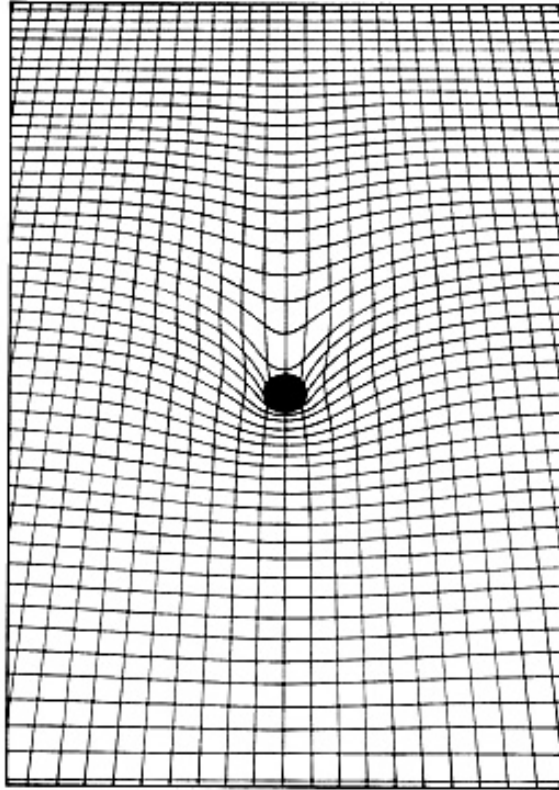


## “Rubber Sheets”

Language penetrates Nature. Nature returns the favor.



*[The Nature of Language, the Nature of Nature,  
and the Persistent Illusion of a Clockwork Universe]*

Nicholas Knight

## I.

Without the *word* for it, there would be no Nature. Language must first call it into existence. As a result, nature's purity is tainted by linguistic ambiguity from the very start. Yet our common vision of nature—as a realm governed by cause and effect, however complex or vicious—does not allow for ambiguity at its core. How can the gears of the clockwork heavens function if their teeth are not interlocking?

And what sense does it make to claim that nature is called into being by language, rather than the other way around? Mustn't there be some "world" out there *first*, for language itself to exist in? Wittgenstein's declaration that, "[t]he limits of my language are the limits of my world," rests on the distinction between the veiled ontological world of phenomena *out there*, and the world as it exists for us as a conceptual construct. Our world, the world we can't help but inhabit, is a world of language that draws its forms from the flow of perception. The phenomena 'out there' seem to be causing our perceptions, but just how confident of that are we willing to be?

Still, most of the time, language does a good enough job of representing the world. We know this because most of our intentions can be expressed through actions that bring about the desired effect. We turn the key and the door opens. Life on human scale is well-approximated.

I want to introduce an analogy here, which must be preceded by some exposition. Isaac Newton's three Laws of Motion and his Universal Gravitation, drafted in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, form the basis of classical mechanics. They are an unbelievably elegant and cohesive portrait of the physical laws of the universe. They give us a model of empty space, as flat and predictable as a billiard table, with actions and reactions among the colliding balls precisely calculable according to known and measurable quantities. Cause begets effect, without remainder.

As technology advanced and knowledge compounded through the centuries, however, gaps and inconsistencies became more difficult to ignore. The closer science and

philosophy looked at the consequences of advancing theories, the more it seemed that Newton's laws might be more *useful* than true. Eventually Albert Einstein tied together a patchwork quilt of localized solutions into single understanding of mass, energy, space, time, and gravity with his Theory of Relativity. Its power and genius are as startling as Newton's. This model of the world reproduced the results of classical mechanics at the scale Newton understood, and it extended the functionality of the system to new scientific phenomena that had become problematic.

Einstein developed a wonderful metaphor to distinguish his universe of relativity from Newton's billiard table world. Rather than a rigid, smooth, and indifferent plane on which balls ricocheted about, the universe was a stretched rubber sheet. When a massive object, like a bowling ball, is placed on it, it sinks into the sheet, bending the space around it. Space is not a neutral arena, it turned out, but is distorted in complex ways by the events taking place there. The space between things takes on a form inseparable from the objects warping it.

Einstein's solutions work, but they are not easily observable. They apply to the world that we all live in, you and I, but we don't need them to understand the key that opens our front door. Newton's solutions still work just fine for that. More importantly, the conceptual model of the world that flows from the Newtonian system is one we generally carry in our heads: cause and effect have a straight Euclidean line connecting them. But if we hold too tight to Newton, as push really comes to shove, we'll have problems. (Try opening your front door at light speed!) Minor confusions will erupt into full-scale impossibilities. When we mistake convenient shortcuts and shared ideas for the truth, we foreclose a universe of bewildering and exhilarating epiphanies dwelling in the pockets between those ideas. Einstein's relativity did not need to displace Newton's mechanics, it just needed to explain the dilemmas too stubborn for the classical system to solve. That those stubborn dilemmas required radical, mind-bending solutions is, all things considered, to be expected.

## II.

When the tools of language are asked to approximate the world with less exactitude and rigor, then what? The world of language and concepts that people inhabit is not mathematically precise, or systematically regulated. Instead it is variable, biased, ambiguous, and fugitive. To say nothing of the ontological world on the other side...the world that language blockades even as it tries to describe it, and act upon it.

And since language is the inescapable root of culture, many of the ambiguities in language are manifest in its cultural products. "Products," in this sense, is meant broadly: the "things" produced by a society, obviously, but also the modes of relating amongst people, and the conventions that govern those modes. All these layers are subject to analysis that traces their instabilities back to lacunae in the language that originally gives them form.

Which, defining our terms that way, pretty much includes everything. But that's also the point: it's not at all clear that any category of human experience is to be excluded from the examinations that art can undertake. Quite the contrary: it seems necessary to begin from some point as near to the edge as possible, so as to get the widest purview available.

But even if language calls "nature" into being, the one thing language does not call into being is itself. There is no vantage point outside of language from which we can get a sufficiently detached view of it. The knots that ripple through its fabric are ever-present. Each time we step outside the previously described limits of experience, we create another shell that contains our musings. As Stanley Cavell has claimed, there is no such thing as meta-philosophy, because that's exactly what philosophy itself already is. It's my sense that this applies equally to art. Because, even if some *Übermensch* were able to divine the nature of things apart from any concept of that thing, how would he communicate it?

It is also my sense that this ultimate inability to enclose language suggests that it is, in some mysterious way, "tethered" to the world of phenomena. Language is, finally, bound to the world by invisible ligaments, thwarted in any effort to sacrifice elasticity for clarity. A closed linguistic system is permanent only by virtue of being ever-tempting; once closed, it will float away like a balloon the day after your birthday. But the open system must always be marked by the frustrations of its dysfunction. By breaking down, we know it's working!

## III.

Anyway, even if Newton works as a good approximation, most of the time, it's not "most of the time" that art generally concerns itself with. It addresses itself, instead, to those nagging, confused places where a shared concept breaks down into misunderstanding. It is the distortion in the rubber sheet that catches the attention of artists. The artist wants to discover and articulate that heavy object bending space...and then perhaps even make one of her own.

Let's push harder on our metaphor and say that cultural products (such as shared concepts of nature and language) are the bowling balls, and they're warping the space around them, punching pockets deep into the malleable surface of contemporary experience. In that spirit, artists are dealing with the contours and locations of these pockets: their works are positioned on the slope leading beneath the surface, establishing a new footing for us to get a better view, a place from which we can chart the topological deviations.

Or, let's manipulate this thought model a little further: while maintaining that the rubber sheet is a membrane separating language, above, from nature, below, the artworks *are* bowling balls, now, rather than articulations *of* them, and they push into the membrane, stretching space from one side into territory of the other. Their tendency to is distort space more than expected, because they deploy their language for precisely this purpose, rather than incidentally. As such, their deformations are more acute and more noticeable. Their subjects sink into the space of phenomena, their forms and propositions held darkly against the real thing, whatever and wherever that may be.

But the penetration is, always, tempered by prophylaxis.



#### IV.

“Rubbers sheets” has thus far been deployed twice as metaphor and once as analogy<sup>1</sup>:

*Analogy:* Einstein’s relativity is to Newton’s classical mechanics as artworks are to ordinary notions of nature and language. The shared concepts work well enough most of the time, but the special cases demand some stronger medicine.

*Metaphor #1:* The rubber sheet is an elastic, but non-permeable, barrier between the language-world and the ontological-world, which is unavailable to us. Language is shared by people, but ambiguities in its manifold uses cause distortions in the rubber sheet, places where the curvature of the sheet makes it impossible to find purchase. Art positions its claims on the edges of these pockets.

*Metaphor #2:* Artworks themselves are the bowling balls that deform the rubber sheet. In this usage, the rubber sheet is the plane of common understanding, of concepts of nature and language. If this plane were without confusions, elisions, gaps, and obfuscations—if it were stretched taut—the artworks would not deform the sheet, bending the space of interconnectedness to their own propositions. But language *is* ambiguous, and artwork is deployed with the intention to cause distortions.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I looked it up, and it turns out that the defined difference between analogy and metaphor is that a metaphor is comparison of two things in whole, and an analogy is comparison of two things in part. This is very unsatisfying to me. I posit that metaphor is comparison of *things* and that analogy is comparison of *relations*.

<sup>2</sup> Objects of cultural production can push into the space of nature, distorting the sheet, in order to crudely compare the contours of their shapes against the dark phenomena on the other side. But they cannot access the other side of the sheet to verify their claims. The point is not, in the end, to *resolve* the ambiguities, because language won’t allow that and nature doesn’t care. The point, ultimately, is to articulate the experience of the ambiguity.

#### V.

Now that we’re adequately outfitted with metaphor and analogy, that makes this a good time to introduce, thematically, the precise knots and ambiguities that “Rubber Sheets” addresses. These divide roughly into three groups: *Sexy Nature*, *Voicing the Animal*, and *Positioning the Text*. As one might expect, the categories are fluid, and fail to completely contain the artists or their ideas. But, nonetheless, here goes:

*Sexy Nature* begins with the premise that our concept of nature is shot through with sexuality and desire, and that these qualities have an incredible power to disrupt even the most intimate communications and aspirations. Nature, a concept utterly primal and foundational, is particularly likely, then, to evade consensus.

**Paul Jacobsen** posits a utopian world that seems to be the logical conclusion of Romantic ideas about natural vistas and perpetually ripe sexuality. His vision is so committed to a radiantly idealized existence that suspicions about things being too-good-to-be-true soon crowd out the momentary euphoria. Or we could say, his paintings depict utopia as little beyond a momentary euphoria, quickly exhausted.

**Orly Cogan’s** photographs of herself, collaged bodily with images clipped from fashion magazines, place two distinct realms into conflict. A tangle of cultural constraints, effectively marketed by the fashion industry and abetted by mass society, is one set of impossibilities grafted onto the equally elusive holism of the human subject at one with nature. Cogan depicts herself coquettishly, communing in the woods, but also slightly uncomfortably: we begin to sense that the anxiety is not just in the *mixture* of conflicting models of nature, but is really inherent to each one.

The totalizing effects of psychological reality deeply mark the images and sculptures of **Luisa Kazanas**. In her work we see ourselves molding the image of nature to conform to our own changeable mental states. That the transformations so completely adopt a sexualized character should come, really, as no surprise. In fact, her subjects seem forced to make an impossible choice: by being in touch with psychological reality, they become alien to the world itself; but severing the connection with the psyche would eliminate what makes them who they are.

*Voicing the Animal* shifts the focus from the domain of nature to the creatures that populate it, both physically and symbolically. Animals are screens upon which meanings are projected, but our impulse to do so, and our desire to know how that makes them feel, seems both innate and rather misguided.

**Joianne Bittle** exhibits paintings from her series *No Man's Land*. In each we see a gnarly jackrabbit, set against a barren and reduced landscape, but boxed in by the edges of the canvas. Such a pose seems richly metaphorical. And yet, though we feel invited, we stare into its eyes and find not even a glint of recognition that our human condition could be mapped effectively onto this foreign body. The hares' vivid expression of instinctual motives (for example, arousal or escape) inspires a disconcerting admiration.

The flesh is made real, in a way, by **Dan Mikesell's** robotic sculpture. Putting a sewn-prosciutto carapace on a scampering remote control robot may not be the reanimation that the Apostles, or Dr. Frankenstein, had in mind, but the visceral hilarity of this little fellow simultaneously fascinates and repels. What is it about ourselves that we recognize in the Meatbot? Everything?

**Nina Katchadourian** attempts a different type of transfiguration in her video, being shown in New York for the first time. Inserting gift-shop shark teeth into her own mouth, she channels the spirit of a vanished specimen. Our protagonist, once given the language of facial expression, uses it to unexpected and sympathetic effect: have we overlooked the creature's humanity?

Once language and voice enter the picture, the complexities rapidly multiply. Who speaks? From what point of view? With what aims? Does the utterance make demands or passively react? How is the voice *Positioning the Text*?

**Matt Keegan's** works circulate around the cut and the object excised. Text is present as a bridge between things unsaid. What belongs on either side of the conjunction? His work depicts internal syntax as an architecture for social exchange. Keegan's voice emerges from deep within the experienced moment, expressing knowledge of his presence but not its consequences.

As if plowing nutrient-rich cultural turn-over back into fertile artistic soil, **Ian Pedigo's** sculpture presents us with forms that seem so natural and inevitable that we are seduced into believing these re-purposed materials were always meant for only this one delicate blossom. Language, for Pedigo, is embedded in a different register, as his titles evoke the oblique consensus of applied social sciences. Acting as an epistemic Prime Mover, this text is positioned as an enigmatic comment lurking at the periphery of the work.

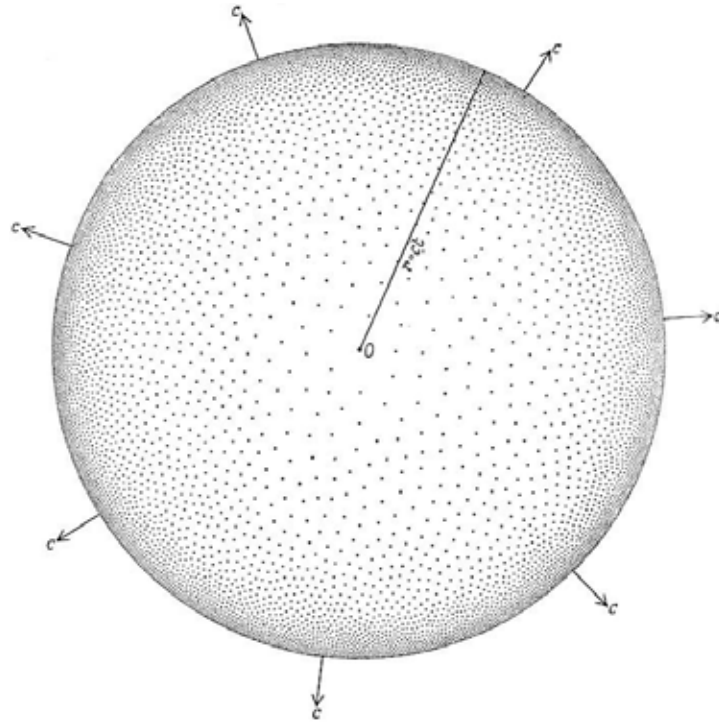
**Alejandro Cesarco** confronts head-on the absence at the core of language with his *Footnotes*. By removing the text that gives rise to a footnote, he throws into stark relief the fugitive nature of stimuli, and the frequent incomprehensibility of the ensuing response. Language may be a repository for memory, but it is also a sieve. And if language is this difficult to hold, how can we cling tight to the objects hidden on its dark side?

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## VI.

“For an aggregate of sensations to have become a remembrance capable of classification in time, it must have ceased to be actual, we must have lost the sense of its infinite complexity, otherwise it would have remained present. It must, so to speak, have crystallized around a center of associations of ideas which will be a sort of label. It is only when they have lost all life that we can classify our memories in time as a botanist arranges dried flowers in his herbarium.”

Henri Poincaré  
*The Measure of Time (1905)*



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*[And Just Because Something Is an Illusion Doesn't Mean It's Not Also the Case. Like Paranoia.]*