

## Making Sense of What We Can't See: A Visual Retrospective of COVID-19

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Article abstract

How do we make sense of the global and granular at the same time? This visual essay explores the relationship of the macro and micro through everyday practices of image making, cropping, and sharing. It asks whether new ways of knowing emerge or if perhaps patterns of sensemaking pre-exist, a psychological or social equivalent to fractals in nature. This becomes relevant when we consider that it is precisely within the mundane details of everyday actions of sensemaking that future structures are born. In wonders about how, in times of global trauma, might these micro practices reinforce or resist existing relations among humans, technologies, and the planet.

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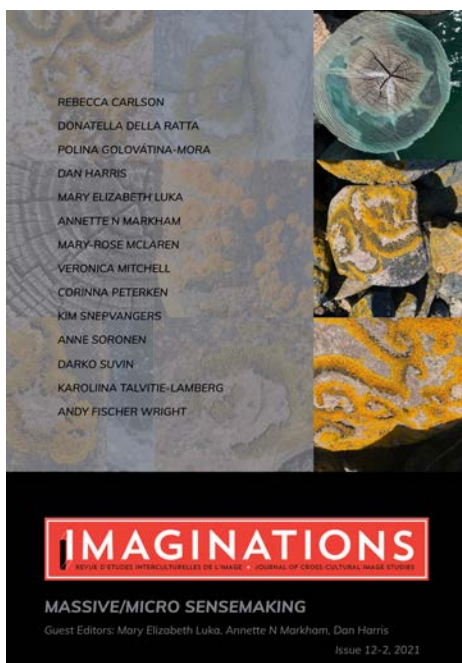
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Image credit: Annette N Markham

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## MAKING SENSE OF WHAT WE CAN'T SEE: A VISUAL RETROSPECTIVE OF COVID-19

ANNETTE N MARKHAM

*How do we make sense of the global and granular at the same time? This visual essay explores the relationship of the macro and micro through everyday practices of image making, cropping, and sharing. It asks whether new ways of knowing emerge or if perhaps patterns of sensemaking pre-exist, a psychological or social equivalent to fractals in nature. This becomes relevant when we consider that it is precisely within the mundane details of everyday actions of sensemaking that future structures are born. It wonders about how, in times of global trauma, might these micro practices reinforce or resist existing relations among humans, technologies, and the planet.*

*Comment donner un sens à ce qui est à la fois global et granulaire ? Cet essai visuel explore la relation entre le macro et le micro à travers les pratiques quotidiennes de création, de recadrage et de partage d'images. Il pose la question de savoir si de nouveaux modes de connaissance émergent ou si des modèles de création de sens préexistent, un équivalent psychologique ou social des formes fractales dans la nature. Cela est particulièrement pertinent si l'on considère que c'est précisément dans les détails banals et les actions quotidiennes de création de sens que naissent les structures d'interprétation futures. Alors que l'on traverse une période traumatique à l'échelle du globe, l'essai s'interroge sur la façon dont ces micro-pratiques pourraient contribuer à renforcer ou à résister aux relations existantes entre les humains, les technologies et la planète.*



Figure 1: Balancing in the wind. Photograph by Annette Markham. Used by permission.

How does a massive and incomprehensible global crisis like a pandemic connect to the microscopic moment of lived experience of COVID-sponsored isolation? In this visual essay, I explore a core premise behind my design of “MMS,” the large scale project “Massive and Microscopic Sensemaking in Times of Global Trauma” (2020).

Beginning in March 2020, I spent 113 days in near isolation from other humans, walking obsessively on the cold and windy shores of the northern Danish coastline. In temporary housing and a country I couldn’t call my own, I explored the natural landscape through image making, in equal measure with doomscrolling the news on my smartphone.

It felt chaotic, as if I was slipping on constantly shifting terrain. Yet the visual evidence I find now in my journals and camera defy my own memory, building a soothing symmetry of retrospective sensemaking about this situation. What’s happening at these everyday microscopic levels, where the human, the planet, the technology of the lens, and memory practices meet?

My body (as it made its way through storms and seasonal changes) intersected with fractal patterns in nature (as witnessed through my phone), along with overlapping swirls of information (as experienced in my constant searching and consumption of more, more, and more news about COVID), and ebbs and flows of friends (presented in various timezones through social media).



Figure 2: Wandering. Photograph by Annette Markham. Used with permission.

In these days, I found myself image cropping more than anything else, which I attribute to the desire to explore depths of field my own eyes could not see, even behind glasses. My camera is a phone. And like a fighter pilot's airframe, I trust it as an extension of my body. There is a type of blindness in the perception of seeing through a camera because one is unable to do otherwise in screaming winds and driving rain.

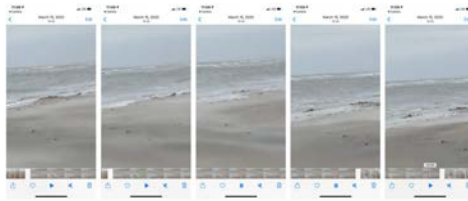


Figure 3: Walking in the wind. Screenshots of camera video. Image by Annette Markham. Used with permission.

Through posting (on Instagram, or Facebook), I recognize an impulse to convey a particular sensation, share the affect of a moment. This effort is a creation of my own sense, more than simply an “extension of the senses” in the way McLuhan describes our relationship with a technological medium.

Zooming in and out and cropping a moment for others becomes a rhythmic performance to extend my understanding of my Self. By ‘extend,’ here I mean that it deepens and complexifies my sensibilities, as much as ‘augments’ my physical ability to see.



Figure 4: Even glasses don't help. Screenshot of Instagram post. Photo and screenshot by Annette Markham. Used with permission.

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Figure 5: Wind carved microscopic sand cliff. Photo by Annette Markham. Used with permission.

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Figure 6: The process of making a post. Photo collage by Annette Markham. Used with permission.

This effort (exercise) to understand what I thought I was trying to capture is not a solo act, but a performance with others, actual or imagined, the success of which relies on the responsiveness of others. Meaning requires reverberation in the network.

While I sought to generate a disturbance in the exosystem, the images themselves seem to present only a certain stillness. It is only in the critical juncture of Self and Other(s), in interaction, that this disturbance occurs. Then, a reverberation of echoing signals returns to me a sense of my senses. Through retrospective sensemaking I discover, as an aftereffect, some of the things I could not see or know in the lived moment.



Figure 7: Reaching out to the universe. Screenshot of Instagram post. Photo by Annette Markham. Used with permission.



Repeated patterns and textures bespeak an apparent calm of soothing colors and syncopated rhythms. Amid the lived experience of chaos and anxiety, perhaps this is a serendipitous levelling of affect, as if to produce deliberately a counter-punctum to the nauseating spin of daily news from around the planet. There is both a recognition and a forgetting, especially as time and the encounter of Self/ Other has passed.



Figure 8: Pattern Recognition Type I. Photo by Annette Markham. Used with permission.

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Figure 9: Pattern Recognition Type II. Photo by Annette Markham. Used with permission.

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Fractals are recognized by their patterned features. They are the product of recursion, and present as rhythmic, because they repeat at different scales, as well as across different dynamic systems.



Figure 10: Pattern Recognition Type III. Screenshot of iCloud photo album on laptop.  
Photo by Annette Markham. Used with permission.

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Figure 11: Fractals in Nature.  
Photo by Annette Markham. Used with permission.

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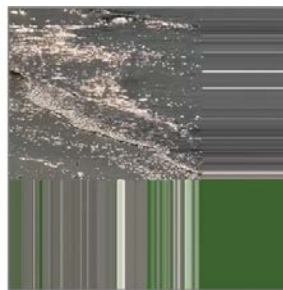


Figure 12: Fractals in Tech. Screenshot of photo editing glitch on iPhone. Screenshot by Annette Markham. Used with permission.

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Akin to rhythm, reverberation has become a fruitful tool for conceptualizing relationality and connectivity. Taking seriously the eco-

logical metaphors used by scholars in the 20<sup>th</sup> century to depict the complexity of self and sociality (e.g., Bateson), or life lived in and through media (e.g., McLuhan), terms like resonance, rhythm, and reverberation foreground certain elements of the immediate media ecology within which we are making sense of the world around us. The emerging reverberations carry their own chronology, difficult for me to see until well after the fact.

Reverberation pays attention to the echoing qualities of the senses. Even in the seemingly original turn of the camera's gaze toward something that caught the eye, this experiential moment is not 'raw,' but a continuation of a relation. Perhaps the patterns are always already there.

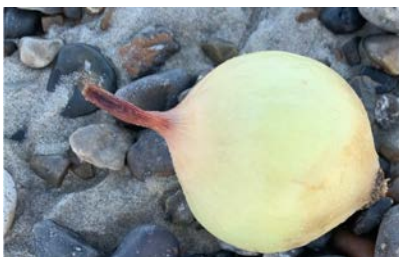


Figure 13: Partial Fractal A: Onion. Photo by Annette Markham. Used with permission.

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Figure 14: Partial Fractal B: Tennis Ball. Photo by Annette Markham. Used with permission.

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Figure 15: Partial Fractal C: Jellyfish. Photo by Annette Markham. Used with permission.

Fractals are scale irrelevant, which means we can see patterns at the micro- or macroscopic level. But they are never singular; fractals are only noticed or understood in and as a relation. Whether we use Mandelbrot's classic notion of fractals or Latour's 2012 revival of the concept of the monads, the part is always greater than the whole. Or, as William Blake's now common idiom reminds us, we can "see the world in a grain of sand."

The massive is thus always reflected in the microscopic. The only question is how we might interpret this, and which microscopic elements we are paying attention to any given time. To understand the lived experience of a pandemic, therefore, is not about generalizing but specifying, within the details of a lived moment. To extrapolate.



Figure 16: Partial Fractal D: Trees and Lichen. Screenshot of Instagram post and photos by Annette Markham. Used with permission.

Fractals have rhythmic properties, or perhaps vice versa. For months of isolation during these early days of a global pandemic, I felt the world's rhythms by virtue of the massive interruption in the flow. At the same time, I felt the flow of information as a matter of breathing. As Lefebvre noted, "In suffering, in confusion, a particular rhythm surges up and imposes itself: palpitation, breathlessness, pains in the place of satiety" (2004, 21). There's a moment, between the in breath and the out breath, when everything just stops. A suspension of time, an endless waiting to breathe again.



Figure 17: The tide breathes deep. Sighs a little. Screenshot of Instagram post and photos by Annette Markham. Used with permission.



Figure 18: Precarity. Erosion. On the edge. Screenshot of Instagram post and photos by Annette Markham. Used with permission.

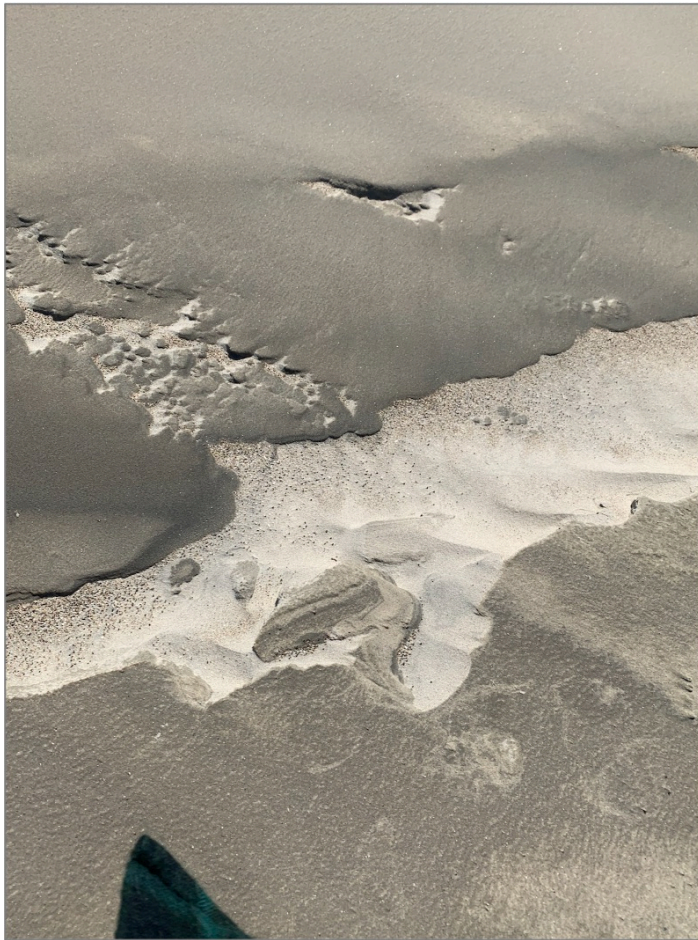


Figure 19: Disorientation. Photo by Annette Markham. Used by permission.

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*“The dizziness of not knowing. I cannot orient myself.  
My body knows the world is precarious; its equilibrium  
is gone.”*

*—Journal entry March 21, 2020.*



I can't help but identify patterns that already exist. I might initially notice an anomaly, and once this difference is picked up (sometimes literally as I'm walking along), all subsequent noticings are about finding similar data points. One might ask if the pandemic only highlighted patterns that were already there, or if the world, and all of us grains of sand, swiftly found patterns in how to make sense of the situation. The collective gasp catching in the throat; a global moment that returns to a rhythmic sense of being in the world.

(Parenthetically, if not conclusively, one might as well be describing Instagram's *relevance algorithm*, since it is designed to generate these patterns, presenting more of the same, over and over, until one simply believes the pattern was always already there).

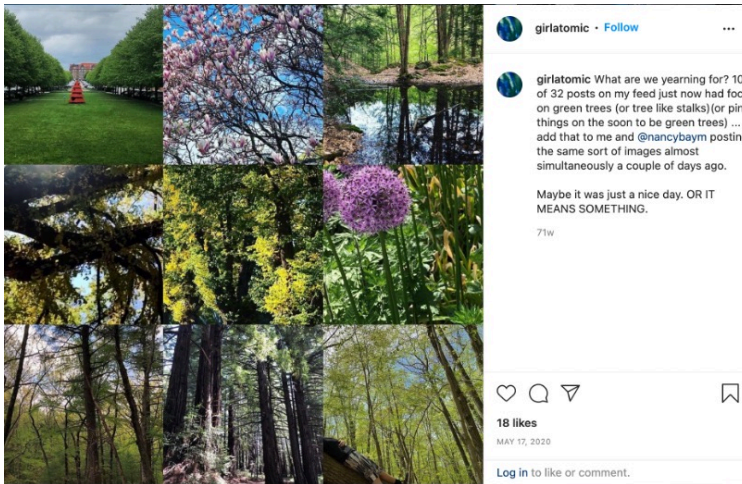


Figure 20: Pattern Recognition Type V. Across the Networks. Screenshot of Instagram post by Annette Markham. Used by permission.

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### IMAGE NOTES

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