

A New territory of (In)human Proportions

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Where is space? For the ancients, it was simple. There was the Earth and the Heavens, and the more or less divine links between the two. Science secularized the cosmos, and engineers hurled their rockets right into it. Where does space begin? Where does the Earth end? On its surface? With its atmosphere? With its gravitational field? With what used to be called “the known world,” that is, the “inhabited” and mapped world? French uses the vague term *espace* to designate “the world beyond the world,” while English prefers “outer space,” implying that there is an “inside space” as well. Space and territories are at the core of many space artworks.

Leave the Earth, turn around and look back at it. This macroscopic vision involves a shift in the relationship of scale between us and our planet that is simultaneously glorious and overwhelming. Alain Jacquet took up this global vision in his serigraph *First Breakfast* (1972), where the Earth, seen from the pole, looks like an image seen on a radar screen. The human vision and the artificial vision of satellites for a new representation of the world. For the *@ Geosphere Project* (1990), Tom Van Sant made a polar projection map of the earth using satellite photos. This “real” image goes beyond cartographic abstraction, with its political boundaries etc. It is unreal, or perhaps ultra-real, because there is not a cloud in sight.

But you can also use the Earth as a medium, as if going beyond Land Art, and draw on it an eye that is reflected by the “eye” of the satellites in an endlessly reflexive stare (*Reflections from Earth*, Tom Van Sant, 1980), or its medieval symbol, fusing sign and object (*Signature Terre*, Pierre Comte, 1989).

The conquest of space, born of the fury of the Cold War, produced a picture of a unitary, borderless planet, heralding a new discourse about “globalization.”(1) A longing for flight and (physical and spiritual) uplifting, and, too, a non-violent globalization infuse Nin Brudermann’s *Balloon in No Man’s Land* (ongoing since 2002). In a unique example of world cooperation, every day 2,000 weather balloons are released from some of the world’s most isolated spots. For Brudermann’s participation in this project, a sort of earthly ballet or scientific ritual that she describes as “a playful, poetic event aimed at mankind’s greatest desire—overcoming uncertainty,” she replaced the scientific instruments with a camera, and filmed this Earth “which is no man’s land.”

The exploration of space opened new “places” to artists: the Earth’s orbit, space vehicles (satellites, probes and space stations) and other celestial bodies, among with the Moon and Mars feature prominently. Making art in or for outer space goes way beyond the search for new forms that dominated the 20th century. For one thing, form

here is often determined and constrained by the technology, weight limitations, materials, safety and the general parameters of practicality in outer space. At the same time, the imagination from which such contemporary works are born, their symbolism and the discourse in which they are embedded, are just as much, and sometimes even more, a matter of artistic gesture, even though they cannot be categorized as conceptual art in any strict sense of the term.

In the 1980s some artists had the idea of launching art satellites to orbit the Earth. Some of these projects required only existing technology (Jean-Marc Philippe's *L'anneau de lumière* proposed using geostationary satellites to carry special light sources that could be turned on or off at will). Others explored alternatives to that technology (like the solar sails of Comte's *Arsat* project or the inflatable structures of the *OURS Sculpture* by Arthur Woods). What they had in common was the core aesthetic concern that they be visible from the Earth, and that they conveyed a symbol of peace. These works were inscribed in and by the same token defined a new "public space" for a new "world community." Today's projects such as Dragan Zivadinov's *Noordung* (see the article by E. Chardonnet) and Jean-Marc Philippe's *Keo (2)* give more emphasis to the ideas of community and communication than to the notion of extending public space into the Earth's orbit.

Whenever a group of human beings emigrate to a new territory (or cross other territories) their first symbolic gesture has always been to build a "monument," even if only a stack of stones or a line carved into a rock face, to say something more or less equivalent to "Kilroy was here." And this marking of the territory gave rise to the first works of art, which by the same token defined the extension and enlargement of a habitable/inhabited environment possessed by the species or group as such. This marking and symbolic appropriation of the "known world," this territorialization of space (here we note the degree to which our vocabulary is "Earth-centric"), is the idea underlying works destined for other orbs. On Earth P. Van Hoeydonck's *Fallen Astronaut* is just a plaque and a small statue of a person; on the Moon, it becomes what it is, a monument, and further, a monument to the dead.

Mars projects foreground another dimension. If they, too, have a certain "Kilroy" attitude, in this case the "Kilroy" is a hybrid version of humanity with technological prostheses. With space exploration, for the first time in history, artworks are going on ahead of people. If Damien Hirst's *Spot Paintings*, sent out to be the first artwork on Mars,(3) and the *Moon Museum*, on our nearest neighbor, are both "Earthian"-designed works, J.-M. Philippe's *Sphère de Mars*, to be made of shape-memory alloy, will integrate the reality of the Martian environment, where it would open and close like a flower in accordance with the "local" temperature and weather.

@ *Moonmeme* by Liliane Lijn, which makes plans to write on the Moon from Earth using a laser beam, combines territorial appropriation, the technological extension of the human body and myths related to our natural satellite. The word to be written is SHE, and it would be transformed as the Moon moved through its phases. Sometimes all of the letters would be visible; sometimes only a few of them. While technologically feasible, so far it has been implemented only on the Internet.(4) This piece echoes

Nam June Paik's 1965 *Moon Is the Oldest TV*, a video installation where the phases of the Moon are shown sequentially on 11 monitors.

While the Earth's orbit, the Moon and Mars are now part of our environment, "inside" our world and within the *Limes* of civilization, Roger Malina reminds us that space is not really an extension of our earthly conditions.(5) It is an environment with characteristics that are as exalting as they are staggering, such as the void and weightlessness, which are the object of many human desires and fantasies. In 1958 Yves Klein exhibited the void. In 1984, Joseph McShane imprisoned the sidereal vacuum in the *S.P.A.C.E.* sphere of the G38 project, while Lowry Burgess worked with the dialectic of Emptiness/Nothing and Totality in *Boundless Cubic Lunar Aperture* (1989).

Weightlessness—the dream of freedom to move fluidly in all three dimensions (see F. Arvers' article on Kitsou Dubois) without constraint or support—is the quintessence of alterity, and furthermore, of an unalterably foreign otherness. What would be the forms for this new environment? How can this experience be conveyed? Calder freed sculpture from its pedestal with his *Mobiles*. Comte went a little further with *Alpha* and then *Prisma* (2002). Similarly, Frank Pietronigro explored painting on nothing in his *Drift Paintings* (1998). Lately spheres and cylinders seem to predominate in terms of shapes, as in Takuro Osaka's *Sound Wave Sculpture* (2002-03). Arthur Woods' *Cosmic Dancer* is the only counter-example here.(6)

The territory of space is also the immaterial locus of waves and communications (see Chardronnet's article). Capturing the universe's waves and putting them to music is an immaterial art if ever there was one. In 1990 Gérard Grisey included the sound of pulsars in *Noir de l'étoile*. In 2003, Terry Riley and the Kronos Quartet made *Sun Rings*, a composition based on waves detected by the Voyager, Galileo and Cassini probes and recorded by the physicist Don Gurnett. Other pieces are not about listening and receiving but about sending, specifically human messages sent to the outer limits of our galaxy (Alexander Zaitsev, J.-M. Philippe). Burgess' 1987 *Moon-Bounce/Lunar Antiphon* is a complex ping-pong game of sending-receiving-transcription: a slow scan of a performance of pouring purified water is converted into a broadcast shortwave and beamed to the Moon. The waves are reflected back and picked up by the Haystack Radio Telescope, turned into a reflected image and transferred to a computer-synthesized hologram for the *Boundless Cubic Lunar Aperture*.

Today most communications projects are between human beings (*ARTSAT*, Richard Kriesche, 1992), often using the GPS system, as in the *Impressing Velocity Project* (1994) and *Field Works* (2002) by Masaki Fujihata. This immateriality now exists on the equally immaterial Web. Helene von Oldenburg and Claudia Reiche wanted to find new venues for art. But the spaces they envisioned "couldn't compete with the idea of an exhibition site on MARS, realized via WWW. The parallel was as convincing as evident that the euphoria about the promised land in cyberspace and on extraterrestrial sites in the planetary system had similarities. [sic] And: neither has anybody entered cyberspace nor stepped on the red planet. The patriarchal concept of

conquering virgin territory appeared to be predominant in triggering euphoria. This demanded to be conceptually and artistically worked out: to be exploited for our idea of utopia.”(7) Thus 1998 saw the appearance of *Mars Patent* (8), which invites us to put “everything which does not fit on Earth” on the MES (Mars Exhibition Site) by using a very special teleportation machine, the HRM.1.On (High Reality Machine)—a machine that recognizes only female names.

Space is a source and medium for utopia and myths. The utopia of a world liberated from physical, political and social constraints, where hierarchies disappear and new communities can come together. Further, the utopia (or promise) of human power acquired through humanity’s machines.

Invited by NASA to the launching of Apollo 11, Robert Rauschenberg wrote, “Softly largely slowly silently Apollo 11 started to move up. Then it rose being lifted on light. Standing mid-air, it began to sing happy loud in its own joy wanting the earth to know it was going, saturated, super saturated and solidified air with a sound that became your body. For that while everything was the same material. Power over power—join pain ecstasy. There was no inside, no out. Then bodily transcending a state of energy, Apollo 11 was airborne, lifting pulling everyone’s spirits with it.”(9) In 1969-70, Rauschenberg made the series of 33 lithographs entitled *Stoned Moon*. One of them, *Sky Garden*, shows the fiery, powerful lift-off of the Saturn V rocket as it rose above the palm trees and birds of Florida.

The power of machines and their aesthetics is no longer a source of exaltation. Yet they are still present and strongly felt in contemporary works made in Russian space facilities now open to the West. For *Celestial Vault* (2003), Stefan Gec put a small copper globe covered with the constellations of the northern and southern hemispheres into the centrifuge at Star City (10) so that its roundness would be distorted.

Every adventure has its heroes. The astronauts were (and still are) terrific in that regard, and they are represented as such in countless photos, paintings and drawings or are the basis of a work about myth, mystery and lying such as the project of Joan Fontcuberta about the cosmonaut Ivan Istochnikov (11). But these images also remind us of mutants, faceless beings behind their golden-visored helmets (Alan Bean’s *That’s How I Felt to Walk on the Moon*), or fragile crustaceans in space suits, like shellfish, with their exoskeletons constituting an interior matrix to protect them from a hostile exterior The Wilson Twins (12) photographed like fossilized remains that recall molting creatures (*Skarfaundry and Cosmonaut Suits, Mir*, 2000).

Utopia met reality and with that its illusions evaporated. Ilya Kabakov’s *The Man who Flew Into Space from his Apartment* (1981-88) is testament to the twinned failures of cosmism and communism but also expresses nostalgia and regret. Kabakov’s man, like Yuri Gagarin, took off on April 12. The photos of Adam Bartos are also shot through with melancholy and respect inspired by the splendor of the Soviet space program and its decline.(13)

And yet, the dream continues, revisited by new generations. Cosmonauts become icons in *Is Anybody Out There* by Igor Stromajer.⁽¹⁴⁾ Rockets and other Moon landing images are the raw material for the VJs' mixes (*Spaced Out*, Addictive TV). In its many diverse projects, often playful and iconoclastic, the AAA (Association of Autonomous Astronauts), a nebula of individuals and informal groups spread out all over the planet, calls for space access for all, in an alternative to the monopoly now held by the space agencies.

In December 2003, the European Space Agency called for feasibility studies of the "culturization" of the International Space Station. The story is not over. More pages about the dialectics of the interior and the exterior, space and territory, matter and the immaterial, the individual and the community, humans and machines, reality and utopia, are about to be written.

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(1) Here we think, of course, of Buckminster Fuller, McLuhan, and, today, Sloterdijk.

(2) www.keo.org

(3) This article was written in early December 2003. The Beagle 2 carrying D. Hirst's piece is to land on Mars at Christmas 2003, while this special section will appear in *art press* in February 2004. These different temporalities make verb tenses particularly difficult, since at this writing no one knows whether or not this mission will be crowned with success.

(4) www.lijn.net/moonmeme/index.html

(5) In a communication in the framework of the @rt Outsiders festival in 2003. Roger Malina is an astronomer and director of the journal *Leonardo*.

(6) In issue number 4 of the journal *Anomalie*, which is the catalogue for the 2003 @rt Outsiders festival focusing on space art, there is a whole section on art and zero gravity.

(7) Excerpted from an e-mail from the artists.

(8) www.mars-patent.org

(9) Notes published in *Studio International*, vol. 178, no. 917, December 1969.

(10) Star City, near Moscow, is the cosmonaut training center. The centrifuge is used to attain high-g loads to test materials and train cosmonauts for g-load effects of take-off and landing.

(11) See *art press* n°240, novembre 1998

(12) See *@ art press* 275, January 2002.

(13) See the book *Kosmos: A Portrait of the Russian Space Age*, New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2001. Photos by Adam Bartos with a text by Svetlana Boym.

(13) www.intima.org/help/

Further references and a bibliography can be found at www.olats.org/setF3.html