

## IN CONVERSATION

*Rob Carter and Jonathan Rider*

Though I do not believe that a plant will spring up where no seed has been, I have great faith in a seed. Convince me that you have a seed there, and I am prepared to expect wonders.<sup>1</sup>

— Henry David Thoreau

JR *Faith in A Seed* addresses, in many ways, man's desire to alter nature through intervention: Lawes through crop experimentation and fertilizers; Darwin through cataloguing new species and countering longstanding theories of evolution; and Thoreau, through Walden, reclaiming Arcadia from an increasingly industrial world. Though the title of the show is a direct quote from Thoreau, the notion of faith seems a bit at odds, perhaps romantic, considering men of science. Can you discuss the quote, and notion of faith in relation to Lawes, Darwin, and Thoreau?

RC Thoreau's full quote describes his experience of the magic of seeds and the time-lapse videos I produced during the exhibit certainly concern the metaphysical, if not magical, transformation of seed to plant.

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<sup>1</sup> Henry David Thoreau, *Faith in a Seed: The Dispersion of Seeds and Other Late Natural History Writings* (Washington D.C., 1993), p. xvii.

Taken out of context, focus on the word “faith” creates a duality between the miracle of nature that keeps us nourished and our assumption that the seeds of the world will sprout and food will continue to be available. As food science evolves, our need for faith in seeds seems to have diminished—we have engineered our seeds to be more and more reliable. For me, the title was meant to sound somewhat transcendental, but also to denote our historical reliance on the seed and our increasing manipulation of it. The title might also reference Darwin’s “Theory of Natural Selection” and the scientific advancements that questioned the evolution of humans, and in turn, our faith in many aspects of humanity. Despite this, my personal experience continues to be one of awe every time a seed germinates, so it’s as much a faith in experiencing wonder as it is in the germination and growth of the seed itself.

JR Can you detail your travels to Rothamsted? Were there surprises along the way that changed how you thought of *Faith in A Seed*? Also, how was the concept of your exhibition and practice received by those you met there?

RC I had a very successful few days at Rothamsted Research in Hertfordshire. The people I met there were incredibly generous of their time and helped to flesh out my understanding of John Lawes, the history of his experiments, and the kind of man he was. They gave me quite trusting access to their sample archive,



allowing me to research the place both scientifically and aesthetically.

The legacy of John Lawes is an institution of cutting edge research, which is committed to the debate and exchange of ideas about all aspects of the environment and crop sustainability. The conversations that left the greatest impressions on me were with scientists about research into genetically modified crops.



Discussing the issues both politically and scientifically around that subject helped me solidify my interest in making the installation focus on the observance of nature from a short distance in a controlled environment. Realistically, in some form or other, this food technology will be needed to feed our expanding global population. Despite the worrying issues

that surround the multinational agricultural biotech industry, Lawes's model of detailed experimentation and observation over time is the only way we can possibly use this technology safely and productively.

One generous bonus from my visit was the gift of a number of published papers and lectures by John Lawes and his resident chemist Joseph Gilbert. The writings of Darwin and Thoreau were available and familiar to me, but these papers gave me a new insight into the scientific methods of the nineteenth century and of some of the ecological concerns of its author. The Lawes texts completed the trio and made the audio and voice component of the installation seem viable.

JR Henry David Thoreau is often considered America's preeminent and quintessential outdoorsman. His *Walden* is very much a chronicle of escapism, self-reliance, and introspection:

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practice resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world; or if it were sublime, to know it by experience, and be able to give a true account of it in my next excursion.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Henry David Thoreau, *Walden; or, Life in the Woods* (Edison, NJ., 2007), p. 148.

As Darwin and Lawes were both British and men of science, do Thoreau and *Walden* act as counterpoints? You have mentioned that those at Rothamsted Research found his inclusion in your project disjunctive. Would you mind expanding on that a bit?

RC The philosophy and methods of Thoreau certainly contrast with those of Lawes and Darwin, but I do not really view him as a counterpoint to the other two. To some extent I also see him as a scientist, indeed his meticulous botanical research and observations tell us a great deal about the flora and fauna



of the places he wrote about. Many of his written works, such as “The Dispersion of Seeds,” affirm him as a scientific researcher of nature and as an ecologist. He worked in a solitary way, separated from much of the contemporary leading science on his subject, but nevertheless showed that he was one of the first people to understand forest succession on

the American continent. For me, he represents that magical place where art and science overlap.

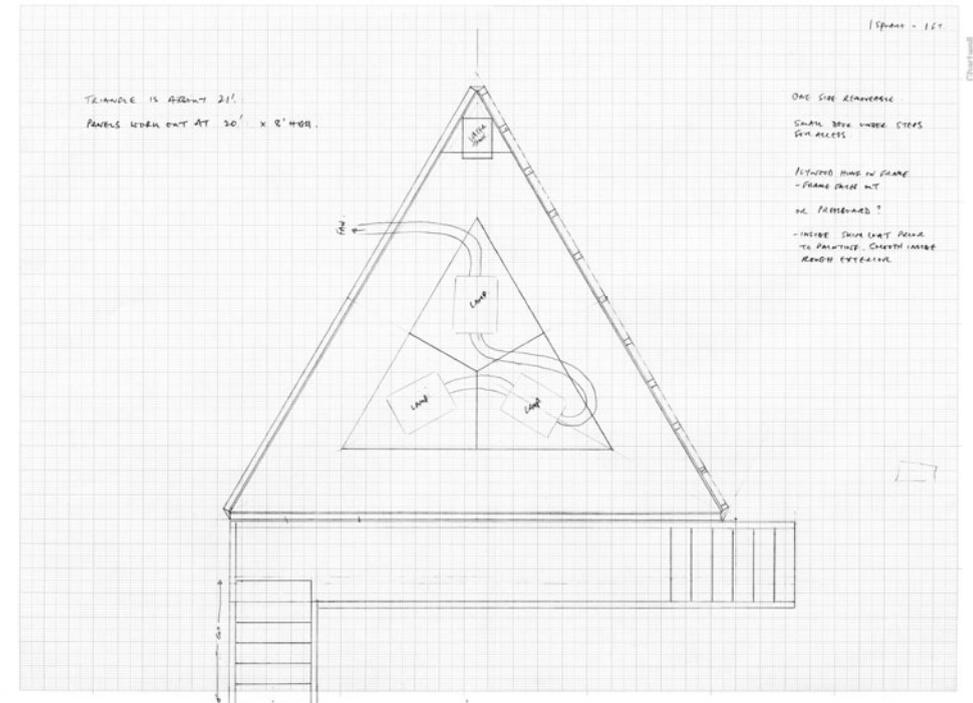
Each of these contemporary figures differs and relates on a variety of philosophical and practical levels. In some ways John Lawes was, of course, a scientist, but his inclusion is really as entrepreneur, pioneer of both farming and industry: he hired the influential chemist Joseph Gilbert to work with him on all of his experiments. Lawes was certainly a businessman and though he and Thoreau may have outwardly agreed on little, their approach to lifelong experiments on and with the land show a certain unity. What drew me to Lawes was his apparent forethought about the future of food production with such a massively expanding population. To him this was clearly an opportunity, but also a genuine problem that needed to be solved and is even more pertinent today.

Through observation and species collection, Darwin's voyage on the HMS *Beagle* helped form the scientific basis for the *The Origin of Species*, but that voyage also had a huge impact on him in terms of the people he met and especially the abject horrors he witnessed involving slaves in South America. Ultimately, through the lens of biology his groundbreaking ideas were abolitionist and philosophically revolutionary in their own right. Thoreau wrote more directly on the subject: "Slavery and servility have produced no sweet-scented flower annually, to charm the senses of men, for they have no real life: they are merely a decaying and a death, offensive to all healthy nostrils. We do not complain that they live, but that they do not get buried. Let the living bury them: even they are good for manure."<sup>3</sup> This sense of the interconnectivity of all life is at the heart of the work of both men, and I believe also buried in the experiments at Rothamsted. Lawes's writings imply a genuine inter-

<sup>3</sup> Henry David Thoreau, *Slavery in Massachusetts, The Writings of Henry David Thoreau*, Vol. 4 (Boston, 1906), p. 408.

est in raising the food standards of the working class, and the allotments and workers' club that he set up at Rothamsted show that he valued the wellbeing of his workers in a way that was all too rare at the time.

JR With viewing platforms, pinhole windows, and audio recordings, the central structure of the exhibition encompassed many elements and roles. Please talk more about your triangular garden and structure at the center of *Faith in A Seed*.

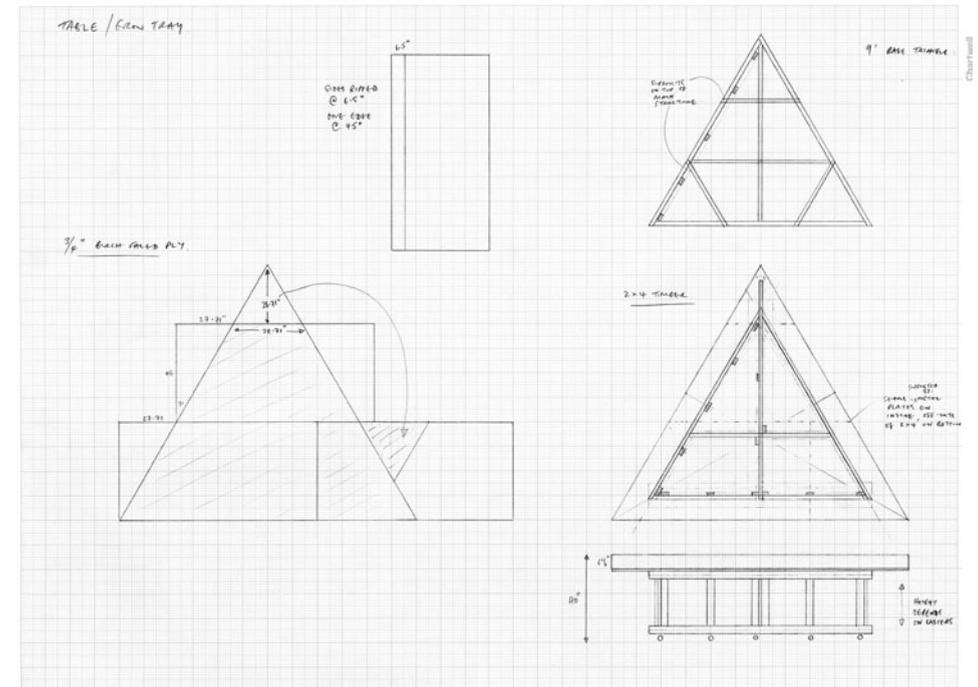
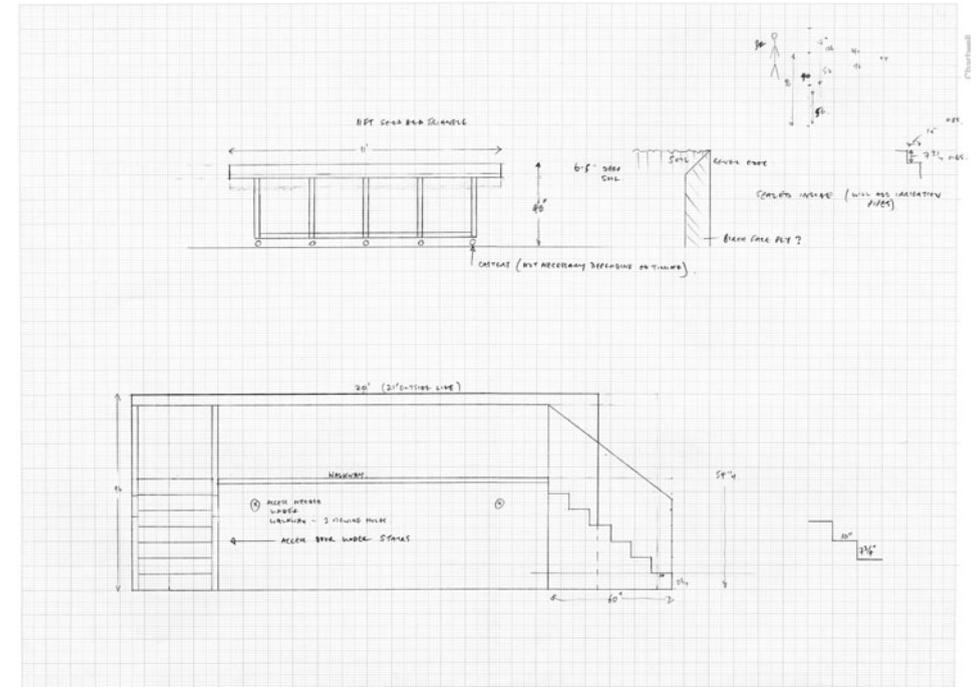


RC Three equally sized gardens came together to form an equilateral triangle, an ideal shape to build the installation around. Symbolically the shape is universal and has a massively rich variety of associations to art and science as well as religion and mysticism, going back thousands of years. This triangular

garden, encased in its triangular walls was designed to be a very functional structure—essentially a film set. The outward aesthetics of the construction confirmed this and that the form was the “backstage” side of something going on within. The use of Oriented Strand Board referenced the more organic interior developing jungle.

The idea was for the viewers to negotiate the installation in whatever way they chose, and to discover all the elements as they explored the space. These elements were aligned so that the plant growth, within the triangle, could be experienced in contrasting ways. On the gallery walls the video projections displayed the active and somewhat magical time-lapse growth of the plants within. On the outside walls of the triangle itself, viewers discovered that they had visual access to the interior via miniature telescopes. These views gave an even more displaced view into the interior jungle but one that implied scientific examination of the plants. Set near these viewing holes were speakers. Each side of the triangle emitted a different voice from the past—readings of the work of Lawes, Darwin, and Thoreau, as well as imagined sounds of the nutritional absorption and rustling of plants. As a whole, they added up to a cacophony of human and plant chatter. By moving in toward the speakers, the visitors could listen more closely to the thoughts of each man.

Finally, the steps on one side of the triangle gave access to a walkway and viewing gallery over the top of the structure from where the viewer could see all the workings of the experimental garden/set within. This included the field of plants as a whole, but also all the cameras, grow lamps, and ventilation pipes needed to grow the plants and create the video—occasionally they might observe one of the SLR cameras capture an image. The structure was designed to give the viewer three distinct views of the plants within that were quite acutely different representations of the same thing. The idea was that they would be included in the experiment and provoked into re-experiencing





something familiar in a new and more meaningful way. As the plants grew and the video extended, the view of the model buildings within the garden also evolved; becoming invisible from above, dwarfed by the plants and only visible through the viewing holes and in the video projections. I hoped to instill an almost palpable sense of the passage of time, where this triangle formed some kind of pseudo-scientific pagan clock for charting the progress and evolution of the plants and in turn the exhibition itself.

JR Within *Faith in A Seed*, viewers look at the same source materials through varying scales and positions, placing them at once within (pin holes), above (elevated platform), and consumed by (the larger-than-life projections) the growing plants. What was your reasoning behind the shifting scales?



RC The scale shifts between each viewpoint to make the viewer look at the same plants as they shift in time and space. The use of the model houses is the most distinct scale shift within the installation. The buildings appear to shift in scale in themselves as the plants emerge as seedlings in proportion to them and then get increasingly dwarfed by the plant/trees as the exhibition continues. I am less interested in



the idea that the buildings are being overrun by the plants and more by a sense of the evolution of plants and their extraordinary variety of scale. After all, the seed of the American Redwood is smaller than that of the bush bean. The shifts between the experience of seeing plants in different ways was intended to represent how relative each experience is depending on the mediating mechanism—how still the plants seem after watching the videos and how small they feel looking from above, how ordinary yet elevated by the presentation.

JR The Svalbard Global Seed Vault in Norway is very much *the* doomsday scenario, the repository that will protect the world's seeds (and agricultural future) in case of nuclear fallout. With climate change and geopolitical uncertainty very much a concern, do you consider *Faith in A Seed* art as activism?

RC I would not call the work activism because it does not overtly take a stand on a specific issue. My work contains a number of ecological and political view-

points, but I prefer to let the viewers bring their own thoughts with them, leaving the work some room to breathe and evolve in itself. *Faith in A Seed* also contains many more open and unresolved questions about our relationship with plants and the evolving science of farming. It's hard to imagine that an exhibition in a New York gallery is the most effective way of influencing the dialogue on such matters, but expanding interest in our environmental future has pushed food production—and certain writers like Michael Pollan—toward the mainstream, so I would consider the installation part of the increasing cultural noise that is trying to inform and change the political and moral dialogue on the subject.

JR The conversation around global warming consistently discusses man's accountability, i.e. our carbon footprints, CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, etc. This, however, is very much a product of industrialization and the modern world, how first world nations (those of Thoreau, Lawes, and Darwin) became/remained first world nations. The three videos in *Faith in A Seed* show nature winning in the end, overtaking man and his accomplishments. Is your work discussing the particular inevitability of nature winning out?

RC I don't really see it as winning because that implies that someone loses. It is often in our interest that nature takes back, reuses, and adapts to our footprint. Our interaction and impact on our environment is far more violent and extreme than other species, but I don't see a battle between us and nature, perhaps more of an evolving and chaotic dialogue. The model buildings in *Faith in A Seed* are not destroyed by their environment; they are simply transformed by the evolving landscape. The bush beans that surrounded Thoreau's cabin quickly obscured the building, but after the ten weeks that the beans were productive, they died re-revealing the architecture. To me this suggests more of a cycle of interaction—of nurturing, growth, reproduction, and decay.

The balance of nature is a myth. There will be plenty of losers out there, but winners too, and probably new species. We will adapt too, but for many it may not be a very pleasant place to live. In my other projects I have certainly focused on the ability of plants to take back a space and to physically interact with architecture. I think of this as reference to our temporality and the strange frailty of even our most imposing monuments and structures; this "rewilding" is somewhat reassuring to me.

JR The relationship between agriculture and architecture is literally intertwined within your photographic and video works. In *Faith in A Seed*, Rothamsted, Down House, and Thoreau's cabin become relatable stand-ins for the men themselves, their research, their egos, and their contributions. I would suggest that each model was grand in its own right, spe-



cifically Thoreau's, as the mythos surrounding his humble cabin is a touchstone in American culture. In your earlier *Union Territory* photographs, the architecture was much more about empire, presented through George IV's exuberantly Oriental Royal Pavilion, and Le Corbusier's magnificent failure

Chandigarh—exotic weeds sprouting in unfamiliar countries. Would you discuss the role of architecture in your practice and its relationship to the natural world? Is one of its roles to control man's own nature?

RC I suppose all architecture is designed to control man's nature in some way. It is one of the key things that separates us from the natural world—it shelters us and supposedly civilizes us. A home is designed to keep nature at bay, a space that “clothes” us and protects us from nature, from animals, from the elements, from each other. At the heart of *Faith In A Seed* were three homes that were certainly stand-ins for the people who lived there, but also represented the privilege that is afforded by having a home, as well as this idea of architecture as a civilizing vessel. They were all places from which these men could survey the natural world and attempt to read it, embrace it and control it. (Lawes far more literally than Thoreau.)

Frank Lloyd Wright wisely noted that, “architecture is the triumph of human imagination over materials, methods, and men, to put man into possession of his own earth. It is at least the geometric pattern of things, of life, of the human and social world. It is at best that magic framework of reality that we sometimes touch upon when we use the word ‘order.’”<sup>4</sup> As humans we often try to impose “order” and symmetry onto nature where it does not exist, but architecture effectively imposes order onto the earth and our potentially chaotic lives. Much of my work is an extrapolation from architecture as symbol, history or icon, but it is this idea of architecture as possession and use of the earth that is such a regular motif. I'm interested in what our impositions on the landscape tell us about our present society and how the meaning and context evolves long after the death of the architect or society that created them.

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4 Frank Lloyd Wright, in *Architectural Forum* (January 1938).

In my *Union Territory* series of photographs the buildings were simply created with a single flat image inserted into a seedbed, then cut and folded to make it three-dimensional. The plants grew in the gaps in the paper initially unifying the two buildings with a lush garden then quickly separating them and ultimately enveloping the delicate paper structures. These two famous buildings embody the power represented by architecture, but also its arrogance and beauty. The Brighton Pavilion and Chandigarh's assembly building are separated by several hundred years of British colonialism and they both exist in massive contrast to their environments—they are buildings made in time but not space. Here, architecture is imposed on the natural world and its purposes and meaning have shifted. Like a dreamscape the buildings and landscape become intertwined, unifying the two and taking aim at architectural and political hubris, but bearing witness to our interconnectedness both culturally and environmentally, despite geographical distance and financial inequality.