things change and open up again?

Laura Joy Pieters summons a trusted group within her community to address these questions and others plaguing her home in England and the globe today. In her four-part podcast series, Laura considers how to live in right relationship within the political sphere, drawing on the listener as an active, social and political being in the age of the coronavirus.

In Project Acorn Bread, Whitney French and Lue Palmer offer up the process but not the recipe for Acorn Bread.<sup>9</sup> The collaborators came together with community at a safe physical distance to gather nuts, process flour, and bake bread over the time

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<sup>9</sup> Octavia Butler, 6. The nutrient dense bread made from oak tree seeds is mentioned early in the series. In conversation, Lauren and her father, Rev. Olamina, speak about the importance of knowing one's environment and the plants therein foreshadowing the future community Lauren will create. Rev. Olamina explains that acorns were not eaten in the before times. Their conversation gives the reader a glimpse into the unstable future of industrial agricultural in relation to food sustainability.

span of a few months. In sharing the process, the artists invite the audience to pay attention and create their own right relationship to land and each other, following not directions but impressions of Whitney and Lue's trials.

Their collaboration conjures the question: what does it mean to live in right relationship with oneself, others and the planet during a period of significant risk, isolation and inconsistency? With a shared common goal of sustaining one another directly from the land and with the company one keeps, regardless of environment (the acorns were collected in an urban environment by a team of friends and colleagues), Whitney and Lue encourage viewers to come to a recipe of their own making, together. More of a practice than a project, Project Acorn Bread encourages viewers to sustain one another.

As a collective social body, we too face challenges parallel to those of the Earthseed colony. Our bodies have the potential to host harm, both to ourselves and our communities, the indoor and outdoor environments beyond our sanitized in-place shelters have become suspect and inhospitable, we relate to one another over distance, mouths covered,

voices raised, and for those who have access, more safely through technological means. We do not touch for fear of spread. When framed this way, our lived experiences of the vast and fast-paced global proliferation of the evolving virus appear to conjure otherworldly images inspired by science fiction.

Despite distance, masks and sanitizer, we are acutely aware that contact with another is contact with another's biology. Upon these meetings, especially when one faces chronic illness, as Curator Yero Timi-Biu does, might we ask ourselves: Has this interaction affected me on a cellular level? Has a part of you become a part of me? How has my physiology changed as a result of our meeting? Am I still the same me I was before meeting you?<sup>10</sup> Or, as artist Shamica Ruddock asks in the sound, text, image-based work developed during the residency, *Changing Synthia* (2020): Am I becoming Synthia or is Synthia Becoming Me? In this case, Lauren Olamina might remind us:

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<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, may we consider the body's need for rest in this global state of unrest.

All that you touch

You change.

All that you change

Changes you.

The only lasting truth

Is Change.<sup>11</sup>

Starseed (2020), the digital zine by Kaya Joan also considers change as something foundational and ever-present. Through a trilogy of Awakenings the Earthseed mission in Kaya's future has succeeded, kind of. Kaya introduces a series of unexpected changes that ultimately remind the reader that we are still as we always were. Changed? Yes, but still of this Earth, still a product of lineage, and perhaps still equally accountable to both the past and the future.

Funding shortages, loss of housing and studio space, inability to find, gather, afford or work safely with materials, caring for oneself and others, sick leave, loneliness, fatigue, demotivation, burnout,

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<sup>11</sup> Octavia Butler, 3.

activism, advocacy and accompliceship... Changes, postponements and cancellations due to “pandemic related reasons” greatly and at times gravely affect artists, creative practitioners, curators, cultural workers and the organizations they work within.

The Durham Art Gallery’s program, like Octavia’s efforts for the *Parable of the Trickster*, have become multiple and manifold. In response to the changing needs of cultural producers in the face of morphing regulations, in favour of public security and creating networks of support, we have started and restarted repeatedly in order to centre care for those who produce the art we seek. Considered through the lens of the pandemic-as-trickster, might we find the opportunity to refine being in right relationship to oneself, one another and culture as a whole? In meeting this opportunity, we are reminded that change is ongoing and often reciprocal. Therefore we must be especially aware: while many are suffering, how do we collectively care for one in order to support all?

Perhaps, as these digital artworks portray in concert with one another, we refine our ways of being, we adapt, change ourselves, our relationship to one another, our organizations and their

relationship to the planet, and maybe, eventually, others as well. For they too will change us.

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*Trickster, Teacher, Chaos, Clay Digital Residency* was initiated, in part, to introduce the ideas and themes being considered for the next exhibition year. *The participating artists each shared their responses to the book series that frames Durham Art Gallery's 2021 exhibition program. Likewise, Durham Art Gallery will engage the following year's theme simultaneously now and in the future with another digital residency exploring the 2022 annual theme: Intimacies. Please see our call for applications [here](#).*

# D/A

Durham Art Gallery resides within the Saugeen Ojibway Nation territory. We acknowledge that the gallery rests on the traditional land of the Saugeen Ojibway Nation, which is represented by the communities of Saugeen First Nation and Chippewas of Nawash Unceded First Nation. We thank them. We also thank of the Métis Nation of Ontario, whose history and people are well represented in Bruce and Grey Counties.

Durham Art Gallery is a non-profit, exhibition-driven space for contemporary art and visual culture in West Grey, Ontario. From our earliest incarnation in the local Carnegie library to our current purpose-built home, the Gallery's evolution is marked by an engaged community and a diversifying landscape.

We would like to acknowledge funding support from the Ontario Arts Council, an agency of the Government of Ontario

[www.durhamartgallery.com](http://www.durhamartgallery.com)

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### Hours of Operation |

1 - 4 PM Thursday - Sunday

**Entrance fee by donation.**