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## Spontaneous Knotting of Agitated Strings

Anthony Klotz  
*Virginia Commonwealth University*

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Painting and Printmaking  
Virginia Commonwealth University

This is to certify that the thesis prepared by Anthony Klotz entitled SPONTANEOUS KNOTTING OF AGITATED STRINGS has been approved by his or her committee as satisfactory completion of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Fine Arts

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Reni Gower, Professor, Virginia Commonwealth University

---

Barbara Tisserat, Associate Professor, Virginia Commonwealth University

---

Ruth Bolduan, Associate Professor, Virginia Commonwealth University

---

Holly Morrison, Associate Professor/Chair, Department of Painting and Printmaking

---

Richard Toscan, Dean, School of the Arts

---

Dr. F. Douglas Boudinot, Dean of the Graduate School

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SPONTANEOUS KNOTTING OF AGITATED STRINGS

Tony Klotz, Richmond, Virginia 2009

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The chapter titles in the table of contents of this document were taken from (Teed, 1922). His book, *Cellular Cosmogony* describes his hollow-earth theory and the philosophy of the Koreshan Unity society he founded. I utilize the titles to form the outline of this paper.

## Introduction

The primary theme of my thesis and the body of work it documents is an examination of ideas considered peculiar in their time due to their implausibility or fantastic character, but which had at least some popular, scientific, or social support in one form or another. I am attracted to hypotheses and theories which remained relatively benign or contribute somehow to future progress as opposed to destructive ideologies such as the Nazi Germans.

Within the last few decades there have been many scientific advances which give new insights into epistemological questions at the core of modern and post-modern debates. These insights cross over to art and, while providing some answers, give rise to new questions and opportunities for artists to examine and explore.

## Our Minor Proposition

I have been looking at ideas like Percival Lowell's 20<sup>th</sup> century hypothesis that there were canals on Mars built by Martians, and Cosmas Indiopleustes' assertion in 550 AD that the earth was flat, and of particular interest, Cyrus Teed's 19<sup>th</sup> century delusion that the earth was like an "egg" and that we lived on the concave surface inside.

I look to the original sources whenever possible: Percival Lowell's book *Mars and it's Canals* (Lowell, 1911), Cosmas Indiopleustes' manuscript *Christian Topography* (Indiopleustes, 6 AD) and Cyrus Teed's *Cellular Cosmogony* (Teed, 1922).

## The Law of Visual Deviation Accounts for Certain Phenomena

The work that has emerged as a result of these investigations varies in the use of figuration and abstraction, image and text, digital and analog, mechanical and the hand-made. The work encompasses digital prints, hand colored lithographs from stone, drawings in graphite and metal-point and photographs. It includes abstraction, images and text.

## Solving an Incalculable Problem

Given our perceptual limitations how can we know what is true or real? In the Cartesian analytic view there are narratives that are universal, one example postulates that science leads ultimately to progress. However, this seems uncertain given the historical record. Science may ultimately lead to progress, but very often appears to lead nowhere or unintentionally makes things worse. How can we really know science will ultimately be progressive? This question leads to a post-modern view which is skeptical of the progressiveness of science.

In order to understand how art in the 21<sup>st</sup> century should or can evolve, it helps to understand the ideas that it emerged from. One of those is the transition from modernist foundations to post-modern pluralism to the current position. This transition parallels the struggle of modern science and philosophy to emerge from their mystical beginnings to a more rational condition.

My interest in 19<sup>th</sup> century American art led me to look at the underpinnings of American modernism. In doing so I have looked at the thread in thought that

runs from Emerson<sup>1</sup> to the Pragmatists, William James, Charles Pierce and John Dewey. Pragmatism appears, on the surface, to be a post-modern concept. The basic tenets of Pragmatism generally are: that knowledge does not rest on a fixed foundation, knowledge may always be subject to revision, knowledge resides in agreement within a critical community, knowledge is effected by contingency and there is always more than one point of view.<sup>2</sup>

Pragmatic pluralism does not hold that all points of view are equally valid or relativistic. It acknowledges that while individuals have a right to hold their beliefs there is a need to look to an engaged critical community for validation or denial of those beliefs. An engaged critical community is not one of tacit agreement, confrontation or homogenization. It allows for disagreement without being solipsist. It is embodied

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<sup>1</sup> Emerson, Ralph Waldo, *Nominalist and Realists*, Second Essays, 1844, "Anomalous facts, as the never quite obsolete rumors of magic and demonology, and the new allegations of phrenologists and neurologists, are of ideal use. They are good indications. Homeopathy is insignificant as an art of healing, but of great value as a criticism of Hygeia or medical practice of the time. So with Mesmerism, Swedenborgism, Fourierism, and the Millennial Church; they are poor pretensions enough, but good criticism on the science, philosophy and teaching of the day."

<sup>2</sup> Bernstein, Richard J, *Pragmatism, Pluralism and the Healing of Wounds*, 1988, (Menard, Pragmatism, 1997) , pp 382-401



in Socratic civil dialogue that Richard Rorty describes: "the willingness to talk, to listen to other people, to weigh the consequences of our actions on other people". To imagine that such a community exists where discourse has decayed into barbarism<sup>3</sup> makes no sense. It is pointless to attempt to enter into any debate that is replete with all the pseudo-scientific twists of logic I mention.<sup>4</sup>

While it's good to have a civil discourse, consensus is no guarantee that truth or the right answers are found and embraced. Scientists often revise or refine theories as the precision of their instruments improve or social conditions change. For the rest of us reliance on consensus can be even more precarious.

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<sup>3</sup> Murray, John Courtney, S.J., *These Truths*, Sheed and Ward, New York, 1960, p. 14. "Barbarism...threatens when men cease to talk together according to reasonable laws. There are laws of argument, the observance of which is imperative if discourse is to be civilized. Argument ceases to be civil when it is dominated by passion and prejudice; when its vocabulary becomes solipsist, premised on the theory that my insight is mine alone and cannot be shared; when dialogue gives way to a series of monologues; when the parties to the conversation cease to listen to one another, or hear only what they want to hear, or see the others argument only through the screen of their own categories...When things like this happen, men cannot be locked together in argument. Conversation becomes merely quarrelsome or querulous. Civility dies with the death of dialogue'.

<sup>4</sup> Telescopes More or Less Imperfect; Likewise the Lens of Every Human Eye

History provides numerous examples of groups that flourished despite the implausibility of the beliefs they embraced. Recently I visited the site of Cyrus Teed's late 19<sup>th</sup> century utopian Koreshan Unity settlement in Estero, Florida to see the documents, devices, and surroundings that remain there. When I studied the Koreshans, I became interested in Teed's followers. They formed a community around Teed and appeared convinced, based on his pseudo-scientific gyrations, that the earth is a hollow shell, that we live on the concave interior, and that they were destined to establish a New Jerusalem. Despite the obvious flaws in Teed's reasoning, the Koreshans established an active community which managed to run a successful printing company, a restaurant, and an electric generator for Estero. They held art festivals, parades, plays and concerts on the grounds. I doubt every Koreshan swallowed Teed's hollow earth New Jerusalem theory entirely. Some probably went along for reasons other than a firm belief in Teed's theories; balmy weather, change of scenery, limited options, romantic liaisons and so on. After Teed's death in 1908, discontent and disunity set in; eventually another

autocratic leader, Hedwig Michel, took control<sup>5</sup> and 'rescued' the disintegrating community allowing it to survive later into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The last original Koreshan, Lillian "Vesta" Newcomb, died on April 8, 1974. A few years earlier she admitted the Copernican view of the universe was with merit only after she had seen pictures of the earth taken by astronauts who had landed on the moon. The Koreshans formed a consensus that allowed Vesta Newcomb to maintain an incredibly isolated flawed belief system most of her life.

#### Tests That Cannot Be Ignored

In one work, titled *Mars and Its Canals*, a digital print of Mars based on a photo by Percival Lowell<sup>6</sup> is combined with graphite drawing of four freehand versions of my attempt to recreate the print image of the canals. Accompanying the print and drawing is the text from pages 369-370 from Lowell's *Mars and Its Canals*, published in 1911. In the text Lowell describes the difficulty he had drawing the architecturally straight

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<sup>5</sup> Gillis, Chad, *Bonita Daily News*, USA, November 6<sup>th</sup> 2004

<sup>6</sup> revealing the canals

lines of the "canals" without a ruler, and how he came to the conclusion they therefore must have been constructed by intelligent inhabitants of the planet. Taking my cue from Lowell, I attempted to render the image in the digital print of Mars as precisely as I could, at a smaller scale, in each hand drawn version. My perception is that each version looks alike, given a brief glance. The difference between the subject and each version becomes apparent on closer inspection. While I expected the drawings to deviate, I was curious to see how much they would, despite my expectations.

In another work titled *The Christian Multiverse* the text from Cosmas Indiopleustes 550 AD description of the flat-earth is combined with quantum physics, inspiring an edition variable<sup>7</sup> portfolio of nine hand-colored lithographs, each depicting the terrarium-like description in a slightly different color scheme. The belief in a flat-earth was generally considered unconventional, even in the middle ages, but ended up

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<sup>7</sup> an edition where each print is unique

being accepted by many. The combination of it with physics equally peculiar theory of a multi-verse plays with the theme of religion as science/science as religion.

The circular gold-point on gessoed board titled *The Great Magneto-electric Battery* comes from the Koreshan view that its hollow-earth cosmogony forms a giant battery that in turn powers the light of the sun which is located at the central core. While only someone familiar with Koreshan Cosmogony can possibly know this based on the drawing or its title, they may be able to get a clue to its alchemical origins from the use of gold as a drawing medium and the subject of the sun. The subtle difference in value between the drawing and the gesso ground initially evokes the type of formal reading which relies on what John Dewey disdainfully calls "passive amusements and distractions, different from other indulgent dissipations only in dependence upon a certain acquired refinement or "cultivation".<sup>8</sup> An occasional indulgence in this particular dissipation

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<sup>8</sup> Dewey, John, *Experience, Nature and Art*, Experience and Nature, 1923, (Menard, Pragmatism, 1997), pg, 253

seems harmless enough, far be it from me to discourage it. To find completion when presented with contingent information, cloud gazing, is something I myself participate in when the mood occasionally strikes me. The gold metal-point work is like an ornament from a far off or ancient culture, whose meaning is obscured, but which has found its way into a museum, gallery or collection.

The digital prints titled *Planet X*, and *Z* were inspired by Percival Lowell's hypothesis that there was a trans-Neptunian planet, he dubbed Plant X, in the solar system. For a time Plant X existed only as an idea, a hypothesis. As many people know, Lowell's hypothesis eventually led to the discovery of Pluto, fulfilling the expectations of Lowell and his followers. It enjoyed planet status for many years until its relatively recent demotion to minor planet. With Pluto's demotion, Planet X returned to its hypothetical form. In depicting it as a simple grey hole against a grey ground, I tried to represent it in its current manifestation. The satellite work *Z*, is an absurdly sympathetic attempt on my part to somehow rescue the hypothesis, while the missing *Y* remains a mystery.

In the hand colored lithograph, *The Cellular Cosmogony*, I have depicted Cyrus Teed's hollow earth theory with a few key alterations. It is my homage to Teed and his followers' daring but futile attempt to create their own world. For a time, in their own way, they succeeded in leaving this planet for another to start a new civilization. To the Koreshans', there was nothing but a void outside the thickly layered protective crust of their new home. In my version, the crust is thin and there is a busy colorful universe on the outside.

Photography allows me to combine the historical aspect of my ideas with the present. The Koreshans' well kept antique diesel-powered electric generator seems out of place in an age of nuclear and wind powered turbines. Though it still starts it no longer serves any practical purpose. Its glorious past is a reminder that progress occurs despite our foibles, mistakes and setbacks. The images of the boarded up utopian Koreshan community's general store, now bypassed by the highway, and Eyetopian Optician's in a nearby mall convey a mixture of loss and wish-fulness in a county with the highest foreclosure rate in the country. There is something

slightly staged about the places and their facades. I chose black and white digital prints and framed them in simple black to suggest the weight of documentation. The technology I used in the printing process (quad-toned Epson printing) relies on the subtle mixture of color to approximate the look of a silver-gelatin print, and is itself an artifice.

#### Objections by Illogical Critics

The text included with the work - Percival Lowell on *Martian Canals*, Cyrus Teed on the *Cellular Cosmogony* and Cosmas Indiopleustes on the *Christian Topography* - informs the work and becomes part of it. In deciding whether or not to include the text, I took into account its obscurity and its relation to the images. The text provides a point of departure the way a decorative motif might for an abstraction, a photograph could for a figurative work or a landscape for a photograph. In my work, the intended or conjunctive discrepancies between the text and images are cues to my premise regarding the fallibility of interpretation. I have concluded that this is an essential element. Each image and the corresponding text concern the nature of perception.



Within the context of the installation the premise is revealed.

Telescopes More or Less Imperfect; Likewise the Lens of Every Human Eye

People look for patterns in contingency because it is easier to deal with structure rather than random events and derive pleasure from the satisfaction or play of this instinctual desire. They also construct or adopt beliefs they find personally comforting. One example, the tendency to think of oneself as superior, is known as the "Lake Wobegon Effect". While it is statistically impossible for 94% of university professors to be above average teachers, in one study it was found that 94% of them believe they are.<sup>9</sup> Another example is that when people hold a particular belief because of bias rather than fact, even when given evidence that a belief is faulty, they tend to seek validation rather than question the belief.<sup>10</sup> Because people choose social

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<sup>9</sup> Gilovich, Thomas, *How We Know What Isn't So*, The Free Press, New York, 1991. "The Lake Wobegon Effect" is named after Garrison Keillor's fictional mid-western community where 'the women are strong, the men are good-looking, and all the children are above average'.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, pg 80-84

structures that validate their beliefs, most of their interactions are with like minds. There is an inclination to infer, from that sharing of beliefs with associates that more people in general share the same beliefs than actually do.<sup>11</sup>

There are situations which force science to admit it cannot describe reality precisely. In some cases simply observing something causes it to change. In the social sciences the behavior of a group may be altered simply because they know they are being studied.<sup>12</sup> The results of an experiment are influenced by the accuracy and precision of the devices used. The methods and procedures used are also important as well as the theory itself.<sup>13</sup> Scientists have the same perceptual and social biases as everyone else, and they make mistakes. Add anecdotal evidence, opaque jargon, bold statements, heresy, burden of proof, rumors, rationalizations,

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid, pg 113-114

<sup>12</sup> Shermer, Michael, *Why People Believe Weird Things*, Henry Holt and Company LLC, New York, 2002, pg.47

<sup>13</sup> Shermer, Michael, *Why People Believe Weird Things*, Henry Holt and Company LLC, New York, 2002, pg 46., 'the Copenhagen interpretation of Quantum action: "a probability function does not prescribe a certain event but describes a continuum of possible events until a measurement interferes with the isolation of the system and a single event is actualized"'

superstition, coincidence, emotive language, false analogies, *ad ignorantiam*, *ad hominem*, hasty generalization, overreliance on authority, either or thinking, circular reasoning, ideological immunity and *reuctio ad absurdum* and what you get is pseudo-science.<sup>14</sup> Separate but equally important factors are big money, narcissism and outright deceit. In my work I consider how beliefs are influenced both socially and perceptually.

### Results and Inevitable Conclusions

Our best interest is not found in conflict, consensus, foundations, relativism or in civil discourse alone. Because humans are fallible we invariably make mistakes. Unfortunately, we have a tendency toward certitude about our beliefs. Luckily, given the larger world, we are not all wrong at the same time. Like most people, I do not live in and can avoid isolated dogmatic communes and people. I am able to rely on the combined

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<sup>14</sup> Shermer, Michael, *Why People Believe Weird Things*, Henry Holt and Company LLC, New York, 2002, pp 47-61

beliefs of the varied groups and reflective individuals that I am fortunately free to associate with.

While my investigations inform my work, I am not a philosopher or a scientist. In art meaning is found, not in judgment and ultimate knowledge alone, but in the deeper realm of discernment.<sup>15</sup> I am content to let the work ask questions rather than attempt to posit conclusions. For now I am interpreting what I find in order to better understand it. Because I continuously find new things (at least to me), I come to new conclusions as I go along. I have begun to look at the writings of contemporary Pragmatist Susan Haack, which seems moderate in refuting the skepticism of post-modernism, without adopting an entirely foundational approach.<sup>16</sup> According to John Dewey "Premises are the analysis of a conclusion into its logically justifying grounds; there are no premises till there is a

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<sup>15</sup> *Webster's Dictionary*, Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston, 1984, "Discern -To perceive something hidden or obscure. To comprehend mentally".

<sup>16</sup> Susan Haack is a contemporary Pragmatist who has criticized Richard Rorty's post-modern view for veering from Charles Pierces original definition of Pragmatism. Her moderate view of post-modern skepticism of science and relativism differs from R. Rorty's and R. Bernstein's. It is clearer and seems more in line with my premise.

conclusion".<sup>17</sup> My premise is based on my conclusions, as they are at the moment. It is always subject to revision.

### Summary

Epistemological investigation isn't relativism or a blanket refusal to 'take a stand'. I have firm beliefs I live and work by, but I retain my capacity to ask questions. As silly as the questions may seem, it is sillier not to ask them. We discriminate based on cultural preferences, the precision of our tools, skills and the limits of our knowledge. Because of the research I have done and the work that emerged from it, I find myself increasingly involved with questions of discernment along with perception. As mentioned, I plan to look further into Susan Haack's moderate arguments for science.

At this point, I don't see any reason to constrain myself to any single mode of working. I am restless,

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<sup>17</sup> Dewey, John, *Experience, Nature and Art*, Experience and Nature, 1923, (Menard, Pragmatism, 1997), pg, 253

disenchanted and feel limited by studio work as my only means of expression. Along with photography as a way to bring more from the present into my production, I foresee other possibilities in three dimensional work and video. Though I have kept a return to oil painting open, I continue to find the variety and flexibility of drawing and printing more suitable to me.

Today the media gives us the latest crises in an unending stream of hyperbole to maximize ratings in the form of pseudo-information. Technology has given us the World Wide Web, which is an endless source of unproven facts and conjecture. In 2003 the American Secretary of State presented dubious evidence of WMD's<sup>18</sup> to a skeptically resistant United Nations. The United States invaded Iraq unilaterally anyway. Media reports of WMD's were quickly replaced by reports of IED's.<sup>19</sup> The war itself became old news as we were flooded with information about the Presidential election and the economic crises. There is a long history of similar

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<sup>18</sup> Weapons of Mass Destruction

<sup>19</sup> Improvised Explosive Devices

follies to ponder, the consequences of which have been beneficial, benign or disastrous.

At the same time the shift in the political climate in America demonstrates that the tolerance for the dialog and activities that dominated the last decades of the previous century has worn thin. The attacks of 9/11, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the economic crises have made it increasingly imperative that we turn away from the adversarial, confrontational dialog that characterized political, social and academic debates in the recent past and find constructive ways to deal with our differences in beliefs. Artists, whose works deal with perception, discernment and culture, have an opportunity to contribute to this new dialog constructively.

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