

# **Green Light: Toward an Art of Evolution**

**George Gessert**

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From *Green Light's* inception, Kate, my wife and friend, has contributed. She adapted her schedules to my writing and research and gave up evenings and weekends for something that often seemed to be going nowhere. Kate helped me develop ideas and always believed in the project. When the time came for editing, she went over the entire manuscript, some parts more than once, helping especially with muddy patches I had read too many times to see for the messes they were. Without her this book either would not have been written or would have suffered from a lack of clarity disheartening to imagine.

Beginnings are difficult, and writing is no exception. My way into *Green Light* was aided by one of Eduardo Kac's discoveries, the story of Lolo the donkey, which gave me the first paragraph of chapter one. I cannot always identify Eduardo's other contributions, because we have exchanged ideas for so many years that he has affected the way I see biotech art and living things in general. He has lit the way with an array of green lights, among them *GFP K-9*, *Genesis*, Alba the fluorescent rabbit, and *The Eighth Day*. Above all, Eduardo has helped me through his example of being a brave pioneer.

In 1996, long before the term "biotech art" existed and before any periodical ran more than the odd article on art composed of live materials, Roger Malina invited me to serve as editorial adviser on art and biology for *Leonardo*. Much of what I know about contemporary biotech art has come to me through my connection with *Leonardo*. I am deeply grateful to Roger for having created this forum for biotech art and allowing me to participate. Pat Bentson and Pamela Grant-Ryan have helped make it all work by being welcoming, knowledgeable, and always reliable.

I began this book in 1992 and submitted a proposal to the MIT Press later that year, but was turned down. I no longer remember exactly how I felt when I received that rejection, but today I am grateful to whoever made the decision. If I had published *Green Light* then, or for that matter any time in the decade and a half that followed, the book would have been considerably more fragmentary and too heavily reliant on intuition—a half-baked production. Over the years I submitted the manuscript to more than a dozen other publishers. In 2006 I resubmitted to the MIT Press, and this time it

was accepted. Doug Sery and Deborah Cantor-Adams, my editors at the MIT Press, have been unfailingly good-humored, supportive, and helpful.

A challenge in writing is to find a style appropriate to the subject. My subject, the effects of aesthetic perception on evolution, draws on art, ornamental horticulture, plant and animal breeding, history, science, and philosophy. Finding common ground in this mix is the sort of problem a critical theorist might relish, but I am no critical theorist. Furthermore, I have wanted to produce a book accessible not only to academicians but also to artists, horticulturists, and anyone else interested in the concerns that biotech art raises. Solutions to problems of style come chiefly from reading, but also from conversation. Among the friends whose conversational styles have been especially important to me is the artist Paul Semonin, a.k.a. Violet Ray. Fresh, lucid, adventurous, learned, and amusing, his style is perpetually self-renewing. Paul has also contributed invaluable information about extinction consciousness. Chapter 15, "The Angel of Extinction," could not have been written without the historical foundation provided by Paul's book, *American Monster*.

Conversations with other friends have also contributed in important ways to the style and substance of *Green Light*. John Witte has encouraged me and has provided a social space in which I could speculate, follow nonobvious clues, and use language and storytelling to explore unfamiliar territory.

In high school and after, Georges Rey and I had life-forming conversations that took him to philosophy, me to art. Those conversations resonate here.

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When Jens Hauser organized L'Art Biotech in 2003, he brought the term biotech art into use in the art world. For that and many other efforts on behalf of biotech art, he deserves special thanks. He suggested that I read Hans Gumbrecht's *The Production of Presence* and Steve Baker's *The Postmodern Animal*, both of which helped me link different paths of thought in the book.

For timely encouragement and support, I want to thank Ionat Zurr, Oron Catts, Guy Ben-Ary, Phil Ross, Ken Rinaldo, Ernestine Daubner, Louise Poissant, Stephen Wilson, Dmitry Bulatov, Thomas and Ellen Abrego, Melentie Pandilovski, Nayland Blake, Renny Pritikin, Phillippe Henry, Ingrid Lilligren, Lluís Sabadall, Antonio Cerveira Pinto, Ingeborg Reichle, Nick Bertoni, Pam Winfrey, Charlie Carlson, Peter Richards, and the Exploratorium crew.

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I am grateful to Marta de Menezes for her exceptional generosity, wise advice, and recognition that for an artist the best reasons to work with living things are curiosity, love of the materials, and simple visual pleasure.

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I drafted most of the texts in *Green Light* in longhand, then transferred them to my computer for editing. Final edits were done on paper, and were helped by a change of scenery. Thanks to Perugino's coffeehouse, where for the price of a cup of espresso I could edit for hours to good music.

I am grateful to my animal companions, especially Zorro, Wendy, Tikka, and Bear.

Finally, this book owes more than I can say to Joe and Sophie. The time spent on it was often time not spent with them, although we did get down to the Siskiyou for iris hunts. I like to think that *Green Light* is not altogether lost time for us, but that is not for me to decide.