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TOPICAL Cream

BLOG



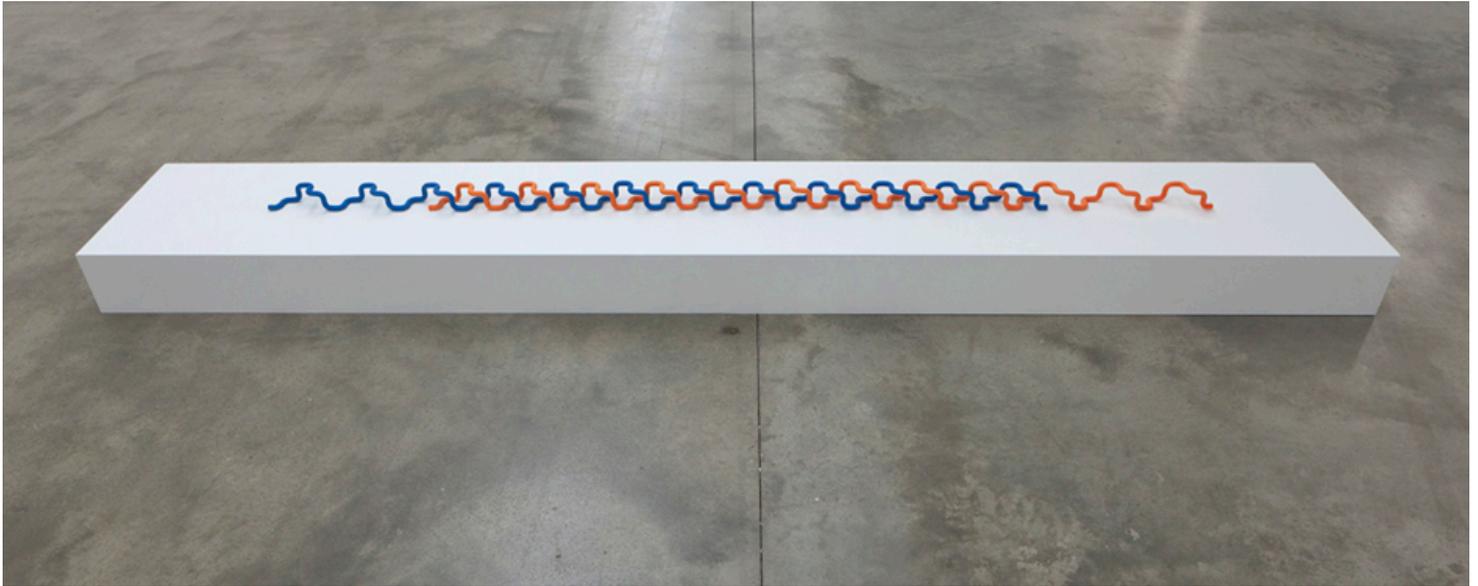
Tauba Auerbach The New Ambidextrous Universe

Words by [David Riley](#)

Polymath visual artist Tauba Auerbach recently mounted her first UK solo exhibition at London's Institute of Contemporary Art titled *The New Ambidextrous Universe*. Tauba took time out of her busy schedule to speak with Topical Cream about space-time, brushing her teeth left-handed, and the launch of her new publishing project, [Diagonal Press](#).

Topical Cream: Congratulations on your first UK solo show! Was there a special reason for this work to debut at the ICA?

Tauba Auerbach: Thanks! Going into it, there wasn't a reason that this particular work needed to be shown in this particular place, but while I was working on it with [ICA curator] Katherine Stout I discovered a really great coincidence. The show was inspired by my reading of Martin Gardner's *The New Ambidextrous Universe*, which deals with symmetry and asymmetry on a variety of levels. It talks about the human body, crystal structures, molecular compounds, quantum particle behavior, the trajectory of time, and the structure of the universe in general. This last one is the one that interests me most: what is the topology of space-time? Is it symmetrical or not? I'm hung up on this question because the more I learn, the more I see topology defining every single thing.



In the book, Gardner introduces a proposal for the shape of space-time by Sir Roger Penrose (the mathematical physicist who is known by many artists because of his Penrose tilings) called *Twistor Theory*. It's beautiful—it's perfectly symmetrical in some ways, and deeply asymmetrical in others.

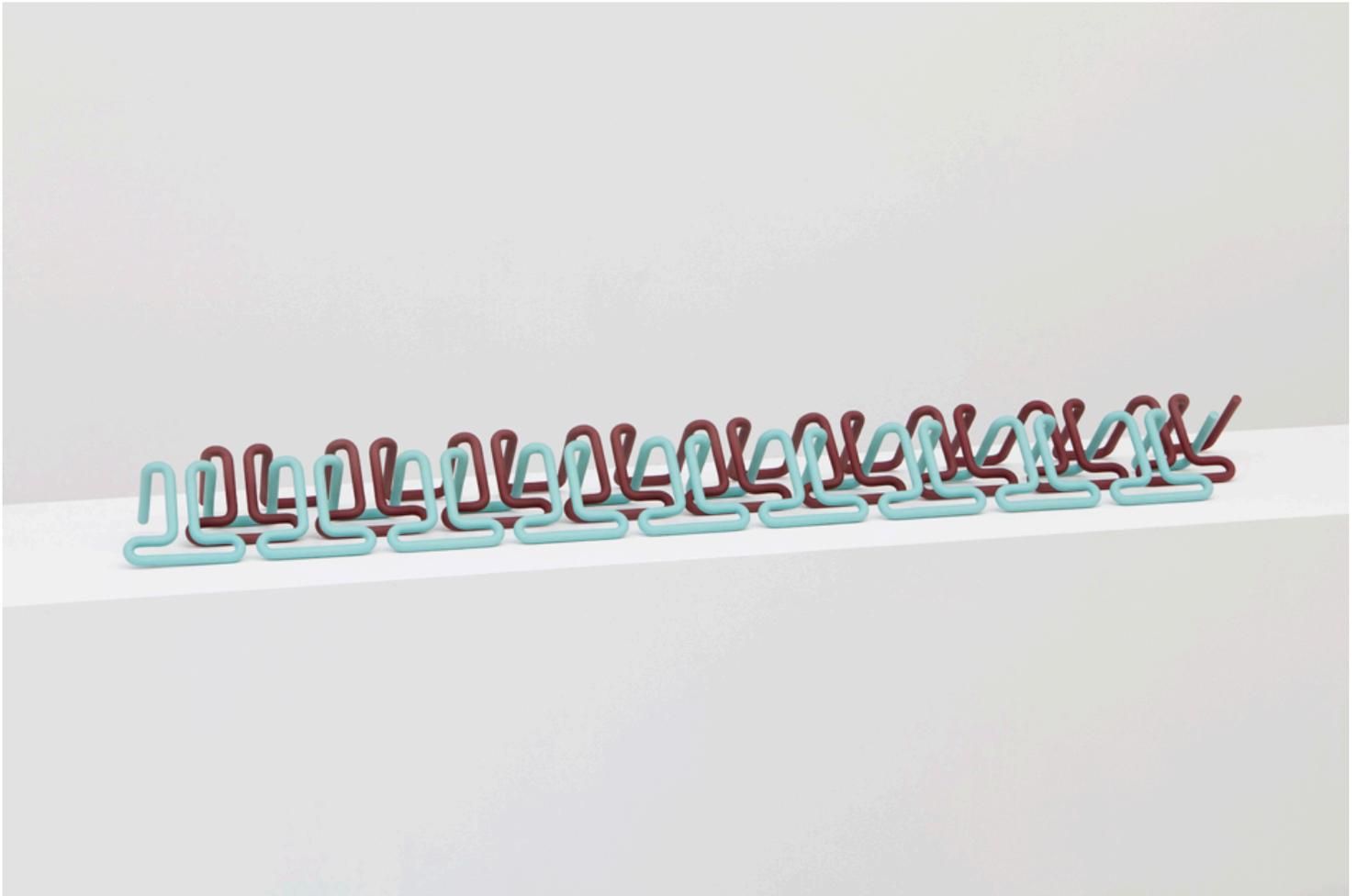
I sat down to write a letter to Penrose, and when I told Katherine about it she quickly informed me that his uncle was in fact one of the founders of the ICA: Sir Roland Penrose, who was married to Lee Miller! I've sent fan mail a few times in the past, but I for some reason chickened out and never sent this letter.

Topical Cream : What about Gardner's book spoke to you?

Tauba Auerbach: Everyone talks about the beauty of symmetry, but this book showed me the profound power of asymmetry.

Topical Cream: Can you give an example?

Tauba Auerbach: Sure! The best one takes a second to explain, but it's worth it. So, if you take a molecule that does not have mirror symmetry, you can build it out of its constituent atoms in two ways that will be exactly the same in all respects except that they will be mirror images of one another. These two versions are referred to as left- and right-handed. When these asymmetric molecular compounds show up in non-living matter, they're made up of 50% left-handed and 50% right-handed molecules. But in living matter, the molecules are almost exclusively of the same handedness. So one of the defining features of life is asymmetry! How incredible is that? When you die, 50% of these molecules slowly reconfigure themselves into the assembly of opposite handedness, bringing your dead tissue into 50/50 balance.



Topical Cream: I love how you translate these lofty mathematical principles into a material like plywood. The steel sculptures have the simplicity of a science museum exhibit, they reminded me of the models for the Double Helix, two intertwining strands of DNA. Are you trying to make complex theories accessible?

Taub Auerbach: The short answer is no. I'm not setting out to learn then convey. I'm not an authority, and I'm much more interested in occupying the space at the fringes of my own understanding. I am trying to use physical objects—along with light—to move around in the collective fringy space of what we as humans can comprehend, especially the outer layer of that which I see as the place where knowledge drops off and something else, something alien and otherworldly, begins. I think objects and images can tap the non-verbal part of the mind and do something to change that perimeter space, not necessarily edging it outward as in “expanding” the mind, but maybe changing the flavor of it.

Topical Cream: You've also been training yourself to use your left hand more. What did you learn from that experience?

Taub Auerbach: My experience has been that my body just wants to reinforce its *asymmetry as time goes on*. And that's part of why I do a lot of little exercises to be more ambidextrous. I brush my teeth with my left hand, use my mouse with my left hand, move the part in my hair from side to side... little things like that. The more I do this, the more I feel how handed the world around me is.

Topical Cream: You are often described as a “polymath” because your practice straddles sculpture, painting, photography, music, design, typography, fashion, book design and more. Do you make any distinctions between these modes? Or are they all part of a holistic approach, DaVinci style?

Taub Auerbach: I don't really make a distinction between these modes or media, and there are still so many things I haven't even tried yet but would like to. The truth is that I'm just a totally compulsive maker. When I get home from the studio I'll often begin on some kind of domestic project like making something to wear. So yes, being called a polymath is extremely flattering, but I don't think I'm master of anything yet in life so I can't imagine being a master of many things. It's interesting that you bring this up though, because I've have been thinking a lot about mastery as a concept recently. I keep asking myself and my friends questions about the value of virtuosity. Some people are brilliant technicians, but boring artists. Some people have brilliant minds, but can't bring their ideas into being in a resonant way. To me, virtuosity seems like the straight path, and I want to move diagonally.



Topical Cream: During your UK trip, you will be publishing a book that corresponds to the ICA show. How does it relate?

Tauba Auerbach: Yeah, I just bound the first copy last night! It's a book called *Z Helix*, and it's basically an abstract catalog for the show. It emerged from one of the sculptures, *Square helix (Z)*, and the manufacturing conventions for coil bindings, which are only available in the Z version of a helix. Helices have either an "S" or "Z" forms, which are mirror images of one another. The book incorporates five helices going the Z direction, two of which are coil bindings threaded through one another like the sculpture. I also just made a thrilling little discovery that the book, when seen from the edge, bares a strong resemblance to a wall at Carlo Scarpa's [Brion-Vega Cemetery](#), which I'm going on a little pilgrimage to see next week. After London I'm traveling around Italy to see several of his buildings.

Topical Cream: Last year you started a publishing project, [Diagonal Press](#). You said it was a way for you to deal with your cynicism about the art world. What do you feel most cynical about?

The profession of being an artist feels so fraught. When I was younger all I wanted was to make my life work—to be able to do what I loved and afford to live on it. I'm incredibly lucky that I get to do that, but now that I'm here I'm faced with a whole new set of problems, and have found some things (and some people) very disappointing. Some of the values of this business clash with my personal beliefs about distribution of wealth and the marriage of wealth and power. I'm horrified that the Supreme Court of 2014 says money equals speech. Seriously, fuck that. If simply trying to succeed is the straight path, that no longer feels right to me, but neither does the lateral path. I don't want to evade or avoid, nor do I want to back away, though sometimes that's tempting. Diagonal Press is an experiment for me as I'm searching for a way to deal with all of this and my place within it. The diagonal path might be **a hybrid** between the straight path and the lateral one, or it might be the path that comes right off the plane the **z axis** in a three-dimensional drawing on a flat piece of paper.

Topical Cream: Diagonal circumvents the usual art book protocols by having an open edition, no numbering or signing. What is the reason behind that?

Tauba Auerbach: Yeah, The structure of the press is such that all the publications are in open editions and nothing is signed or numbered. This means that if you purchase something from Diagonal you don't stand to gain anything monetarily by doing so. There is no secondary market. The only reason to buy one of the publications is a genuine and straightforward interest in the thing itself.

Topical Cream: What will the press be publishing?



Tauba Auerbach: So far the press is just an outlet for ideas I've had built up. I've always made zines and artists books of various types, and this is a way for me to formalize that publishing practice. I recently joined the board of [Printed Matter](#), and that has only reinforced my commitment to artist books. There is a series of books called *Saccades*, which is the type of jerky eye movement when your focus jumps from visual target to target. The books are made out of pairs of images, one on each cover, and a series of 50 pages in between which are frames from a video transition between the two images. So far there are three of these books. There are 14 type specimen posters of fonts I've designed in the last eight years, some pins that make use of some of the fonts' line treatments, and the *Z Helix* book I described earlier which relates to this ICA show. I'm doing all the binding and assembly in my studio, using things like desktop thermal binding or coil binding machines, having custom rubber stamps made and hand stamping the covers. It's just the beginning of the project, and I'm still figuring it out.

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