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Openings: William Lessard Interviews Adeena Karasick and Warren Lehrer

Adeena Karasick is a Canadian poet based in New York. She is also a media artist, cultural theorist, and author of 14 books. Her most recent books include *Ærotomania: The Book of Luminations* (Lavender Ink, 2023) and *Massaging the Medium: 7 Pechakuchas* (The Institute of General Semantics Press, 2022), which was shortlisted for Outstanding Book of the Year Award (ICA, 2023) and winner of the Susanne K. Langer Award for Outstanding Scholarship in the Ecology of Symbolic Form (Media Ecology Association, 2023). Karasick teaches Literature and Critical Theory for the Humanities and Media Studies Dept. at Pratt Institute, a 2021 Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Award recipient and the 2023 Poet Laureate for the Institute of General Semantics.

Warren Lehrer is a writer/designer and vis-lit pioneer. His books capture the shape of thought and reunite the oral and pictorial traditions of storytelling with the printed page. Among his recent titles: *A Life in Books: The Rise and Fall of Bleu Mobley*; *Five Oceans in a Teaspoon* (with Dennis Bernstein); *Crossing the BLVD: strangers, neighbors, aliens in a new America* (with Judith Sloan), which have each won a slew of awards. Lehrer's work is in the permanent collections at MoMA, L.A. County Art Museum, The Getty Museum, The Walker Art Center, Pompidou Centre, and Tate Gallery. He is Professor Emeritus at Purchase College, SUNY, founding faculty at SVA's Designer as Author/Entrepreneur MFA program, and Co-Founder and Co-Artist Director of EarSay, a non-profit arts organization in Queens, NY,

In the following interview, which was conducted virtually, Karasick and Lehrer discuss [*Ouvert Oeuvre: Openings*](#), a joyful meditation connection in our post-everything world. Along the way, we discuss Mallarme, Dada, the state of the "experimental," and the visual scoring of language.

Thank you to Lavender Ink for allowing us to publish excerpts from this work.

William Lessard:

How did *Openings* come about? It's like nothing I've seen in recent memory.

Adeena Karasick:

It was during COVID, and while in Hawaii, I started writing this poem about openings and about just how things were constantly being open and closed, and as it was so excruciatingly

frustrating, I started thinking philosophically about what exactly it meant to be “open.” How Heidegger posits in his analysis of Rilke’s, *Sonnets for Orpheus*, the “Open” designates that space where all beings are given over; that which does not block or set bounds, but rather drawn from and drawing into the boundlessness of the infinite; an openness which is twisted and unconfined, referencing all that is fleeting and unshielded, touched by the widest orbit. I sent the poem to Warren, whom I had known and hoped to work with for several years. It was just an early draft, but he got really excited about it. And even though he was working on so many other books, agreed to dive in.

William:

What about you, Warren? Did you work from texts that Adeena developed, or did you come to her with ideas which she would develop in text along with some visual concepts that you were playing with?

Warren Lehrer:

It was both. After reading the poems several times, I was struck by their syntax and multilingual wordplay, use of language, sound, and exploration of themes. Parts of it are funny too while also dealing with trauma and layered histories. But the work came to me in a pretty straightforward form, in a Word doc with stanzas and flush left columns of text, and it looked like a poem. So, I jumped over the epigraph and went right into the first words of the first movement, “when the opening is a premise, a promise, opening, opining, pierced, polis.” I wasn’t sure what “polis” is, so I looked it up: a city-state in Ancient Greece, especially as considered in its ideal form for philosophical purposes.

Is that what she's thinking of? Probably, I'm not sure. “Pulsing, policies, policing.” Policing, maybe George Floyd. I think Adeena sent this to me in June of 2021, so that was quite a year of COVID and coming out on the street to protest police brutality after so many people were locked inside, they took a risk to go out on the street. Legacies of racial injustice.

So those words I mentioned, just as an example (I won't do this for every page spread in the whole book, but just as an example of my process), that is the entire text of the first two pages. And knowing where the poem was headed, I started working with the notion of inside and outside, so brackets and parentheses ended up being like metaphorical architectural boundaries going from inside to out.

So, you've got some words on the left-hand page and then the bracket in the middle. And then somehow, these other words spew out onto the right-hand page. And then there's this propulsive energy and sound of the words, gaining energy as they roll, each word rolls into each other. I started making each word a little bit bigger and then I bolded the “O’s,” because these poems are very alliterative. And so that's happening in the language. So maybe

I could bring that out in the visuals by bolding the “O's”. Eventually, they expand and break apart, and become like COVID cells.

William:

The work is very mimetic. How everything is laid out is a perfect expression of what the language is doing. And I guess with that, I'll say, Adeena, so when Warren came back with basically a visual score, as it were, of your writing, did you say, "Wow, that's exactly what I had in mind," or there was a thread that in the work that you hadn't realized? What happened at that point, Adeena?

Adeena:

It was an incredible experience. It was like he could feel it. He was so “open” to the language. And as I've always been obsessed with language as a technology, as a prime mover in the redistribution of aesthetic values, having him visualize the work with a range of neo-Fluxus, Dada-esque, post-language, concrete/vispo models, which seemed framed by a feminist aesthetics of transgression, invasion, contradiction, ambiguity, ornament, access, paradox and desire, was ecstatic for me. It was like he somehow was able to lock into that sense of openness and create a visual re-presentation highlighting the physicality/materiality of the language and the space – which itself is so very alive and breathing. And yeah, sometimes, I pushed him a little, ‘n say, "Okay, this is brilliant and I am loving it, but...maybe there could be a touch more texturality complexity...."

Warren:

Actually, you kicked my ass because you really liked what happened with the first poem and then for the Touching poem you said, "This is really good, but can you open it up more?"

William:

There is a definite grit and feel to that work. And the typography reminds me a great deal of Barbara Kruger. I don't know if she was somebody who was on your mind, but when I looked at it, I could just see a room with the poem in the room laid out across the walls. How did you folks come individually to the idea of the book, the book in this book, but also the book as a concept?

Adeena:

First of all, let me just say being a Jew, I'm a person of The Book. I have 14 books now, and so in love with the genre in all its varied possibilities. I teach a course called, “The Artists Book” at Pratt Institute in New York; the prerequisite to the Book Minor I helped install. All to say, I'm a big fan of the physicality, sensoriousness of the book as object – so there was never a question in my mind that whatever else this was going to be (performance piece / recording etc), for sure this would be a “book” but a book that called attention to its own structure; a book that exceeded itself– where each “page” is an opening, a welcoming space,

an invitation inscribed in desire – a series of directional episodes, graphic, lexical visual, operating through what Georges Batailles might call “an excess of energy.” A text whose organization of words and grammars and syntax combine and recombine to form networks of signification not accessible through conventional reading habits.

A book that asks us to re-see the book – as a series of surfaces, walls, constellations, organizations of graphematic possibilities; and thus, all intertextilic, exilic, propels us to see the world in new ways. And yeah, perhaps Barbara Kruger *was* indeed traipsing through my subconscious; whereby Openings is as a form of cultural critique; challenging normative uses of language and aspects of consumerism wrought through feminist interventive play..

Warren:

I've been working on books for 40 years or so, and maybe if I was starting out now, I wouldn't be making books. But pretty early on, *The Book* was connected to performance. My earliest books were scores for performance. And here, not only do you have the physical book, but you have the enhanced augmentation with the audio recording. And at a certain point when we were done with getting these words onto the page, we both agreed that we wanted to have this enhancement to the performance aspect. So, we have the recording, which Adeena then worked on with Frank London, coming back full circle to the person who introduced us.

We have the QR code in the back and I like the idea that people after reading it can listen to Adeena performing this text while going through the score of *The Book*. And then post-book, it connects to coming and seeing us do it live. You talked about Barbara Kruger. I respect her, I love her work, and I really enjoyed the recent exhibit at MoMA, but I wasn't thinking of her when I was working on this. It's possible, because I use a bold sans serif font throughout the whole second poem, that it makes you think of Kruger. She almost exclusively uses Futura extra bold. And when we performed these poems in May at Nuyorican Poets Cafe, they had a huge screen and there was that kind of Maximalist scale of the words above Adeena.

Adeena:

I just wanted to say what you're alluding to and what I think is so important to me and what I love, is that intersection between visual and acoustic space. And this book particularly encompasses all of that which is between the page, stage; the sound, script and screen. And the various technologies really remind us how the work itself isn't just a transcription of the oral, but they're different realities, different experiences of engagement yet complement, enhance each other. And so having this book with the audio embedded in the text with its heightened sense of visuality and defamiliarity, really reminds us how each letter is a multisensoric, textatic habitat to live in.

Warren:

Wow, “textatic habitat.”

William:

There's a lot of Dada here. There's Mallarme's *A Throw of the Dice*. I also see a lot of *Saint Ghetto of the Loans*, with its interplay between the visual and the textual. Were these works an influence?

Warren:

Funny you bring up Mallarme's *A Throw of The Dice* because that's a really important work for me. But when I first started doing the kind of work that I do, in graduate school, and I graduated in 1980, I didn't know anything about Mallarme or Dada, or Marinetti, or Tristan Tzara or Sonya Delaunay. I had other influences at that time – John Cage, Gertrude Stein, minimalist (music) composers, expressive jazz, the theater work of Robert Wilson. And I had a copy of Robert Massin's typo-pictorial visualization of Ionesco's *Bald Soprano*.

I began as a writer and designer, letterpress printing my own books. And my graduate thesis, which became my first offset printed book, was a score for performance that was simultaneously a study of the poetics and rhythms of speech. But it was only later when I started teaching that I went back and taught myself more about the pre-history, the precursors to what I was doing and the *Throw of The Dice*, and even to Mallarme's essay, “Book as Spiritual Instrument,” which was so radical at the time (1895).

William:

It's still radical.

Warren:

It's true, but to a certain extent, that kind of revolution that Mallarme was dreaming up and the Dadaists, and the Futurists were hoping for, never really took hold except on the fringes. But now in a way, it's breaking through into a more mainstream possibility, where you go into a bookstore, if you can find a physical bookstore, and you can find one out of maybe 50 novels, let alone poetry, that have something typographic or visual or structurally-interesting happening within the text, where it used to be one out of 1,000 novels.

William:

I'm going to respectfully disagree with you. I feel like we've entered a very conservative period of art. I think there used to be a much higher tolerance for experimentation, I don't want to say that it's experimental, but there was a higher tolerance for non-linear work.

Adeena:

Yes, perhaps in the '60s and '70s....but still you have the oeuvre of Bill Bissett's books – marked by shifting margins and dirty concrete, drawings and paintings palimpsested on text of variant sizes and typographies...but yes, there seems to me a lower and lower tolerance for all that announces itself as defamiliar and challenging; where you have to “work” for the art ;)

William:

I wonder why most books don't look like your book. Why is it such a dark horse? Because what you're doing is not “experimental.” It's 21st-century realism. It's like, this is how our lives are with weird texts flying around. It's not just that this is a pandemic book. I feel like calling it a pandemic book is to limit what you're doing. I feel like it's a 21st-century book. It's how information flows. And I don't see why more books aren't like this and people would call it experimental because I just don't feel like that's what it is.

Adeena:

And I hate that word because it's not an experiment – Commonly understood, an experiment is a procedure undertaken to make a discovery, test a hypothesis, or demonstrate a known fact. But for us, it's an ongoing exploration of discovery.

Warren:

Oh, I so dislike when the word “experimental” is used like it's a genre. It's not experimental for us. We improvise, we take chances, experiment as part of our process, but we know what we're doing, folks like us, we have a craft that we've developed over years. But, I feel your critique is more about the publishing *industry* than about artists, poets, and writers. I could name a lot of people, from Susan Howe to Douglas Kearney, to Mark Danielewski and Jonathan Safran Foer, and Reif Larsen, and so many others who are doing work that's daring and has a lot of the attributes that you're talking about.

William:

That's true. But it's unfortunately not the main tenor of where things are. I just don't understand why people don't seem to realize the world in front of them. Because they go about their whole day, they're texting with their friends, they're looking at YouTube videos, and then, when they sit down to write, they might as well be sitting there with a quill and a candle.

Adeena:

No, you're right. But take Charles Bernstein, or Bruce Andrews, Rachel Blau DuPlessis, Johanna Drucker – there's a cohort of my contemporaries that are working in increasingly

defamiliarized ways, questioning linearity, celebrating contradiction, paradox, the slipperiness of language, generating a contiguous infolding of meaning. But I hear what Warren is saying too – who's publishing it? It's often just Small Press publishers.

William:

How did you get Lavender Ink to do your book? This is a beautiful book. What was it like working with them and what were some of the challenges that you had translating the visual works onto the page?

Warren:

Bill [Lavender] responded very quickly to the proposal, which included basically a PDF of the whole thing. Or at first, it was just the first poem, right?

Adeena:

Yeah, I think when I first approached him, I believe it was just the first poem. I knew him before as he had invited me to the New Orleans Poetry Festival to perform a few years ago – and just from the International poetry scene, and he is the publisher of a lot of fabulous poets who I so admire: Hank Lazer, Norman Fischer, Kit Robinson, Pierre Joris. But when he saw this, he scooped it up immediately, and we were so happy. And he ended up publishing my other new book, *Ærotomania: The Book of Lumenations* at the same time. So I couldn't be more thrilled!

Warren:

A lot of small presses have shifted more to a print-on-demand model, although I believe Bill came from producing his books more traditionally, with offset printing and like that. We gave it a shot, because I've seen results from print-on-demand that can be okay. We got a few proofs of *Ouvert Oeuvre*. But I was getting frustrated with things like matching up words that cut across the gutter, and dealing with the bleeds. We were getting there. The proofs were getting better and better.

But then Adeena and I were going around, we were at an opening at the Center for Book Arts, and among other things on display were some older books of mine, and she was saying, "I wish we could have something that had more tactility." So then we went back to Bill and said, "I think we need this to be a beautiful object; a book that's sewn instead of glued, so it could really lay flat, and to be on acid-free paper, and to have a real presence in your hands." And so we worked something out, worked a way to make it happen. And he's really happy with it, as are we. And even though the book officially launches in October, we did a premiere for it at the New Orleans Poetry Festival.

William:

What is next for you folks?

Adeena:

I have another book I'm working on now called: *Star-Crossed: La Judia de Toledo and the King of Castile: A Romancero* – about a little-known 12th Century Jewess who had a 7 year affair with Alfonso VIII, the King of Castile during the time of Convivencia. So I am deep into that as well as promoting my new film: *Eicha: The Book of Luminations*, a 20-minute videopoem based on the Biblical Book of Luminations, the text of which is published in the *AErotomania* book. Also Warren and I have been doing a slew of launches and celebrations for the Openings book, and upcoming our Spring / summer touring schedule includes performances in Canada, Australia, Italy, Paris, Woodland Pattern in Milwaukee and at the Museum of Jewish Heritage in New York. Stay tuned!

Warren:

Yeah, I really enjoy doing these performance/reading events together. Sometimes I'm quietly behind the scenes working the visuals, sometimes I also present from other works. And like Adeena mentioned earlier, I took a break from several other book projects to work with her. The biggest of those projects is called *TRACE: A Surveilled Novel*, which I wrote and designed and am very excited about. Cut 42,000 words out of it in the last two months. Oy! And there's a collaborative book on loss, with former *NY Times* reporter Rick Black, which is turning out to be kind of stunning, if I may say, and heartfelt. Lastly, I'm finishing an electronic book made for mobile devices, that I wrote, about a woman recovering from a very bad stroke. She's regaining language, and as a reader of this e-book, with the help of animation and an interactive interface, you experience that gap between what she understands and what she can articulate, and the tremendous, hardfought progress she's made. Working with a wonderful programmer, Artemio Morales. Experimental? Well, sort of. But I think it's working. Or it will be in a couple of months.