

THE SUBTLE ETHER

SAMANTHA CLARK

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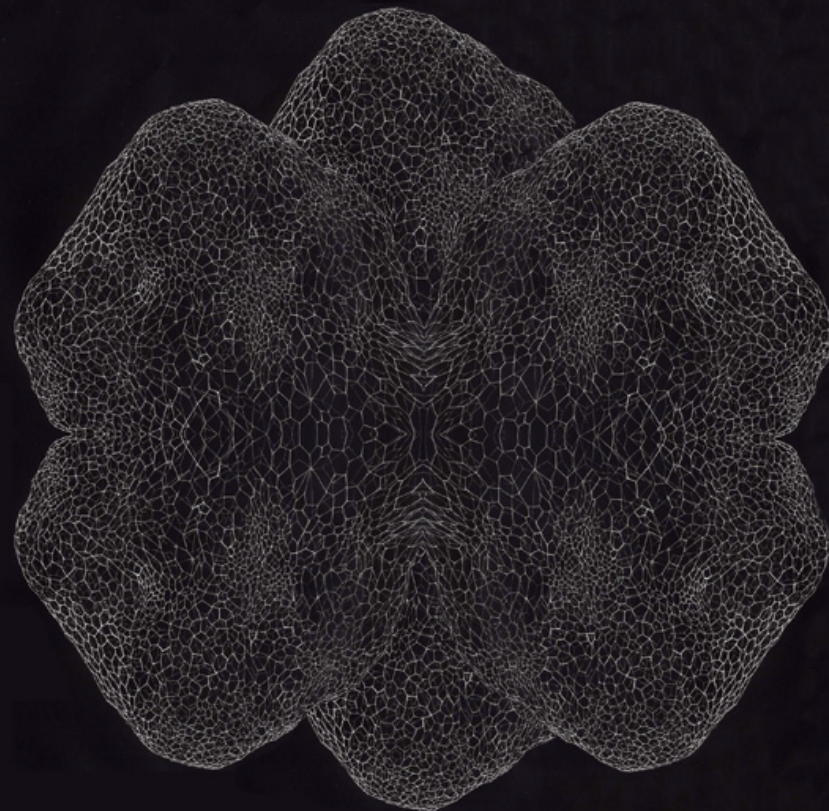
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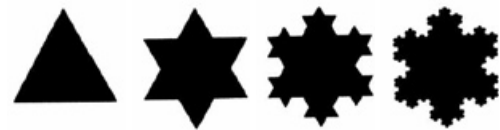
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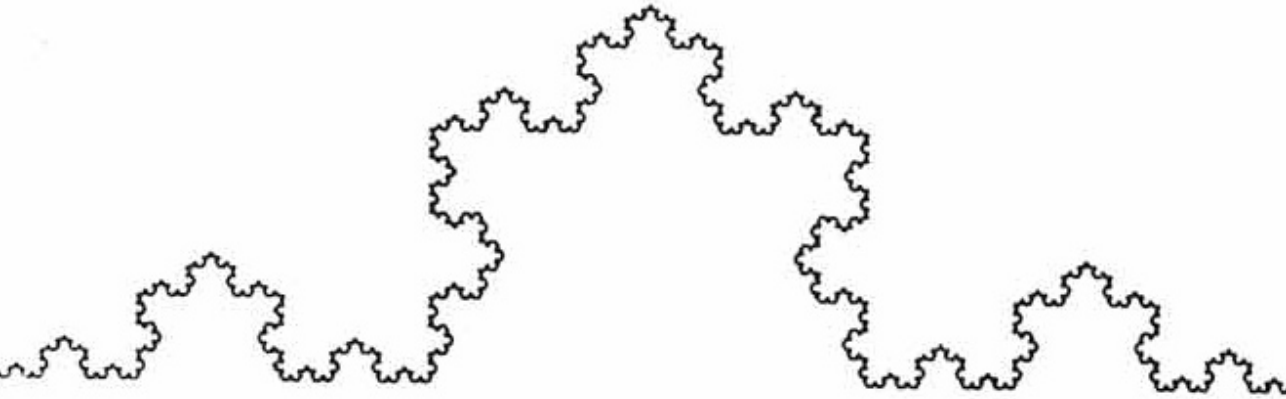


IN 1904 A SWEDISH MATHEMATICIAN called de Koch described a way to fold infinity up so neatly it might fit in your hand, or the head of a pin. Imagine a triangle, all three sides the same length. Forget your high school geometry, he performed a miracle on this humble shape. Imagine a very simple transformation, repeated endlessly; in the middle of each side, attach another, smaller triangle, a third the size of the original. Now we have something like a star of David. On each of the twelve sides of the star, again attach a smaller triangle. And again. And again. The outline becomes like a snowflake.

Keep going. Now it's a crystal. A sea creature. A piece of cauliflower.



Keep going. A coastline emerges. Hawaii. Norway.



Keep going, on to infinity, folding and folding.

The outline becomes more and more detailed. If you were to draw a circle touching all three corners of the original triangle the Koch curve would never spread beyond it, no matter how many times you repeat the process. And yet the curve is infinitely long, so long that if you unfolded it, it would stretch to the edge of the universe. A miracle. A finite shape containing a line of infinite length enfolded inside it.

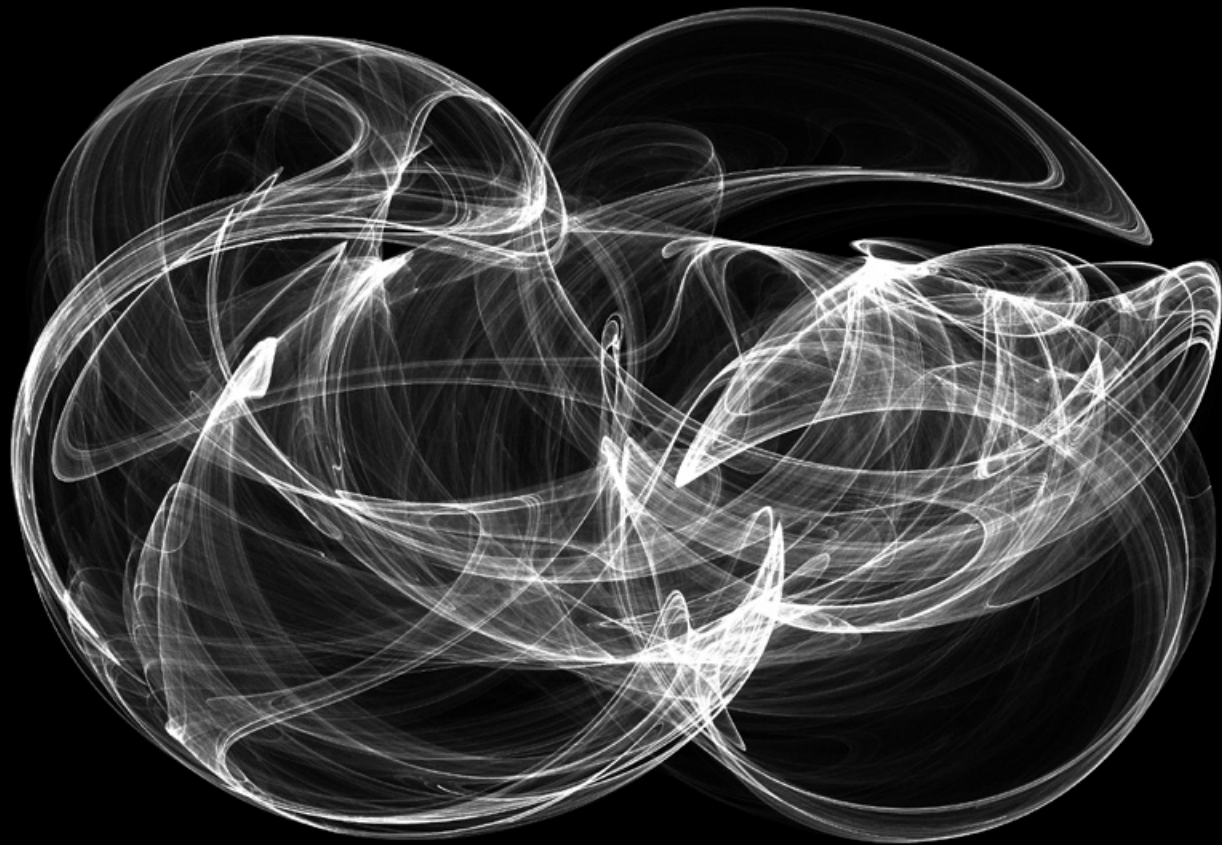
William Blake knew about this sort of thing, seeing a world in a grain of sand, and he wasn't talking about peering down a microscope. He was onto something bigger.

Notes on the Fertility of Gaps

Language is a crude, inexact tool. Off the peg rather than tailor cut, it never quite expresses the experience it describes. Paradoxically, the gaps and flaws that emerge from this uncomfortable fit provide the mental space to create unexpected interpretations that open the described experience to unimagined perspectives. The gap becomes a creative force that mutates the known experience into a wholly new phenomenon.

A recognition of the possibilities and pitfalls of language has provided the basis for many of the most profitable experiments in contemporary culture from Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* to James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* and the cut-up novels of William Burroughs. Likewise these gaps in language have come to represent something deeper in the human psyche – both a desire for the dissolution of self and a sense of the isolation we can experience if communication is impossible. Our grasp of reality, our hold on memory and our mapping of space all seem to rely on the solid foundations of language. Intuition, though, persuades us to seek out gaps and territories beyond the known – slippery, mutating spaces where as Joyce puts it 'every person, place and thing in the chaosmos of Alle . . . was moving and changing every part of the time.'

Strange Attractor, image generated by Olivier Langlois www3.sympatico.ca/lolanglois



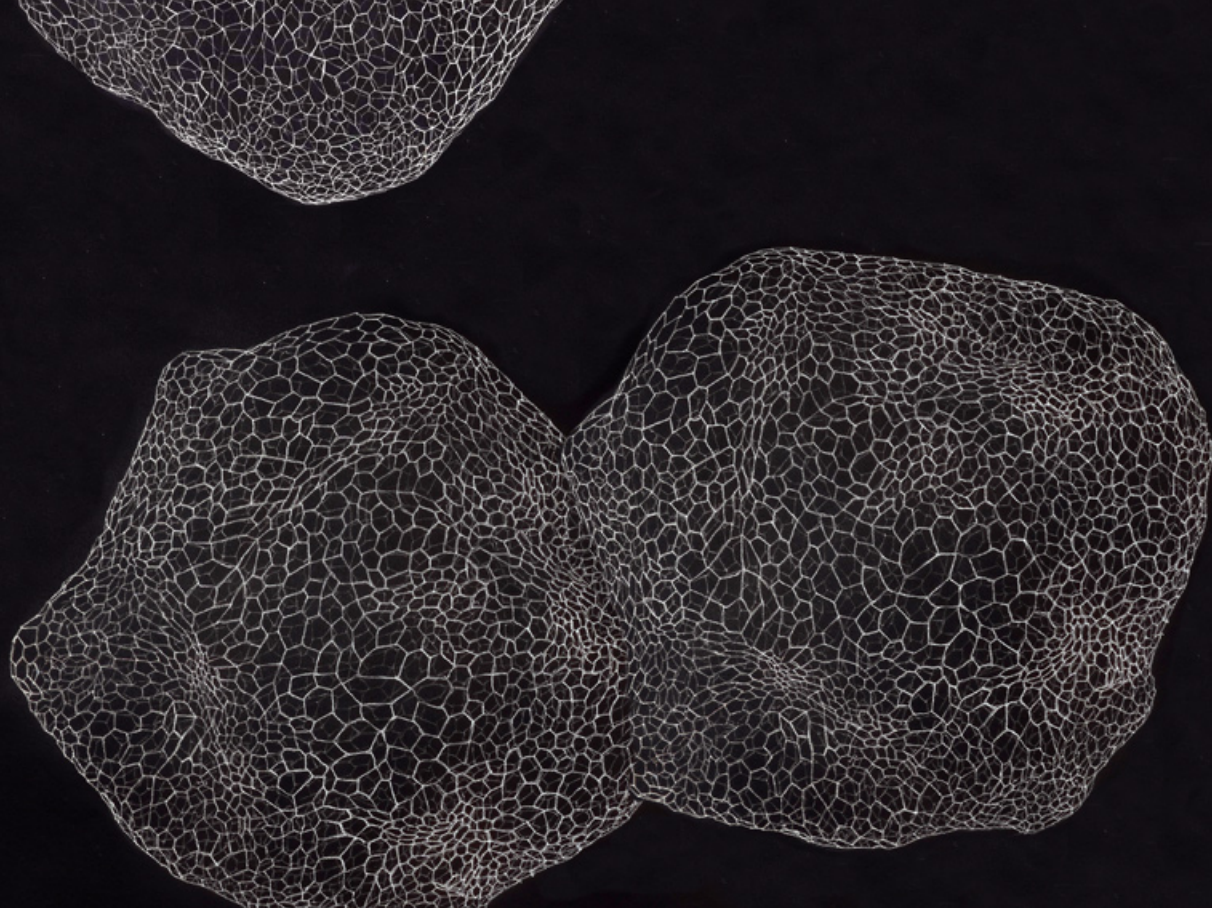
IT'S WORTH REMEMBERING, in times of need, that vanishingly tiny amounts of potent substance can be effective.

Think of homeopathy.

Progressive dilutions of the 'mother tincture' often result in a remedy that doesn't contain even one single molecule of the original substance, and yet anecdotal evidence attests to the effectiveness of homeopathic remedies.

Tincture of Hope.

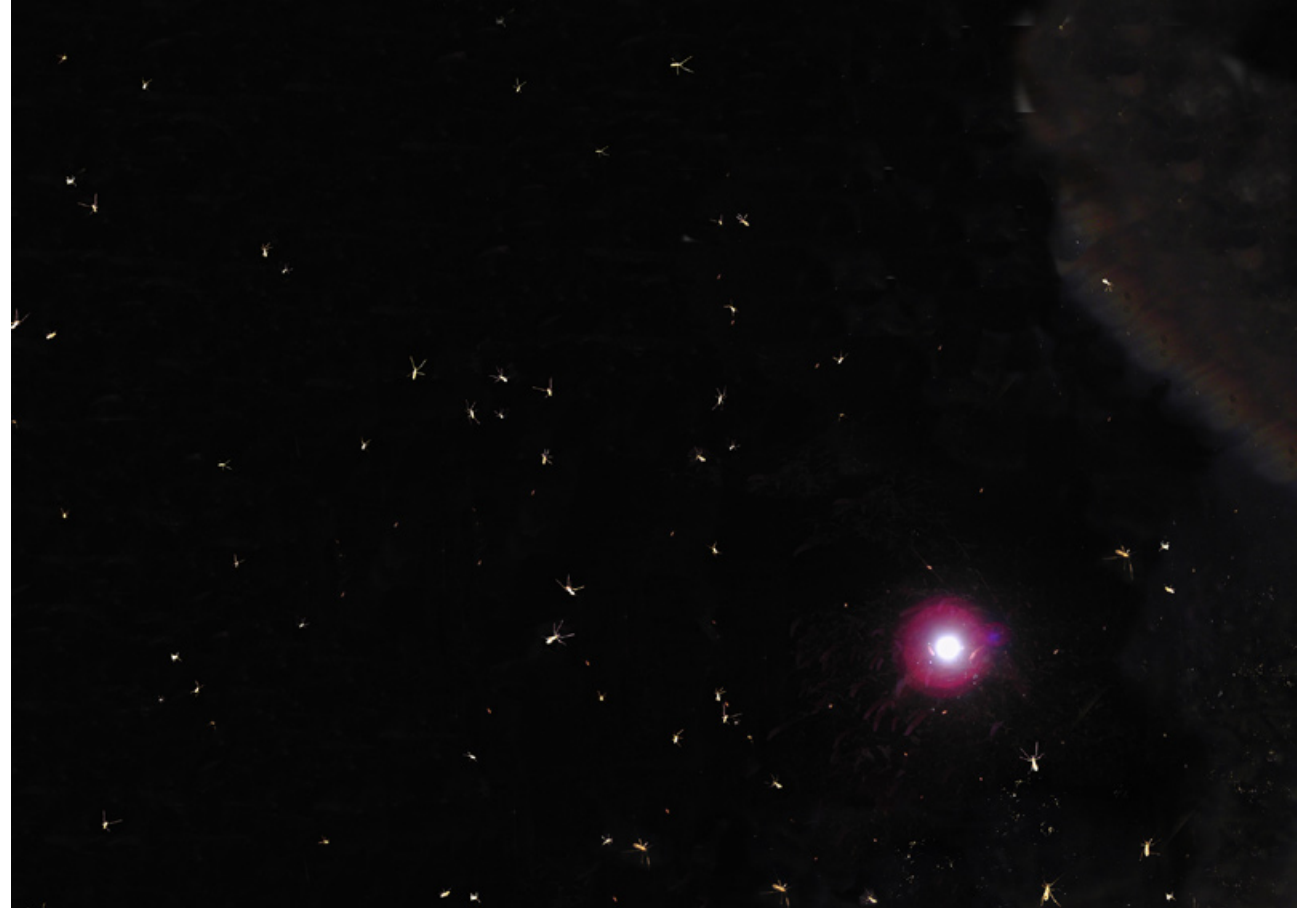
Samantha Clark, 'Split', Giclée Print, 2007



Four quotes:

1. The unconscious is founded on a gap, on the lack in the Other. This could be demonstrated in the way in which a musical score is structured. Take any musical score and any two notes, no matter how infinitesimal their value, and there will always be a gap between them. And yet, although this infinite discontinuity is underscored by the case of music, it will have an effect, an effect of jouissance.
2. Caudill explores Lacan's language theory with reference to the doctrinal debate over contractual gap-filling. The silences or gaps in contracts - - unaddressed contingencies - - function as an unconscious source of meaning.
3. Language names things and thus murders them as full presences, creating an alienation between the word and the thing, an alienation that infers gaps or a ternarity into language itself.
4. Nothing comes from the unconscious by way of the dream but incoherent meaning that it fabricates in order to clothe what it articulates like a phrase... The rebus of the deciphered dream shows a gap in meaning, and it is in nothing else that it connotes a desire.

Samantha Clark, 'Constellations', Giclée print, 2006



Harold Pinter, known for the silences and gaps in his plays as much as for their obliquely violent conversations, commented on the fragility of communication and the writing process in his Nobel acceptance speech:

I have often been asked how my plays come about. I cannot say. Nor can I ever sum up my plays, except to say that this is what happened. That is what they said. That is what they did.

Most of the plays are engendered by a line, a word or an image. The given word is often shortly followed by the image. I shall give two examples of two lines which came right out of the blue into my head, followed by an image, followed by me.

The plays are *The Homecoming* and *Old Times*. The first line of *The Homecoming* is 'What have you done with the scissors?' The first line of *Old Times* is 'Dark.'

In each case I had no further information.

So language in art remains a highly ambiguous transaction, a quicksand, a trampoline, a frozen pool which might give way under you, the author, at any time.

Mullard Radio Astronomy Observatory, Barton, Cambridgeshire



I do not like language (but it does not follow that I advocate its disuse or misuse – just the contrary), but I love words. (Please forgive this digression: for some reason we speak as though there were a connection between words and objects. One of the interesting properties of both words and objects is that they repel each other. I often like to combine them in art works by nailing or gluing them together because of the vibration this causes.)

Jimmie Durham

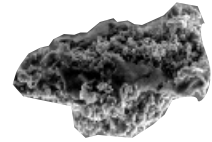
The philosopher John Sutton ruminates on a 17th century French text and the desire to communicate accurately. His final remarks juxtapose this desire with an equally human counter wish for amnesiac gaps in history:

Recent prehistorians of sound recording have recovered an exotic European fantasy of the early 1630s. A pamphlet called *Le courrier veritable* told Parisians of a strange sponge discovered by a Captain Vosterloch on a voyage to the South Seas. Local people used these sponges to communicate across long distances: a message spoken into one of them would be exactly replayed when the recipient squeezed it appropriately.

These wondrous sponges, then, were unique cognitive tools, soaking up sound, embodying particular acoustic signals in an unusually porous medium. They are strange objects to have had this cognitive and cultural role, even in an imaginary space of early modern European fantasy. As a cognitive artifact, the sponge was more commonly a figure for the effacing of memory, so that Confession, for example, could be described as “that happy Spunge, that wipeth out all the blottes and blurres of our lives”.

INTERPLANETARY DUST PARTICLES are the tiniest of meteorites, microscopic specks of ancient matter from the spaces between stars. This 'cosmic dust' falls constantly to earth from the farthest reaches of space, 40,000 tons of it a year, floating down on us like a soft rain. When it lands it sinks to the seabed where it lies undisturbed, or dusts the ice floes of the polar regions where it is gathered for research.

Or it collects, with the skin flakes and pollution particles under the radiators of suburban homes. You can see this cosmic dust in the atmosphere, just before sunrise and just after sunset, in the glowing triangle which lights the sky when the sun is just below the horizon, a phenomenon known as 'zodiacal light'.



scanning electron microscope images of interplanetary dust particles

It's January twenty-six. I'm freezing. Ed Fitzgerald, Age nineteen. five feet ten inches, black hair, brown eyes. Going home to Boston Massachusetts, It's four p.m., and I'm hungry and broke. I wish I was dead. But today I am a man.

Long before the post-modern invention of the 'non-place' there were legendary sites of nowhere. Timbuktu, for one. They existed but at a mythical distance that stood for a kind of disappearance. Often, the place is a vital crossroads, a patch of nothing linking many roads to something. But passing through nowhere leaves its mark.

Barstow, California. A crossroads in the Mohave desert. One of a list in the song 'Route 66'. American composer, Harry Partch, hitchhiked through the town and in 1941 wrote a piece dedicated to eight hikers who carved graffiti in a guardrail while waiting for a lift ('Why in hell did you come, anyway?').

In 1971, Hunter S. Thompson drove through Barstow with Oscar Zeta Acosta and began to contemplate the end of the American Dream:

We were somewhere around Barstow on the edge of the desert when the drugs began to take hold. I remember saying something like "I feel a bit lightheaded; maybe you should drive...." And suddenly there was a terrible roar all around us and the sky was full of what looked like huge bats, all swooping and screeching and diving around the car, which was going about a hundred miles an hour with the top down to Las Vegas. And a voice was screaming: "Holy Jesus! What are these goddamn animals?"

YOU, DEAR READER, are half blind. There is a gap in your vision.

Allow me to demonstrate.

Cover your left eye and fix your right eye on the left spot.

As you move your face closer to the page the right spot vanishes just as it passes across the point at which the optic nerve joins the retina.

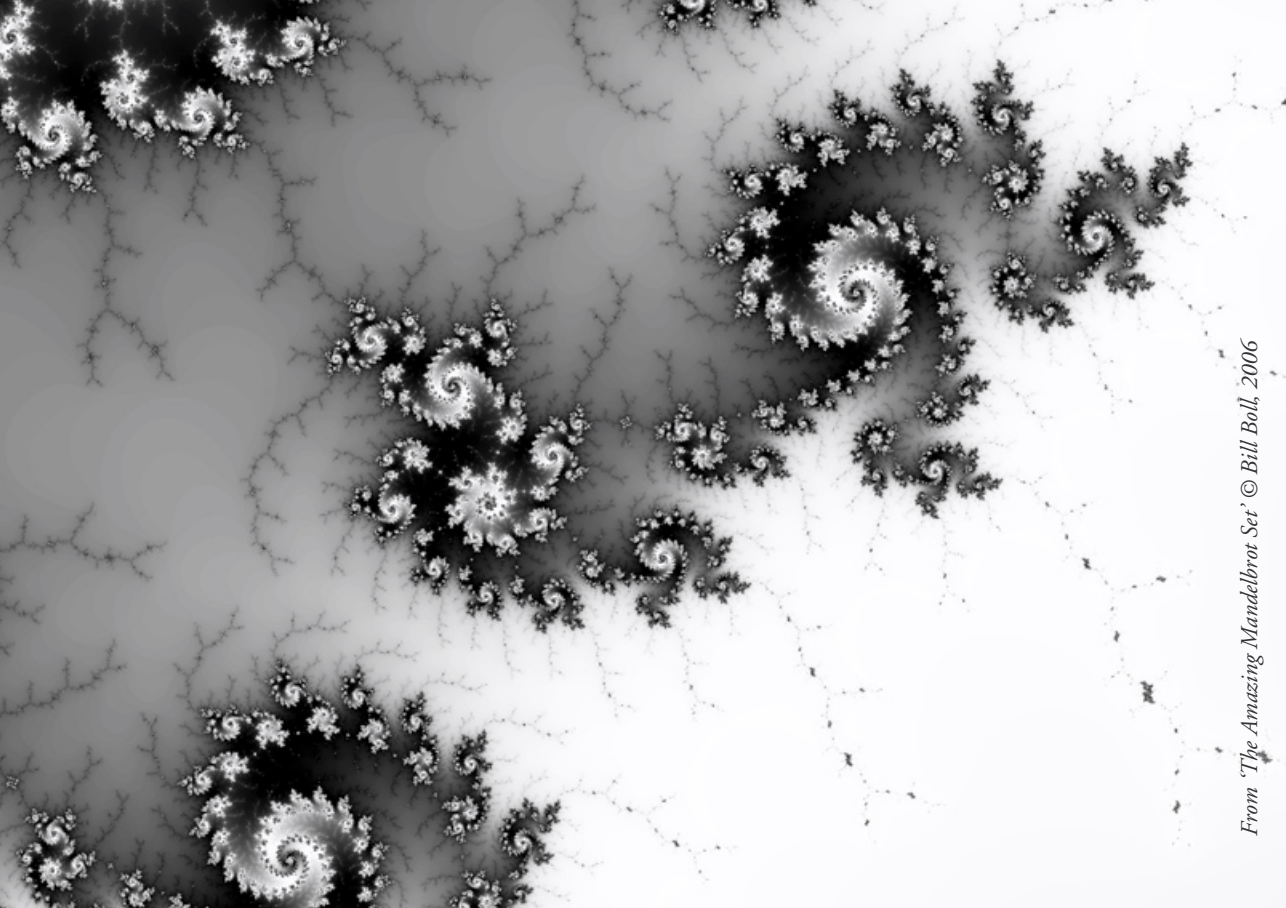


The term 'no man's land' was first used in the 14th century for a large wasteland outside London where the authorities displayed the rotting and dismembered corpses of executed criminals. No one was willing to claim ownership of this land.

The term was used widely in the First World War to describe the territory lying between the trenches of one army and the other. Wilfred Owen, the war poet, wrote home that 'No Man's Land is pockmarked like the body of foulest disease and its odour is the breath of cancer...No Man's Land under snow is like the face of the moon, chaotic, crater-ridden, uninhabitable, awful, the abode of madness.' And, in another letter: 'Hideous landscapes, vile noises....everything unnatural, broken, blasted; the distortion of the dead, whose unburiable bodies sit outside the dug-outs all day, all night, the most execrable sights on earth.'

The Situationist concept of the derive or 'drift' vacillates between the intuitive excitement of losing oneself in a landscape and the more work oriented sense of harvesting observations and results. Guy Debord's definition of the process suggests that 'one or more persons during a certain period drop their relations, their work and leisure activities, and all their other usual motives for movement and action, and let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there.' This drop into the unknown is countered though by the need to then establish 'domination of psychogeographical variations by the knowledge and calculation of their possibilities. It is only towards the end of Debord's discussion of the *dérive* that his true loyalties to the unknown are revealed in a passage that also highlights the difficulty of expressing this:

Our loose lifestyle and even certain amusements considered dubious that have always been enjoyed among our entourage — slipping by night into houses undergoing demolition, hitchhiking nonstop and without destination through Paris during a transportation strike in the name of adding to the confusion, wandering in subterranean catacombs forbidden to the public, etc. — are expressions of a more general sensibility which is no different from that of the *dérive*. Written descriptions can be no more than passwords to this great game.



From 'The Amazing Mandelbrot Set' © Bill Boll, 2006

SOMETIMES IT SEEMS LIKE there's nowhere solid to put your feet any more. Has it all got a bit too much? When you feel seasick with it all, stare at a blank, flat sheet of A4 paper and listen to Bach. When that sheet of paper is flat you can measure the distance between the two diagonal corners exactly, and even calculate the other dimensions. It's absolute. Clear as day. Everything is in its place. But if you crumple up that sheet of paper, maybe even stuff it in your mouth and have a good old chew, those two points might be right next to each other, but the dimensions of the paper haven't changed. That's the topology of networks. That's the way our world is now; no absolutes. It's not made up of elegant cubes and spheres, but nonlinear feedback loops, iterated functions, strange attractors, seahorse tails, ferns uncurling, ocean gyres, hurricanes and the whorls of a plume of cigarette smoke. Magic and chance everywhere you look.

Oh, but it must have been comforting when God was in his heaven and the universe all worked smoothly like a clockwork orrery and everything had its place and all the greatest minds of your generation were engaged on breaking things down into smaller and smaller bits to see how it all worked, and where it was all going, and it was all marvellous, evidence of a divine and benevolent intelligence at work. You can hear it in Bach. You can hear it in the Goldberg Variations. Pure maths and harmony and just the right little grace note coming at just the right moment to give you a delicious little frisson, and you know

exactly when the end has come because it's all resolved and the music comes to rest just as it should.

So when it all makes you feel a little queasy, breathe deeply, look at that blank white sheet of paper and listen to Bach. Indulge for a moment in nostalgia for a world where everything was about to add up, it was all going to be figured out for you, built solidly from the ground up. There's that quote of Bacon, going on about absolute mastery over nature, it's them against us but its alright chaps, we're winning. Mechanistic, deterministic, reductionist. Not Chance but Design.

Until those crazy Romantics started going on about transcendence and the infinite, Wordsworth dwelling in the light of setting suns, Blake cursing Newton, all those gentlemen tramping about in the Alps reciting poetry and having elevated thoughts about the Sublime. It could only end in tears. Or Chaos.

But Newton had his moments. He found it absurd that objects seemed able to communicate with each other without exchanging any physical substance. He spent a great deal of time looking for this substance. What was it filling all the emptiness? Electricity? The ether?

In BLAH the French Mathematician Poincaré was still searching. 'We know whence comes our belief in the ether. If it takes several years for light to arrive to us from a removed star, it is no longer upon the star nor is it upon the earth; it must be sustained somewhere, and supported, so to speak, by some material.'

Sometimes the harder you look for something the harder it is to see. Like stargazing. A star whose light is just visible to the naked eye will vanish when you look directly at it, but gleams coyly in the corner of your eye when you look aside, always shy of your direct gaze.

The subtle ether was not directly observed by scientists. It was deduced to exist, invented really, because it was needed to explain other observable phenomena.

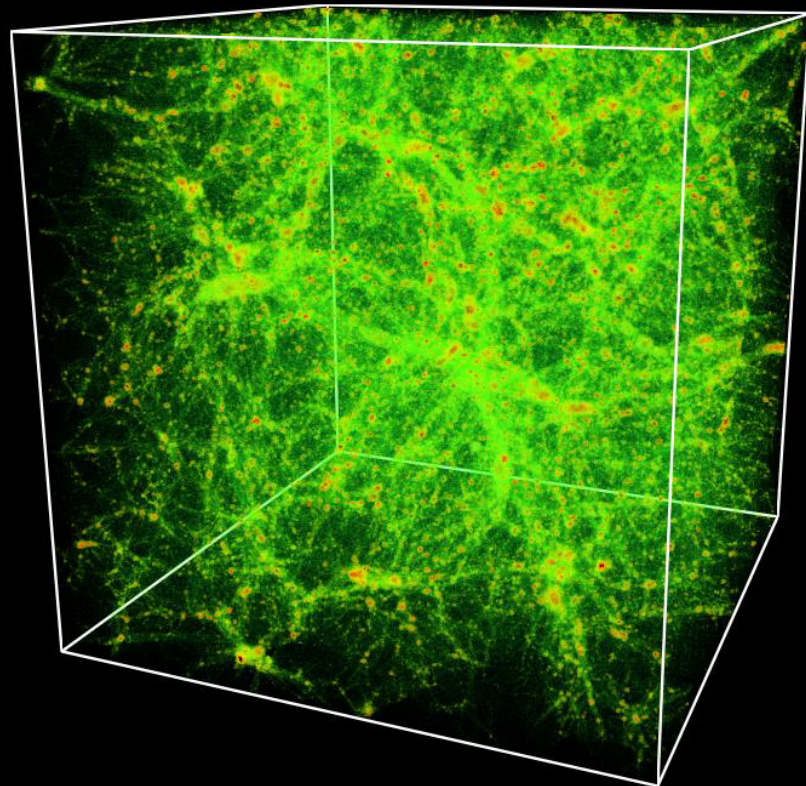
It's the stuff between things, explaining effects at a distance. It's what the light from distant stars travels through to get to us. It's what lies in the space between nucleus and buzzing electron. It was supposed that an ether wind passed unhindered through the structure of things, passing through molecules of entire planets like a breeze through a forest. Even now, scientists tell us that most of the universe consists of 'dark matter', a substance which has never been seen, measured or recorded, remaining resolutely insubstantial and elusive in every respect. Dark Matter is wedged in the spaces between galaxies like packing material in a crate.

'It's a fairly embarrassing situation to admit that we can't find 90% of the universe.'
– Bruce Margon, Chairman of Astronomy Dept, University of Washington

Everywhere we look we only see ourselves. Is an electron a wave or a particle? Neither and both. It has become a commonplace to both scientists and artists that reality is a peculiar alchemy between observer and observed.

The subtle ether abolishes distance and emptiness. It fills the gaps. It lies in the spaces between notes of music played hesitantly. It is what we see when we look up at the sky to be lifted out of ourselves for a moment. It sustains light across the cold vastnesses of space to bring us the specks of light that tell us that we might not be alone. It is longing made substance. We need it.

Distribution of 'dark matter' in the Universe © Princeton University, Dept. of Astrophysics



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