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This is an electronic version of a paper presented at the *Association of American Geographers Annual Meeting,* San Francisco, 29 March to 2 April 2016.

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Paper presented at the Association of American Geographers, San Francisco, April 2016. Panel: Critical Issues in Outer Space. Convenor: Julie Klinger

Critical Art and Outer Space:
A curatorial inquiry into space as a global commons

Nicola Triscott

Introduction

During the 21st century, there has been a resurgence of interest in outer space in the contemporary arts, with a succession of international exhibitions on themes of space exploration and cosmology. Alongside artists' interest in aesthetically and conceptually engaging with images and new knowledge coming from remote exploration of distant planets and the cosmos, is an increased ambivalence and questioning towards the value of space activities, both past and present, and particularly within Earth's orbit.

My curatorial research is collaborative and practice-based, operating from the non-profit organisation I founded and lead, Arts Catalyst, and integrating three main approaches: active (commissioning artists and organising exhibitions), dialogic (interpreting and analysing artworks and exhibitions), and strategic (intervening within scientific and technological communities to open up opportunities for artists' direct engagement with those knowledge domains). My primary interest is to extend critical and experimental art practices into the spaces, knowledge arenas and practices usually associated with science, technology and international governance. Around the subject of space exploration and activity in space, I am interested in art that interrogates outer space as a dynamic and contested territory.

In this paper, I discuss some of the critical strategies that I have employed as a curator and that artists have used to engage with the political and spatial nature of outer space. I will argue that critical artistic and curatorial practices can contribute to our understanding of outer space as a dynamic and socially constructed space, and help to shape the social imaginary of the region around our planet as an important global commons.

Makrolab and the Orbit-Spectrum Commons

In Fraser MacDonald's paper 'Anti-Astropolitik: Outer Space and the Orbit of Geography' (2007), he calls for geographers to turn their attention to the everyday realities of space exploration and domination as urgent subjects of critical geographical inquiry. MacDonald suggests that critical geography should not be overly pessimistic nor relinquish an engagement with space technology on the grounds that this has, to date, been driven largely by military agendas. Rather, he considers that geographical critique may need to adopt such technologies, and he

suggests looking to the "various forms of playful and subversive activism, experiment and art-event that have knowingly toyed with space hardware", specifically citing a number of Arts Catalyst commissions and collaborators, including artists Lisa Parks, Ursula Biemann, Radioqualia and Miles Chalcraft, who work with the technologies of GPS receivers, remote sensing, amateur radio-telescopy, and rocket science.

MacDonald's knowledge of these artists came originally from his embedded role as a researcher and collaborator in the Scottish siting of a project by Slovenian artist Marko Peljhan, called Makrolab, curated and organized by Arts Catalyst [1]. During his stay on Makrolab, sited on the Atholl Estate near Pitlochry, MacDonald encountered this group of artists and their various practices and critical discourses.

Cultural critic Brian Holmes describes the Makrolab's visual appearance thus: "What strikes you first is the object's technical aspect, its glistening, futuristic exterior, bristling with sensors and aerials." In practical terms, Makrolab provides a communications, research and living unit, capable of sustaining the concentrated work of several people in isolated conditions for up to 120 days. It draws its power from the sun and the wind and links to networks via satellite and shortwave radio.

First realised in 1997 as part of the international art exhibition documenta X in Kassel, Germany, over the next ten years Makrolab travelled to several countries around the globe [2] in a series of iterations and an evolving modular architecture. It hosted teams of artists, scientists, tactical media workers and other researchers, providing them with the tools and means for independent progressive research, primarily in the fields of telecommunications, weather systems and migration.

Whilst Makrolab was a conceptually layered and complex project, which has been interpreted in varied ways by different scholars and critics, I want to focus on Makrolab's upward gaze: its scanning of activity in the skies and lower earth orbit. Lisa Haskel describes an early aim of Makrolab thus: "to work as a node within branching patterns of flows and processes through time and space - be they radio waves, weather patterns or bird migration" (Haskel, 1997). She notes that the "clamouring, noisy, congested contents of the electromagnetic spectrum" were a particular target for Makrolab.

The electromagnetic spectrum, through which radio waves are transmitted, and the orbits into which satellites are placed (often jointly referred to as orbit-spectrum resources), are responsible for the extraordinary range and volume of data traffic through the skies and space. Traditionally, they have been regarded as common resources that no one country is entitled to appropriate [3]. However, as both the

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[1] Curator Rob La Frenais and the author

[2] including Australia, Scotland, Slovenia, Italy and the USA

[3] The body that awards the rights to use parts of the electromagnetic spectrum is the International Telecommunications Union, a specialized agency of the United Nations. Such user rights are awarded to countries on a first-come first-served basis, free of charge.

electromagnetic spectrum and the geostationary orbit for satellites have become congested, these orbit-spectrum resources have become valuable, and national governments and commercial companies are trying to enclose them (Wijkman, 1982).

Researchers on the Makrolab had access to a wide spectrum of short wave, L-Band, and mobile radio frequencies, satellite telephone systems, Internet and satellite video transmissions, giving them broad access to the electromagnetic spectrum of transmitted audio and data traffic. Crew members gathered information concerning security, the environment, weather, economic and financial transactions, political conflicts and scientific research, undertaking the types of observation (surveillance) and analysis (intelligence gathering) more usually conducted by institutions, corporations, states and the military, but sharing their collected data openly (Birringer, 1998). In monitoring radio and satellite links, activities on the Makrolab often moved on the borders of legality (Birringer, 1998), engaging with issues of ownership and regulation of the electromagnetic spectrum. Thus I suggest that Makrolab operated, both actively and metaphorically, as an autonomous node of access to the threatened 'global commons' of the sky and the airwaves.

Joanna Griffin's Art Practice and the Orbital Commons

Artist Joanna Griffin has developed a body of work exploring the experiential dimension of space technologies, often drawing attention to the human-made 'architecture' of Earth's orbit. She has proposed a substitution of the notion of 'authorship' of outer space for than of 'ownership' (Griffin, 2015). Griffin has worked on a number of commissions for Arts Catalyst [4], including a performative guided walk with scientists at Mullard Space Science Lab. [5] The Mullard Lab is rather unexpectedly sited in a mansion in spectacular location in rural Surrey. In Griffin's performative walk, Satellite Stories, scientists and audience members moved together through the spaces of the house and – after dark – around the garden, lit by torches, candles and fire, sharing the scientists' stories of launches, orbits, constructions and failures, which illuminated their individual and collective roles in the 'authorship' of space. Orbiting spacecraft, such as those the Mullard scientists work on, Griffin has suggested, generate partitions between those who own space technology and those who do not. Yet such partitions are abstractions or imaginaries, because the ownership of space technology, as a collaborative enterprise with many actors, can be difficult to pin down (Griffin 2015).

Another project by Griffin, in collaboration with Chilean artist Alejo Duque, addresses issues of ownership in space, specifically the case of geostationary orbit. Geostationary orbits – in which satellites circle the equator and appear stationary relative to the earth - are hugely important for communications satellites, which have revolutionised communications and have important defence and intelligence applications. Since telecommunications technology developed in the industrial countries first, it's unsurprising that ninety per cent of existing user rights have been

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[4] Curated by myself and my former colleague Rob La Frenais

[5] Mullard Space Science Lab is part of University College London

allocated to the richest ten per cent of the world's countries, with the United States and the Soviet Union occupying the most valuable and coveted spots in geostationary orbit early on.

A little-known piece of space law history, the Bogotá Declaration was an attempt in 1976 by eight equatorial countries – Brazil, Colombia, Congo, Ecuador, Indonesia, Kenya, Uganda and Zaire – to draw attention to the inequity of orbital allocations and to assert sovereignty over those portions of the geosynchronous orbit lying over their nation's territory. The declaration was never ratified, unsurprising given the many powerful nations that it would disadvantage. Duque and Griffin were struck by the poetry of the Bogotá Declaration - its fervour in challenging the great powers and its description of the architecture of this necklace-like ring of satellites circling the earth. They set out to develop a new manifesto based on the Bogotá Declaration in a project that explored the poetics of the declaration as well as 'inequalities in technological power, the physics of orbit and its contested spaces' (Duque and Griffin, 2011) [6].

Interventions in the Space Community

Between 1999 and 2007, I co-curated a series of projects that involved working with a number of international agencies and institutions of space faring, enabling artists to access their work spaces and technologies, in particular astronaut training facilities in Russia and France. In 2005, I led a successful consortium bid to an international competitive tender by the European Space Agency (hereafter referred to as ESA) to undertake a study into 'cultural utilisation of the International Space Station' [7]. The main focus of this study was to set up a dialogue between the space agency and the European arts community, and to make the arts community aware of potential opportunities within the International Space Station programme. The final report, which I authored, proposed a series of strategic initiatives [8]. We also made preliminary feasibility assessments for a number of possible pilot projects [9].

ESA's response to the study proposals was initially highly positive. A new contract was issued to Arts Catalyst to begin implementing the recommendations, and I was invited to curate an exhibition of artists' projects for an ESA conference in Berlin. However, after a change of senior staff at ESA, progress on implementing the recommendations slowed and then stopped entirely. I observed that culture had a

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[6] Through an open collaborative process, the artists tried to draw out what the geostationary orbit could mean to us, and to define protests, rituals and love songs in relation to it The project comprised writing, drawing, experimental music and events, exchanged online, on the ground and through space.

[7] The International Space Station is a joint project among the space agencies of the United States (NASA), Russia (RKA), Japan (JAXA), Canada (CSA) and eleven European countries (ESA). It is a research facility currently in orbit around the Earth.

[8] Including an artists' residency programme, a scientist-artist network, artist-astronaut collaborations, and partnerships with cultural organisations.

[9] The recommendations were published online and presented at a number of arts and space conferences.

very low priority at ESA, even if specific individuals were enthusiastic, and that the difficulties we had with implementation were not specific to the study, but systemic to an institution with a primarily scientific and technological agenda, and symptomatic of a general lack of interest and understanding of art within the space community.

Taking a strategic approach to this systemic problem, in 2007, with a group of international collaborators, I made a successful proposal to the International Astronautical Federation, to set up a new Technical Activities Sub-Committee for Cultural Utilisation of Space (acronym: ITACCUS).

As one of the Federations's Technical Activities Committees, ITACCUS was invited to contribute to the Federation's annual report to the United Nations' Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space, on which the International Astronautical Federation has observer status.

The UN's Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space (COPUOS) oversees the implementation of United Nations treaties and agreements relating to activities in outer space. It was set up in 1959. In 1967, the United Nations sponsored the Outer Space Treaty, which established all of outer space as a 'global commons'. (I refer you to Christy Collis's chapter in Dickens & Ormrod's new book for a more detailed description of this legal history).

In my role as co-chair of an International Astronautical Federation committee, I was invited to address the annual meeting of the UN COPUOS committee in Vienna about the activities and goals of the committee. This was an opportunity to present our community's arguments for the inclusion of artistic and cultural activities within the space agencies' fields of activity direct to the COPUOS committee's international membership. I argued that such activities would stimulate and help to develop a wider societal and cultural dialogue about space activities, which I asserted was urgently needed to defend space as the common heritage of humanity, in the face of increasing pressure from state, commercial and military interests.

Towards a Republic of the Moon

The Chair of COPUOS during this period [10], Ciro Arévalo Yepes, a Columbian diplomat, was supportive of ITACCUS' aims and joined the committee. A comment by Arévalo directly inspired Arts Catalyst's next major space-themed exhibition. In a conversation about the politics of defending the Moon as a commons, in the face of many pressures from states and corporations, Arévalo made the passing comment: "I'm not talking about a Republic of the Moon ...".

Arts Catalyst's exhibition 'Republic of the Moon' (Liverpool 2011, London 2014) invited a number of artists to create and show artworks that might prompt a re-imagining of our relationship with the moon in this new era. For the first showing of

[10] 2008 to 2010

the 'Republic of the Moon' exhibition in Liverpool, the lead curator, my Arts Catalyst colleague Rob La Frenais, took a utopian approach, framing the exhibition as a collection of artists' imaginings of how we might live peacefully on the Moon. For the London iteration of the exhibition, opening in January 2014 just a few short weeks after China's successful probe landing on the Moon, La Frenais and I took a collaborative curatorial approach to address this immediate challenge to the Moon as "the common heritage of mankind", by declaring a micronation - a 'Republic of the Moon' – and setting up the exhibition as an Earth-based embassy of the Moon. [11] A slightly different selection of artists' works [12] put the emphasis on how we might review our historical and romantic conception of the Moon, and create new myths and imaginings more responsive to an age in which outer space – and the Moon - are contested and dynamic spaces, rather than fixed and remote ones.

Alongside installations by Agnes Meyer-Brandis, Liliane Lijn, Leonid Tishkov and Katie Paterson, we invited the artist group We Colonised the Moon (Sue Corke and Hagen Betzwieser) to be resident artists throughout the exhibition. They used the opportunity to conduct, in their characteristically playful style, a creative, transdisciplinary enquiry into our cultural response to the notion of the Moon as a territory for occupation and exploitation. Before and during the run of the show, the artists consulted with planetary scientists, theologians, science fiction writers and exhibition visitors. Their installation evolved throughout the exhibition, with found objects and text introduced into the space. Their final "drop in" workshop solicited slogans and drawings from the public in response to the proposition of whether we should mine the Moon.

Joanna Griffin also presented work in the exhibition – documentation from Moon Vehicle, a project she led in Bangalore, India, with art students and children, using storytelling and model making activities to draw out responses to the mission of India's Chandrayaan-1 spacecraft, its first unmanned lunar probe. Griffin observes that an ideological framework for the future of the Moon has appeared in the space industry in recent years, in which private enterprise is seen as the determining factor, and the Moon an object to be exploited for its resources. These ideologies, she notes, were not values expressed by people participating in Moon Vehicle.

Conclusion

To conclude, it is my contention that critical artistic practices, in particular when they are focused through a sustained curatorial inquiry, contribute to society's understanding of outer space as a socially constructed space and an important 'global commons'. They do so by directing our attention to otherwise largely invisible contested spaces – lower Earth orbit with its cluttered ring of satellites, space stations and orbital debris; and outer space and the celestial bodies – and by

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[11] The exhibition was held in a semi-derelict warehouse, the Bargehouse, on London's South Bank

[12] Three gallery installations from the original exhibition and three newly selected installations

intervening directly in the domains of space technology and politics. By these actions and through their artwork, artists draw attention to outer space as a space of exclusion, in which activities by certain groups or individuals are prohibited or dismissed against claims of ownership or assumed authority by nations, corporations or institutions. This serves to problematise the assertion – often put forward by space advocates – that space missions represent the transcendental ownership of all humanity.

Art that addresses themes of outer space is important because the social imaginary, more than just a collection of ideas and symbols, helps to shape a society's values and the idea of its compass and legitimacy. It is the tendency of contemporary artists, following the tradition of the avant-garde, to challenge prevailing ideologies and imagine alternative worlds (Levine, 2007). For this reason, art plays an important role in imagining our space futures, not by constructing new utopias of space, but rather by destabilizing our understanding of the technological and socio-political forces affecting the Earth.