

Emily Kraus: *Nest Time*
Accompanying essay by Alan Dorin, April 2023

Tis nest is my home
($5!=120$ arrangements)

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This isn't a very original idea. Brion Gysin used such a method in his poem, *Junk Is No Good Baby* (1962). With a set of only 5 words, there are already 120 possible arrangements to explore. Many arrangements are junk. Others are more meaningful, "my home is this nest," "is my home this nest." Enumeration of combinations is one way to discover new patterns but it is also a method to explore the structure of conceptual spaces more generally, to discover the relationships between junk and not-junk, and to unravel the implications of a process and its constraints. The cut-up poem technique was pioneered by the Dadaist Tristan Tzara in the 1920s, but the concept of enumerating possibilities to create text is much older than that.

Ramon Lull, a Catalan missionary of the 13th century, used symbol-inscribed discs and diagrams to methodically generate sets of questions. The French theologian and mathematician Marin Mersenne adopted an approach inspired by Lull's work to music theory in *L'Harmonie Universelle* (1636). Contemporary artists have also explored media and ideas by allowing their attention, and that of their audiences, to map the boundaries of a predefined space of potential patterns. Or to enter into a space's internal regions to reveal the interest and value of its contents. Steve Reich's musical composition *Drumming* (1970-71), for instance, is a structured composition that is formed from phrase-shifting rhythmic patterns. And, Jared Tarbell's *Invader Fractal* (2003) posters depict subsets drawn from a collection of 32,768 symmetrical pixel arrays that realise a bewildering array of "space invaders."

The tools used by these artists take incremental steps to cover a well-defined set of possibilities outlined, or established in its entirety, by their makers. There is no need to stop at finite sets though. As technology has developed, it has become easy to set in motion processes that explore what, to all intents and purposes, are essentially infinite spaces approaching the "computational sublime."¹ This concept refers to scenarios that aren't just awe inspiring and grand, they are so far beyond our day-to-day experience that they exceed our ability to grasp.

The infinite can be expressed in many ways, but there are two categories of process I would like to distinguish. The methodical, incremental movement through a well structured, predictable space, and the stochastic movement through a vast, often unclearly structured or hazily conceived conceptual space. These have very different connotations. The first encourages a viewer to contrast the enormity of time or space against the brevity of their life and situation. The viewer senses where the step-by-step process is leading, but the goal is too distant to reach.

The connotations of the second kind of process, stochastic movement through an amorphous or yet-to-be defined space, are quite different. Imagine the changes in a cloud as it floats overhead, the patterns drawn on the beach after each receding tide, or the veins in a lineage of leaves stretching back millions of years. Digital computers can of course enact similar processes very well, but processes like these are conceptual natives of physical, biological and ecological modes of pattern making. They are also processes that an artist can intuitively use to explore the structure, order and chaos of an as-yet undiscovered visual space. There's no clear goal directedness. No easily encoded or explained mapping from one work to another. The process takes a much more unpredictable, gentle and meandering path than the regular enumeration of combinations and permutations. This is where Emily Kraus' work enters the fray.

A stochastic process is one that can be described by a random probability distribution. Some outcomes may be more likely and others less likely. The relative likelihood of different events can be grasped with experience, and then played upon. Kraus adopts this methodology in her practice by constructing a series of novel nests within the confines of her studio.

¹ The computational sublime refers to a space of forms or concepts, brought about through the possibilities of theoretical computation and new technologies, that is so vast it challenges human perception and comprehension with its enormity. It completely engulfs the concept of the sublime as it is understood in traditional art.

Whilst a bird constructs its nest using twigs, moss and feathers within a tree cavity, and a colony of native bees builds its home from plant resins and bodily excretions, Kraus' nests are built of a roller frame and canvas within the walls of her studio. In this space she lives awhile, reconfiguring the perceptual relationship between herself and the environment by explicitly laying down paint and rotating her nest's canvas walls so that the rollers can act on it. She relinquishes control of aspects of the process to the structure, media and environment. Where exactly will the paint move? How long will it remain sufficiently liquid to spread? How will the canvas slide, stretch and crease? All of these aspects of the process are influenced by environmental conditions over which the artist has marginal control. For instance, the studio and nest temperature, and even the humidity, all impact the canvas' stretch and the paint's viscosity and drying time. But the presence of Kraus' body in the space changes both of these parameters, and these in turn feedback on her own physiology. Her occupation of the nest is an essential part of the coupled environmental and bodily loops that generate the patterns she explores.

Kraus reconfigures space by placing herself at the centre of a pictorial universe that she generates around her. Within the expanse of possible forms, she also reconfigures her body's relationship to nest-time. The marks that she places are transformed through space and time by a sequence of multi-scale, recursive cyclical manipulations: the cycles of the rollers against the canvas, the cycles of the canvas as she rotates it around the frame, the cycles of replacing a canvas wall by another, the process of keeping some rollers and replacing others with fresh ones. The marks therefore gradually acquire their meaning via many temporal cyclic, dynamic processes that unfold under her power and around her body. The processes are intertwined in her interaction with her immediate environment, at a level of complexity that she might grasp intuitively. But they are primarily constrained, guided and stochastic paths, rather than outcomes generated by exercising fine motor control.

Finally, to realise the work as it will be experienced by a viewer, Kraus severs the cycles. She opens the looped canvas and removes it from the rollers. She then exposes the stretched representation of her experience of nest-time to an outsider's gaze. Kraus' canvases collapse the vast space of possible images she explores through stochastic processes, and brings them home to nest within tactile experiential boundaries. The intimacy of this act is masked by the scale of her works. Yet, each painting is an intimate expression of the infinite.

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