



Orbs, Blobs, and Glows: Astronauts, UFOs, and Photography
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National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA). *Pillars of Creation in a Star-Forming Region (Gas Pillars in M16—Eagle Nebula)*, detail, April 1, 1995. Image STScI-1995-44 from the Hubble Space Telescope Wide Field and Planetary Camera 2. Courtesy of Jeff Hester and Paul Scowen (Arizona State University), NASA, and STScI.

Some viewers report seeing an image of Jesus in this pillar of cool interstellar hydrogen gas and dust that is an incubator for new stars. The formation, in the constellation Serpens, is roughly seven thousand light-years distant from the earth.

Neil Armstrong saw UFOs: two pale orbs haloed in a cobalt glow hovering in a pitch-black void. Or so countless websites report in copy-and-paste narratives replete with audio, tiny fuzzy color images, and corroborations by ex-NASA employees, doctors, and even one of Neil's friends. In photographs of UFOs taken by astronauts, two divergent worlds come into the same orbit: science and the paranormal. Astronomers and ufologists both gaze into outer space, but with very different desires. The claim that our national hero Armstrong saw a UFO is either the most alluring evidence of alien intelligence out there or the most absurd. Other pixelated images purportedly taken by Armstrong show a ball of light over a spaceship on the lunar surface and a seahorse-shaped blob high above earth. There they are: July 1969, alone on a cold gray ball 238,000 miles from our planet, out of range of any cameras except the ones they hold, highly trained and imbued with impeccable authority, and invested with all the dreams and aspirations of an entire nation.

Unnamed radio hams picked up the following exchange just as the astronauts landed in the Sea of Tranquility:

NASA: What's there? Mission Control calling Apollo 11 . . .

Apollo 11: These "Babies" are huge, Sir! Enormous! OH MY GOD! You wouldn't believe it! I'm telling you there are other spacecraft out there, lined up on the far side of the crater edge! They're on the Moon watching us!

In a very un-Fox Mulder-like panic, Armstrong stammers out this description, but we have no real details. Though he has been photographing madly through the entire voyage, Armstrong didn't have the presence of mind to shoot at that moment. The photographs circulating among the UFO sites online were taken at other moments during the voyage. Instead of describing anything as clear as spaceships, they feature formless blobs, hazy glows, and cigar-shaped objects.²

Four years earlier, in 1965, Gemini 7 astronauts Frank Borman and James A. Lovell photographed similar orbs floating outside their Titan booster rocket. NASA's website dispassionately describes a moment early in the mission: "The booster was still in sight, its lights flashing and billions of particles around it. Borman and Lovell saw some unidentifiable objects in orbit five to six kilometers away. About 7:00 p.m., they turned from sightseeing to housekeeping, and at 9:30 they ate their first meal in space."³ These are the same veteran astronauts who, on their historic 1968 Apollo 8 flight (the first escape from earth's gravity), took the iconic image of the earth rising over the moon, *Earthrise*. In fact many of the Gemini and Apollo missions were oriented around communication technologies. On the Apollo 8 journey, the prime mission was to take images to map the lunar surface, both the dark side that no one had ever seen and the near side, for potential landing sites. At the same time, they photographed incessantly, documenting every minor aspect of the flight.

In the late 1960s, not only did men leave the earth's atmosphere in a spacecraft, float around in space outside their vehicles, and land on the moon, they also saw multiple UFOs both on the moon and in the earth's orbit. Simultaneously, photography extended its reach dramatically: cameras were brought up

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1. You can read and even listen to this transcript or hear an audio recording at many different websites, such as: <http://www.anomalous-images.com/astrooufo.html>.

2. Jacques Vallee's 1966 UFO classification system includes the cigar-shaped object as one of the primary UFO shapes. Vallee is the renowned UFO authority featured in Steven Spielberg's film *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*.

3. Barton C. Hacker and James M. Grimwood, *On the Shoulders of Titans: A History of Project Gemini*, NASA Special Publication-4203 (NASA History Series, 1977), avail. online at <http://www.hq.nasa.gov/office/pao/History/SP-4203/toc.htm>.





“Frank Borman.”
Image of two balls of light, purportedly photographed by astronaut Borman on the Gemini 7 flight, December 1965. Anomalous-images.com.



“Neil Armstrong.”
Image of UFO, purportedly photographed by astronaut Armstrong on the Apollo 11 flight, July 21, 1969. Anomalous-images.com.

4. Nicholas M. Short, *Remote Sensing and Image Interpretation & Analysis*, ed. Jon W. Robinson (NASA Goddard Space Flight Center, 1997), an online tutorial at http://mercator.upc.es/tutorial/nicktutor_12-1.html.

5. Laura M. André, “Lunar Nation: The Moon and American Visual Culture, 1957–1972” (Diss., University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2002), 8, 32.

6. Louis Kaplan, *The Damned Universe of Charles Fort* (New York: Autonomedia, 1993), 57.

into space to photograph Earth, to perform science experiments, and to capture otherworldly entities. Significantly, these images are notable for being taken by ordinary cameras in astronauts’ hands. Earlier technologies had hoisted cameras out into space. In 1960 the Tiros InfraRed Observational Satellite, the first weather satellite, beamed the first image of Earth taken with a television camera. But the images shot by Gemini and Apollo astronauts and carried back to Earth were the most widely released space images ever. Though many of the images are not particularly different from earlier images, the presence of the astronauts’ bodies is what makes the images important.⁴ These are not sterile photographs of technology imaging itself. Instead, human subjectivity, our wondering minds, authored the images. On Earth, these images, with their snapshot aesthetic, seem familiar and part of our world.

At the same time, the Gemini and Apollo space flights of the late 1960s and early 1970s assuaged our national fears about what is out there. Stories and images from popular culture speculated about mindless monsters determined to annihilate the human race, about germs and bacteria threatening to engulf our ecology, and other terrifying narratives. NASA delivered to the nation comfortable images of astronauts walking around on the moon and in space, photographing each other, and leaving the United States flag and other objects on the surface of the moon. They made the moon and, by extension, outer space seem familiar and touched by our presence. We could now imagine ourselves in outer space literally and bodily. For some, outer space had always been a world of possibility, a “gigantic, sublime container”⁵ into which we could endlessly project our deepest desires and most utopian visions. Instead of anxiety, they saw hope and possibility in alien landscapes. NASA’s images taken on the moon offer a rich terrain of possibility that extends our stargazing from our backyards to a dizzying vantage point in outer space.

The astronauts’ UFO images are, of course, outside the NASA pantheon of mythic images of space. As the early-twentieth-century paranormal researcher Charles Fort said, “The science of astronomy concerns itself with only one aspect of existence, because of course there can be no science of the obverse phenomena.”⁶ The astronauts’ UFO photographs are caught in a cyber netherworld, endlessly circling paranormal and debunking sites, accompanied by claims of authenticity or contemptuous dismissals. They are often described as photographic errors: reflections on the inside of the capsule window or against the camera lens, floating debris, etc. The word error once meant a wandering or roving course. It is in this sense that the images are errors; they reveal a hunger for the other, for a world inhabited by more than clear science, a rich cosmos of possibility that exists just on the periphery of our ordinary lives.

Carl Jung proposed that aliens were a hybrid of the religious beliefs of the collective unconscious going back to early man and the technological drive of our late-modern consciousness. Caught between a theistic and a capitalist world view, UFOs resist the standard order. They resist description, interpretation, and even belief. Surfing through the 258 UFO sightings from January 2003 in the National UFO Reporting Center’s online database, I found that many eyewitnesses contextualize their experience with comments like “I’ve never believed in UFOs,” or “This is my first sighting.” These comments seek to place the encounter in a realm without conscious intention or framework. The language

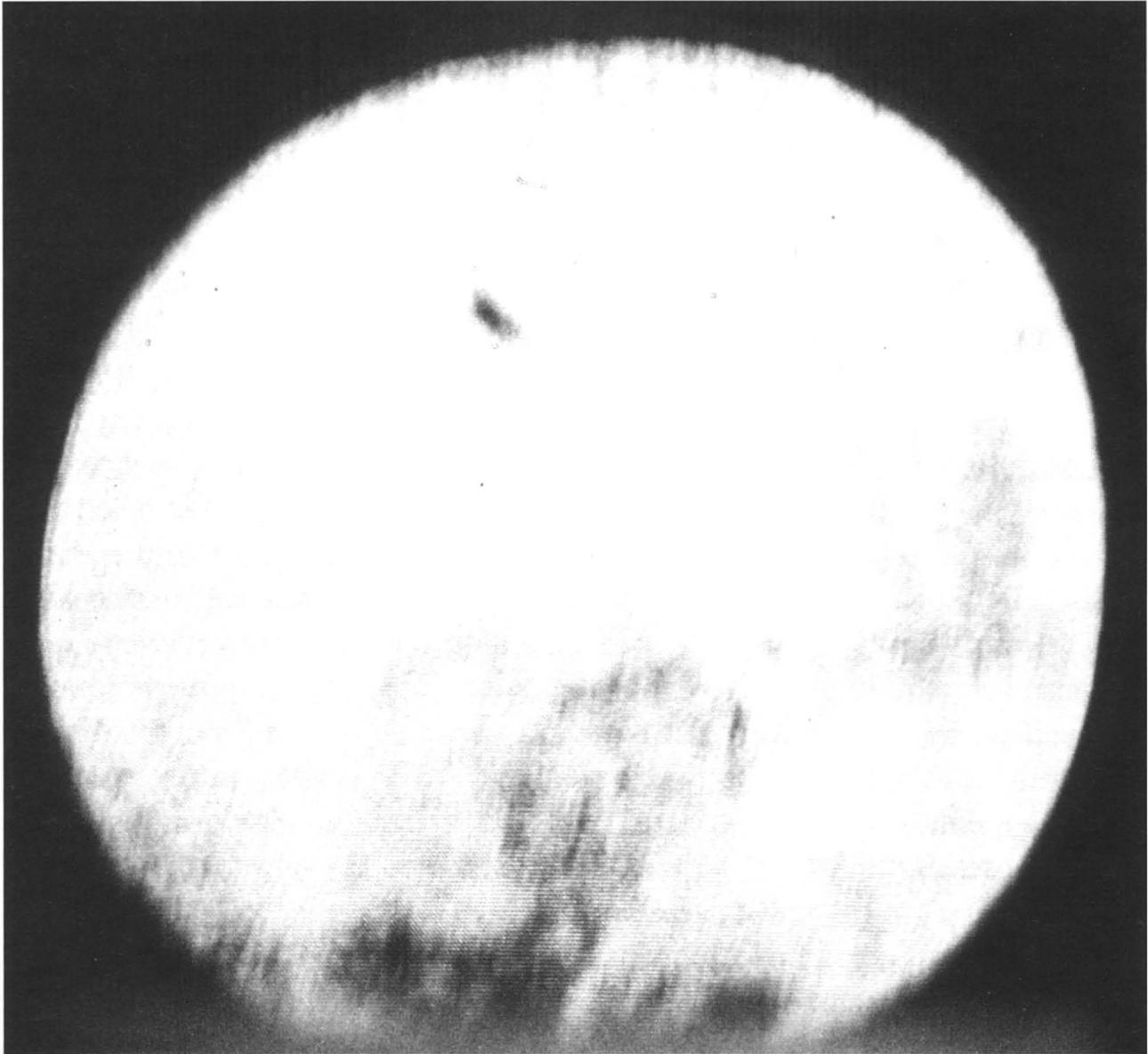
is one of seeing properly so as to remove the stigma of kookiness. The actual descriptions of objects or lights are usually vague and rambling, peppered with scientific terminology familiar to us from television shows like *The Twilight Zone* or *The X-Files*.⁷ Almost always the reports cite the viewer's activity and location: "I was taking my daughter home when . . ." "I was walking my dogs when . . ." They anchor their otherworldly experiences with the stabilizing influence of the everyday. Similarly, the UFO photograph seeks to place the otherworldly into our world by means of the treeline or the curve of the earth over which the saucer flies. The hazy, indistinct forms of alien spacecraft are completely vague, as if the actual form of the alien is unseeable. But the ordinary world that they infiltrate is an indispensable framework for belief.

Every new medium opens up a new outside, a phantasmagorical realm. When we leap to a new mode of perception where our physiological limits and familiarities are breached, an unknown is equally created. As technology brings us forward to new capabilities, the potential of perfection ushers in a febrile world of excessive, out-of-control technologies. The leakage of the paranormal into the "normal" world of science begins with the first tools to extend our physical selves and radiates through culture using the sheer uncanniness of emerging technologies. Jeffrey Sconce's book *Haunted Media: Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television* describes how, over a five-year period in the 1840s, America saw the introduction of both spiritual and electromagnetic telegraphs. Morse's telegraph and the conversations through rappings and knockings between the Fox sisters and various spirits were not isolated, unconnected discoveries. In fact, spiritualists went on to elaborate the connections between the telegraph and spiritualist phenomena in an effort to legitimize their supernatural experiences. Photography was not far behind in its conscription into the arsenal of spiritualist methodologies.

The first UFO photograph was taken on the twelfth of August, 1883, by Mexican astronomer Jose Bonilla at Zacatecas Observatory. Over that day and the next, he took a series of photographs through his telescope showing formations of hundreds of fuzzy round objects crossing the face of the sun. His report describes his reaction: "I had not recovered my surprise when the same phenomenon was repeated! And that with such frequency that in the space of two hours, I counted up to 283 bodies crossing the solar disc. Little by little, however, clouds hindered the observation. I could not resume the observation until the sun had crossed the meridian, and then only for 40 minutes."⁸ With the very long exposure times that photography required, it was difficult to capture a UFO on film, especially since the experience is usually fleeting and UFOs often move fantastically quickly. The resulting images show a huge, blurry, white sun dotted with small, indistinct black discs.

But it is the 1947 newspaper reports of pilot Kenneth Arnold's sighting of a flying saucer that inaugurated the modern era of UFOs. Arnold saw nine metallic objects flying near Mount Rainier "like saucers skipped over water." The burgeoning growth of the communications industry during the 1940s made images and stories of sightings widely accessible to the public in a way that earlier sightings had not been. It was the press that translated Arnold's description into "saucer-shaped objects," and thus the image of flying saucers was born.⁹ Only a few weeks later, the most infamous UFO incident occurred in Roswell, New

7. P. A. Sturrock et al., "Physical Evidence Related to UFO Reports," *Journal of Scientific Exploration* 12, no. 2 (1998): 179, avail. online at http://www.scientificexploration.org/jse/articles/ufo_reports/sturrock/toc.html. See particularly Appendix 2, F. Louange, "Procedures for Analysis of Photographic Evidence."
8. The Wilbert B. Smith Web Page. <http://www.geocities.com/Area51/Nebula/5924>.
9. Brenda Denzler, *The Lure of the Edge: Scientific Passions, Religious Beliefs, and the Pursuit of UFOs* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 6.



Jose Bonilla. First photograph of a UFO, August 12, 1883. The Mexican astronomer photographed a series of such images through a telescope at Zacatecas Observatory.

Mexico, when an Air Force press release claimed to have recovered a crashed flying saucer on a ranch. Images of alien autopsies, scientific analyses of metal fragments, and claims of government cover-ups came to define the aura of earnest scientific investigation and paranoid research that followed. In fact, the modern culture of ufology is as much about the government and scientific institutions as it is about the otherworldly. Paranoia, conspiracy theories, unreliable sources, and government cover-up have overwhelmed the UFO phenomena so that it is hard to see through the smokescreen to what else is happening. As Charles Fort said, "The history of science is a record of the transformation of contempts and amusements."¹⁰ Astronauts' photographs of UFOs prick the discrete facade of astronautics. They allow us to see what is other, what is outside our rational order, through the lens of authority.

In the late 1960s, the extension of our physical reach and vision through the NASA space program opened up new worlds—literally. Human imagination, already endlessly speculative about all that is just outside our reach, seized upon this assortment of images, sounds, objects, men, and data and ran with it. Throughout the ensuing decades, a surprisingly large segment of the American population saw UFOs in comets, over backyards, in images of the sun's corona, and pretty much everywhere else. A 2002 Roper poll found that 56 percent of the American public thinks that UFOs are real, while 48 percent believes that UFOs have visited Earth in some form.¹¹ And these percentages are rising. Periodically administered Gallup polls show a significant increase in belief in many forms of the paranormal, with a decline only in belief in demonic possession.¹²

In our time, bewildering leaps in science and wildly improbable technological inventions feed a hunger for anything and everything beyond daily routines. In 1995 CNN reported that hundreds of viewers called in to say they were seeing Jesus in a Hubble Space Telescope image of the Eagle Nebula (M16) that shows stars forming inside a six-trillion-mile-long plume of gas seven thousand light years from Earth. This is the single most iconic Hubble image, the one that we think of when anyone refers to the Hubble. Its candy colors and ethereal columns are eerie and transcendent. It is both mysterious and organic, a lot like some of the outer-space scenes in Stanley Kubrick's film 2001. Above all, it is completely unfamiliar. Unlike the astronauts' images of UFOs, which are filled with earthly referents and are comfortingly taken by flesh-and-bone men, the Hubble images are beyond our ken. Only in an unimaginable future would we ever travel to the Eagle Nebula; this gaseous cloud is not a form, like our Earth, that we can relate to. In the absence of the familiar, we make things up. Even NASA's Hubble press release begins with a litany of familiar images: "Undersea coral? Enchanted castles? Space serpents?"¹³

Psychological research offers a scientific term for our desire to see something in nothing, to harness reality for our fantasies. "Pareidolia" is a type of illusion or misperception involving the capacity of people to see, with blind certainty, patterns in unstructured data. Examples of pareidolia range from the paranormal, like the image of Jesus in the Hubble Eagle Nebula or visions of Mary in a foggy window, to vernacular and mythical constructions such as nephelococcygia, the science of looking at clouds and seeing shapes. Fourteen men and women, nine birds, two insects, nineteen land animals, ten water creatures, two centaurs, one head of hair, a serpent, a dragon, a flying horse, a river and twenty-nine inanimate objects are represented in the night sky. One of the great lovers of uncertainty, philosopher David Hume, noted that it may be impossible for us to really know anything in the world around us, since what we experience is filtered through our notoriously unreliable senses. We all know this from the various optical-illusion experiments we played as kids (is it a bunny or an old lady?)—but we always forget. Perception is an active process. We take spotty data and follow our desires through a chain of analogy to our end goal, along the way overlooking, shoving aside, or simply forgetting information and conclusions.¹⁴

Seeing is one of the most suspect of our perceptual apparatuses. Studies of the saccadic movements of the human eye demonstrate that our eyes don't see a unified field, but instead leap frenetically from detail to detail in order to

10. Kaplan, 104.

11. The Roper Poll, "UFOs & Extraterrestrial Life, Americans' Beliefs and Personal Experiences" (The Sci Fi Channel, 2002). Avail. online at <http://www.scifi.com/ufo/roper/05.html>.

12. Eamon M. Kelly et al., "Science and Technology: Public Attitudes and Public Understanding/Science Fiction and Pseudoscience," in *Science and Engineering Indicators 2002* (National Science Board, 2002). Avail. online at <http://www.nsf.gov/sbe/srs/seind02/c7/c7s5.htm#top>.

13. NASA/Space Telescope Science Institute's Office of Public Outreach, "Pillars of Creation in a Star-Forming Region (Gas Pillars in M16—Eagle Nebula)," press release, 1995, avail. online at <http://hubblesite.org/newscenter/archive/1995/44/image/a>.

14. Steve Dewey and John Ries, "Seeing Things," chapter 6 of *Deconstructing Warminster*, 1998–2002 draft manuscript, avail. online at http://www.stevedewey.pwp.blueyonder.co.uk/ufo/psych_u.htm.

construct a whole. The processing of the perceptual data of the image depends to a great extent on the viewer's intentions. Further, the saccades—the jumps the eye makes—are stored and perhaps used later for data recall.¹⁵ So seeing is believing or, rather, seeing is constructed belief. It's a slippery slope. On the one hand, our seeing is incomplete, and, on the other, our brains pick and choose from what data they do finally receive. Seeing triggers a reaction in the cerebral cortex, allowing us to recognize and process the visual field—at the same time, the rhizomelike structure of the brain means that many other chemical reactions cascade through the brain as a result of this first seeing, leaving us with countless impressions unprocessed, disordered, unknown. Looking itself precedes by nanoseconds the convoluted analogic mazes our minds construct. In the midst of all this confusion, it's a miracle that we ever had a modernist illusion or that we hope for a world tidily organized by the universal, teleological, and objective. Similarly, anxieties over our fragmented, localized, subjective postmodern condition seem silly, since we are finding more and more that this has always been the basis of our human condition.

Everything around us is powered by, made of, and sustained by the invisible—atoms, dust, cells, microbes, molecules, genes. Even the most ordinary things are mysterious. There are almost a thousand motes of dust in every cubic inch of air. When I shut my eyes and look at the darkness, even nothing becomes something: a star field, a fractal simulation, an indistinct halo. The fact of the real is another world from the figment of our imaginations. Analogy groups the discordant and disordered into relationships forged not on harmony, hierarchy, or order, but instead on the chance connections of experience, imagination, and presence.¹⁶ Analogy satisfies our desire to place ourselves within the world—we link the known with the unknown to create an order that is dynamic and self-reflecting. The people who saw Jesus in the Hubble image of the Eagle Nebula made a huge visual leap. They took one small portion of the tip of one of the gaseous columns, turned it on its side, and found an image of Jesus with long, flowing hair that seems to point right at us. Never mind the fact that the light coming from the Eagle Nebula is seven thousand years old, about five thousand years older than Jesus. Their faith drove them to see the divine in a photograph of the unreachably remote.

Vision has long been associated with reason, cognition, and empiricism. Yet its metaphors also invoke the opposite; we have visions, experiences in which we see as if with the eyes of an otherworldly being. In ganzfeld experiments, subjects place two halves of an ordinary ping-pong ball over their eyes, erasing any visual stimulation. They also listen to white noise on earphones. Lacking visual clues to maintain normal habits of vision and cognition, subjects project their own phantasms onto the homogenous visual field. This procedure is often used to test for telepathic communication between a sender and a receiver. Pilots may experience sensory confusion when they are caught in a cloudbank for long periods of time. I once went to a commercial photographer's studio where he had created a room in which the corners of the walls, floor, and ceiling were rounded off and everything painted a flat white. When I stepped into the space, I had no sense of the room's size. I began to feel as if I were floating, as if gravity had given up on me. I forgot about ordinary things like walking and stared into the white void, straining to see the definition of the room. Pale fields of light

15. Fabrizio Smeraldi, "The Saccadic Search Home Page," 1999, at <http://diwww.epfl.ch/lami/team/smeraldi/saccadic/saccadic.html>.
16. See Barbara Maria Stafford, *Visual Analogy: Consciousness as the Art of Connecting* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2001).

green and blue floated on the edge of my vision, but when I looked straight at them, they disappeared.

In the absence of the known, the unknown rushes in. In the Middle Ages, things seen in the sky were angels or God's thunderbolts; today they are UFOs. Both hover near the edges of our carefully plotted, proven, and philosophized framework. The astronaut's journey into space is a modern-day echo of the jour-

ney to the heavens. A new skin on an old body, UFO photographs taken by astronomers or astronomical equipment are a technological retelling of visitations from angels or the ascensions of saints. Religious tracts have been replaced by scientific methodologies. Both worlds are caught up in fragile, forceful webs of desire. We project our anxieties and utopian fantasies upward, toward places unknown and invisible. In both systems, apophenia, the spontaneous perception of the connectedness and meaningfulness of unrelated phenomena, takes us by storm. What is revealed by astronomical UFO imagery is our desire for belief, for a faith that holds us trembling on the edge between fact and myth, between technology



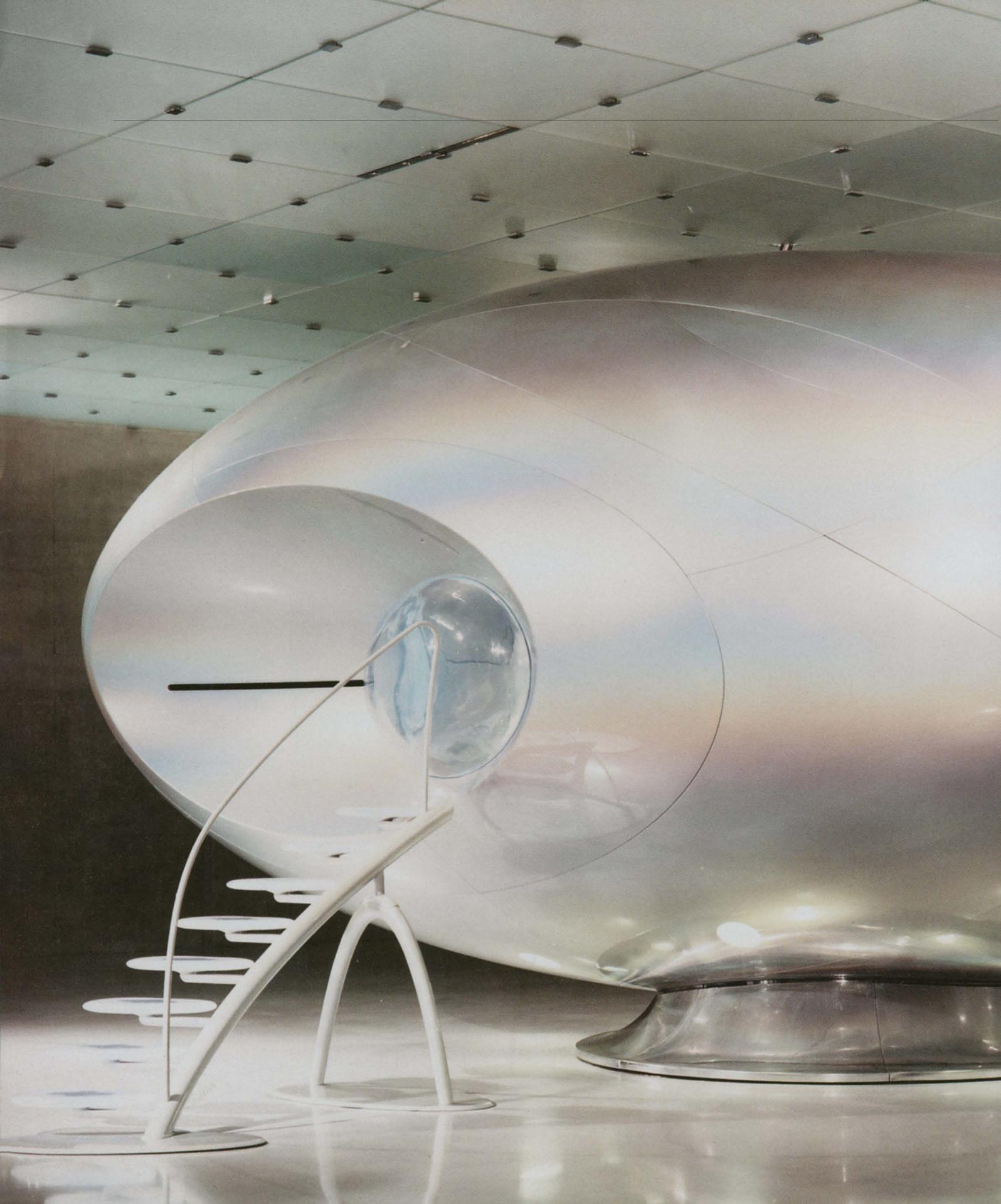
National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA). *Pillars of Creation in a Star-Forming Region (Gas Pillars in M16—Eagle Nebula)*, April 1, 1995. Image STScI-1995-44, the Hubble Space Telescope Wide Field and Planetary Camera 2. Courtesy of Jeff Hester and Paul

Scowen (Arizona State University), NASA, and STScI.

The source for the "Jesus" image on page 56 is the top of the left-hand pillar.

and experience, between the known and the unknown. I have always wanted to be abducted by aliens, or at least to witness a blazing ball of light hovering over my garage. But even more than the actual seeing, I'd like to take a little, grainy, black-and-white picture of it. One that I can tack over my studio table, put up on my website, and tell stories about at dinner. Meanwhile, I'm crunching my SETI data like crazy and hoping that I'll be the one whose computer detects an alien signal among all the cosmic noise. I'm not really interested in what is real or what is bogus, who is conning me or who is the real thing. Instead I am infatuated with those images that desire to believe, that will do anything to create a reality in which wonder, the impossible, the extraordinary truly exist.

Jane D. Marsching is a photography/new-media artist working with issues of belief in culture.





Moriko Mori. *Wave UFO*,
1999–2002. Brainwave interface,
vision dome, projector, computer
system, fiberglass, Technogel3,
acrylic, carbon fiber, aluminum,
and magnesium. 16 ft. 2 in. x 37 ft.
2 in. x 17 ft. 4 in. (4.93 x 11.34 x
5.28 m). Courtesy of Deitch
Projects, New York. Photograph:
Richard Learoyd.