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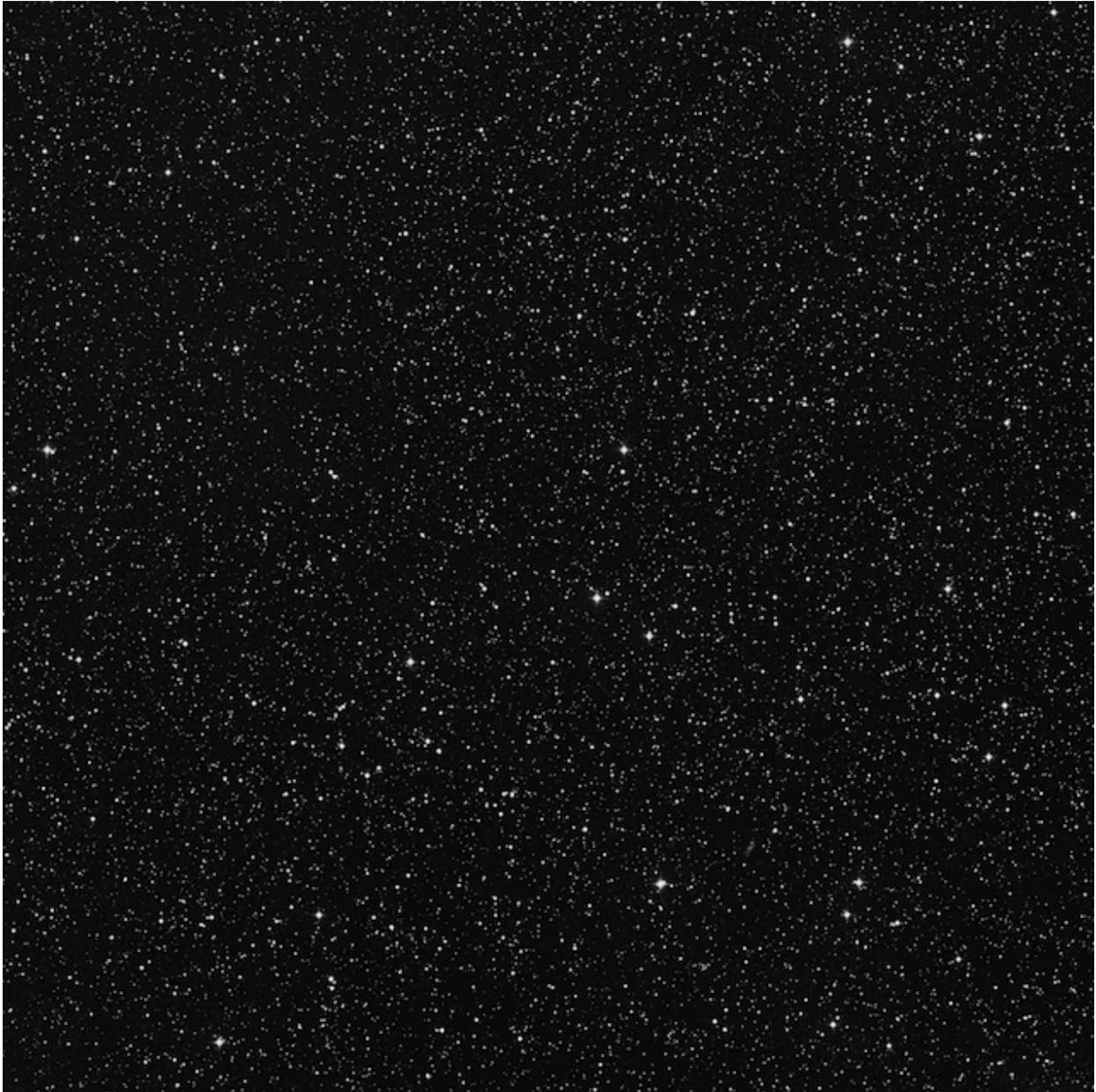
HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

Star Search: Heaven's Map for Getting Lost

• by Albert Mobilio on May 4, 2013

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NGS-POSS Plate O636, taken December 13, 1952 (all images courtesy Apexart)

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"Billions and billions of stars." Carl Sagan's awestruck if indeterminate census of the universe became a comic catchphrase in the wake of his 1980s PBS series *Cosmos*. Johnny Carson would intone the line, exaggerating the astrophysicist's sing-songish repetition of *billions* and we'd laugh. Not because Sagan's estimate was so low (estimates currently put the figure at between 10 sextillion and 1 septillion), but in part because the mere idea of billions of suns and consequent solar systems like our own is a patently impossible notion to comprehend. Contemplating god (as a bearded chap on a throne or some vague organizing "force) is water off a duck compared to the mental rearrangements required by the proposition that everyone alive and who has ever lived amounts to nothing more than a mote of cosmic dust. Now that's hilarious.



Edwin Hubble at Palomar Observatory's 48-in. Oschin Schmidt telescope, c. 1948 (click to enlarge)

In the early 1950s astronomers at the Palomar Observatory in California, including Edward Hubble, embarked on an ambitious project — to create a complete photographic survey of the sky a nine year effort that was funded — given its longstanding interest in cartography — by The National Geographic Society. The original glass plates represented the most advanced photographic technology of the time; they were exposed for long periods in order to capture objects well outside the range of human vision. Prints made from the negative plates (they show the sky as white space and stars as black pinpoints), which are currently on view at [Apexart](#), look nothing like the nighttime sky. Instead, it's the empyrean perhaps as seen on another planet where either the sky is the color of snow or the resident life forms process photons differently.

Writer and filmmaker Greg Allen, who sought out the images, has tightly packed an entire wall of gallery with the plates, assembling them to evoke a sense of vastness. Only a small portion of the more than 900 images that were produced for The Palomar Observatory Sky Survey are on display, but the overall effect is still overwhelming. Billions of stars (surely not septillions) can be only hinted at; peering closely at any one print reveals uncountable black points. Stepping back to take in the entire wall — floor to ceiling — gives the viewer a bracing sense of what facing down even a piece of the universe might be like. A smudge is a galaxy. Each microscopic speck is a sun, one probably larger than ours, its own populous family of planets wheeling around it; whole worlds — mythologies, evolutions, geologies, monarchies, and languages — about which we know nothing more than this atom-like freckle. And, to those beings perusing some sky atlas light years away, vice versa.

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NGS-POSS1 Plate E-161 showing NGC-5792, a spiral galaxy, observed 27 Apr 1957, 00h44 – 01h40

This grandeur of such insignificance is, I suppose, as close as I can get these days to spiritual sentiment. As a child I stared up at the ceiling of my church, a vaulted blue expanse decorated with gold stars, and felt securely situated in an ornately rendered cosmos. God hovered up there over all of us and we knelt below; we had a role in a comprehensible story and were contained within a universe that was geographically legible and soothingly finite. The sky atlas suggests no such arrangement. These photos provide no evidence of hierarchy or narrative; instead there are stars. More than any mind can fully see or imagine; more, I'm sure, than any god might create. The immensity of it all inspires slack-jawed wonderment and my own *less-ness* in its midst is indeed cause for an almost holy kind of laughter.

Greg Allen's [Exhibition Space](#) is view at apexart (291 Church Street, New York, NY) through May 8. The gallery will host a [presentation](#) by artist John Powers this Saturday, May 2, at 2 pm.

291 church st. nyc, ny 10013
p: 212.431.5270 f: 646.827.2487
info@apexart.org; www.apexart.org