



Night sky
showing the Antlia
Dwarf galaxy,
Feb. 27, 2012.
Courtesy ESA/
Hubble & NASA.

The Great Attractor

by Alicja Kwade

WE MOVE AT one-and-a-half million miles per hour toward the Great Attractor. The Earth is dragged on and on toward an invisible giant, the all-devouring Attractor, which must be somewhere behind the “air pump.”¹

All of us are whirling in the Milky Way’s arm, heading toward the air pump. At the same time, the Earth—a free-floating globe of rock with a tiny diameter of 7,918 miles pirouetting at approximately 1,000 miles per hour—orbital around a burning ball at 67,000 miles per hour. At present, by my estimation, I myself am a constellation of 5.5×10^{27} ancient atoms (as I am thirty-eight years old) with lots of electrons that are moving at almost five million miles per hour. But all of this matter is blurred when one tries to focus on it.²

I am occupied by these thoughts, unable to be at peace. They make everything that appears to be true and real seem shockingly unreal. They are to be reflected on with caution and only in small doses.

My muse is the blank space, the not-knowing and not-understanding. I attempt to acknowledge nothingness as real. If nothing is real, there are only possibilities. To me, these possibilities are like the mechanisms of an ever-repeating play with changing sets and props. The conventions we use to structure, count, and name reality, in order to live and function together as a flock of seven-and-a-half billion, concern me. My efforts to understand and represent something I can barely grasp, and my failure to do so, bring forth my work.

My freedom as an artist lies in not having to prove anything. I propose material hypotheses without claims of proof—formal sculptural attempts at understanding. As I rummage through scientific literature whose language I don’t completely understand, the not-knowing furthers the formulation of my language of expression.

Most of what’s around us we accept out of pure habit. What do we really know or really understand? Do I have a will that drives me to pose these questions? If, according to determinism, there is necessity in nature, is it necessary that I be an artist? Was this always already planned? If I have a will, and I have decided to write this, what creates and controls it? The nuclei of my cells? The space between them, characterless trembling strings?

There is not much out there, almost nothing. Nevertheless we are convinced things exist, even though, logically and soberly, this all can only be a strange, stubborn illusion. Matter is predominantly composed of emptiness. An atom’s nucleus is one ten thousandth to one one-hundred thousandth of the size of the atom and, in effect, its only mass. The electrons move around the nucleus through nothingness.

Where can desire be located in all this? Do particles have a will? According to quantum theory, observation influences reality. Observing things changes them. How can we understand anything if we change it by watching it? Is there truth only when no one is looking? Or does nothing exist if it is not observed?

Is the table in front of me there? Or is it there only when I am in the room? There is no evidence that it doesn’t vanish when it is not being watched. Is the table not actually a tree in the form of a table, or only a table, because I name it so, or sit by it? What do we know about the table and its origins? Perhaps all the technical information we have about the table—its atoms, its position in space—suffices. Then all matter could be replaced and eternally conserved as information.

CURRENTLY
ON VIEW
Alicja Kwade’s
solo exhibition
“Revolution Orbita,”
Kamel Mennour,
London, through
Nov. 18.

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Contributors page.



Alicja Kwade: *Lamp (Kaiser-Idell)*, 2014, iron (1991.4 grams), plastic (149.1 grams), copper (58.7 grams), brass (30.6 grams), glass (29 grams), aluminium (20.9 grams), ceramic (16.7grams), varnish (8.5 grams), paper (1.9 grams), and Wolfram (0.05 grams). Photo Roman März.



How do the atoms of a cactus know that they are a cactus? Do they gather themselves to appear as a cactus when we look? Everything could have another form. Matter can be considered as random aggregations in space and time, with plenty of nothingness in between.

The question arises: what power does information (all we know about a physical object) have in an increasingly dematerialized world? Perhaps we will soon write texts on the information of a table.

And how on earth do entangled particles come to an understanding? How do they exchange information? There it is again, spooky action at a distance.³

IF I BELIEVE in determinism, I can do nothing now other than sit here and type this text on this laptop. When I press the keys, I press into nothingness. Neutrinos have no trouble passing through me and this laptop—and they do it continuously, not noticing my presence in the least.

I am a short event in space and time. A bunch of atoms in a place. The place is me, in this moment. The atoms will soon look for a new place. Nothing is lost, its place only changes.

And despite all this, I sit in a café in New York, surrounded by a lot of loudly talking nothing. Nothing slurps, nothing loves, nothing hates, nothing kills each other on a blue ball moving toward the Great Attractor. ○

—Translated from the German by Matthew Shen Goodman

1. The *Luftpumpe*, or air pump, is the German name for the constellation Antlia, originally Antlia Pneumatica (“air pump” in Latin).

2. According to the uncertainty or indeterminacy principle in subatomic physics, postulated by German physicist Werner Heisenberg in 1927, the position and the velocity of an object cannot both be measured simultaneously, with exactitude, even in theory.

3. The concept in physics that an object can be moved, changed, and otherwise affected without being mechanically touched was referred to skeptically by Albert Einstein as “spooky action at a distance.”

Lamp, 2017, ground lamp and epoxy resin, glass, and brass, 56 by 21 by 21 inches. Photo Roman März.