

Editors Editorial

01/03

The seventy-two dimensions of the universe are represented in a single vertebrate body: a snake coiled in a continuous circle, biting its own tail. This symbol was etched within *The Enigmatic Book of the Netherworld*, on the second shrine of a young king, Amen-tut-ankh, who, before he ascended, was once called Tutankhaten – the living image of Aten, the sun. The circled snakes (one rings around an etching of the mummified pharaoh's head, the other around the feet) depict a confluence of the gods Ra and Osiris, light and death eternally returning, swallowed and reborn and always encircling night into day.

Some historians say that the ouroboros in Egypt also symbolized the yearly flooding of the Nile, replenishing crops – life and death, rebirth. Maybe our human bodies, in addition to being part of a universe of feedback upon feedback, are also receiving and transmitting signals – sometimes through the use of the unlikeliest information tools. Amidst media, our bodies and cells can lead to endless consuming and potentially self-consuming cycles, but also with the strange possibility of immortal persistence.

As the legend goes, some sixteen centuries later the symbol appeared in the chemist August Kekulé's daydream, based on a murdered neighbor's serpent ring, allowing Kekulé, former architect, now chemist, to identify the chemical compound for one of the more ubiquitous and quietly deadly substances in the centuries to come: benzene. Allegedly, in a delirious state he envisioned a series of snakes chasing and eating their own tails, illustrating how benzene's sequence of carbon atoms each holds its own hydrogen atom, forming a circle of eternal return. This for a substance present in many recurring processes of disruption and extraction – some more accelerated and coerced by humans than others: volcanoes, earthquakes, gasoline, and crude oil.

Computer screens and digital cameras that use LCDs may be comprised of various families of liquid crystal. There are a couple of constants in the composition of these crystals: the molecules within must exhibit mutual attraction. Often, polarizable rod-shaped molecules fit this bill. Oddly, this way of seeing – this portal through which many of us experience and interact, perhaps halfway between the sun and the underworld – is something of a continuation of Kekulé's daydream, of *The Enigmatic Book of the Netherworld*. One common chemical composition of the liquid crystals used in our screens is a pair of benzene rings.

We may live in a time of endless, warring feedback loops, and amidst piles of discarded

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Detail from the tomb treasure of King Tutankhamun, Eighteenth Dynasty, Egyptian Museum, Cairo. Photo licensed under Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International.

digital traces and ghosts of image persistence. Many of the persistent realities are cruel, or are violent photographs – and careful photographs of violence.

In various installations, certain images – whether timid or sudden or endless, or exquisite in their healing or sorrow – have remained present in multiple landscapes in an ongoing cycle of sleep-death-life; present in various forms of address, felt and hovering as in image persistence, but not fully etched as in screen-burn.

The actual phenomenon of snakes eating their own tails is known to be caused by rapid temperature change; stress; false hunger brought on by living in a glass container; from mistaking their own tail for prey during molting or shedding. Because snakes' muscles are designed to trap and guide food into their belly, their mouths have a very hard time letting go, even when the prey is their own body. Once this tail-eating position is assumed, it can be fatal for the snake. So it is usually best for the snake, or perhaps all seventy-two dimensions of the universe, to seek refuge quickly and cool down, submerge, let it go.

The third-century alchemist known as Cleopatra drew and wrote a compact sheet of symbols on the transmutation of gold. Her *Chrysopoeia* [Gold-Making] of Cleopatra features a drawing of an upright serpent with its tail in its mouth, accompanied by an inscription that is often remembered only by a small segment: *hen to pān* (ἓν τὸ πᾶν), “the all is one.” The full inscription, however, reads in two lines: “One is the Serpent which has its poison according to two compositions,” and “One is All and through it is All, and by it is All, and if you have not All, All is Nothing.”

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Cover: Maria Sibylla Merian, *Common or Spectacled Caiman with South American False Coral Snake*, c.1705-10
Watercolor and bodycolor with gum arabic on vellum.

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