

ART IN SPACE: WHAT FOR?

We are standing on the precipice of an emerging art form, Space Art, which is about people from different worlds working together, collaboration between technology and our biological carbon-based forms, finding terrestrial intelligence on earth as well as outside our own orbit, and eliminating the boundaries between art and science.

Should artists, visionary architects, writers, poets, and musicians be working in the space program? The closest artists have come to experiencing space travel is on parabolic flights that create the conditions of nearly zero gravity. Parabolic flights require a specially adapted aircraft and a highly specialized team: flight crew, trained instructors, and physicians. They are undertaken by a handful of space agencies specifically for astronaut training and scientific experiments. During the flights, bodies and objects inside the aircraft float freely for 25-30 seconds. A flight can have between 10 and 40 parabolas. Many people experience severe discomfort and sometimes euphoria in zero gravity.

Emerging artists are realizing that the tools, materials, and activities used by space scientists and astronauts could provide new materials and media for their work. Artists-astronauts in converging spaces are expanding into new realms of art practice by creating socially “holistic” endeavors. An underground movement of American artists has collaborated with the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) officially and unofficially, for 25 years, and a few artists are now exploring these media. In 1999, the British organization Catalyst Arts and the Slovenian Ministry of Culture provided financial support for theater and dance performances in micro-gravity training aircraft in Russia’s Star City. Recently, a team from the San Francisco Art Institute (the only art school in the world to be involved in this type of research) flew the “weightless wonder” as part of NASA’s Reduced Gravity Flight Opportunity Program. This has inspired a revival of new space art in California and established a new role for the United States in the “space art race.” It has also raised a critical question: Who will be the first artist in space?

Assuming that a real space age finally does arrive, at some point later in the 21st century as new technologies make it cheaper to achieve escape velocity, it will also start to rely heavily on a familiarity on the part of the audience with weightlessness. The more people grow familiar with the radically altered sense of space and time that weightlessness can bring, the more they’ll also be ready intuitively to understand the imperatives behind the expanded viewpoints onto reality that the zero gravity arts will create.

What is the state of weightlessness? In future decades, we’ll integrate the presence of inhabited interplanetary stations. This existence of new places will become a new dimension in our cultural consciousness and in our philosophical dimension.
Michael Benson (filmmaker who documented the “Noordung” Theatre performance in zero gravity)

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The rigors of high-performance aircraft and space vehicles have led to sophisticated sensing and control technologies, and techniques for imbedding sensors in structural components. A comprehensive biological model for architecture may develop out of research into sensing, active control systems, and interactive materials developed in the aerospace and defense industries during the last decade. The locus of design shifts away from the form to concentrate on the behaviors and the interface that will be required for intelligent and interactive environments. Technology is something independent, on its own developmental trajectory, that could overtake and surpass human development. It may be that we are in a feedback loop with the products of our culture. We experience them within a kind of perceptual Doppler effect. They develop and go out as extensions of our selves and return to us, subtly shifted, as an Other. What could be the consciousness of an architectural artifact modeled on biological phenomena?

The implications of these technological developments are to fundamentally alter our relationship with the products of material culture. Autonomous, adaptive, and interactive environments are no longer physical only, but participants in the social realm as well. This fundamental shift, though founded on technological development, is a cultural operation and points to the need for participation of cultural workers with the technological disciplines.

Marco Peljhan

Artistic and scientific practices have one common ground: they are both creative behaviors that push and explore unknown territories. Now that the International Space Station is in orbit, it must host not only scientific and commercial components, but also superlative spiritual work. If it does not, there will be a problem for the future of the station and for humankind.

Marko Peljhan set up Makrolab, an art-science autonomous research station resembling the Mir Space Station. It was first shown at Documenta in 1997 and then on the remote Rottneest Island off Australia. He intends eventually to install Makrolab in Antarctica. He founded the arts organization Projekt Atol in 1992 and its technical branch Projekt Atol Communications Technologies (PACT Systems) in 1995. He is the co-founder of the Ljubljana Digital Media Lab (LJUDMILA) and coordinator of the Makrolab and Insular Technologies projects. In 1999 and 2000, PACT worked with the Yuri Gagarin Cosmonaut Training Centre to organize four arts-based parabolic flights, three for the Slovenian Noordung team and one in cooperation with Arts Catalyst for the Franco-British parabolic flight of Kitsou Dubois.

D.A. Solomon

In the past, artists have been excluded from space exploration. During the year 2000, artists and selected individuals gathered to repair this faulty piece of history. They met in a newly installed space at the Stedelijk Museum to design a mission to the International Space Station. The goal of this mission is to optimize conditions for integrating artists into space exploration programs. Current space-program protocols do not provide much room for the creative process that both artists and scientists need to fuel their work. So far, space has been the sole domain of technicians and the military. One of the purposes of the artist-astronaut video document is to issue a strong proposal to NASA and the European Space Agency that shows how a mission can be modified to optimize the creative process and how doing so will be valuable to the scientific process.

Lorelei Lisowsky

With the onslaught of our technological age, we continue to be devoured and obsessed with "machinic" transportation and the need to be released from our condition of "gravity." Current trends in social and technological developments speak about the transcendence of our bodies and adjustment of the body in zero gravity. When we enter zero gravity, the first thing that occurs is loss of the brain's logical functions. The second thing is loss of the sense of having a body and awareness of "existence" only (a pure feeling). The body self floats, gravity is gone, and subversion of the vertical gives us a state of being that borders on the divine. This begins the next step of evolution. We cope and explore the greater need, separation, and expansion.

In our experiment on the KC135, we explored human-computer interaction in micro gravity. Through close examination of the data-processed phantasm, movements and flows of the visible and invisible body are given access to visual qualities as well as interpreted in a numerical formula. By interfacing the technological being with the need to escape gravity, transformation of perceived orientation within physical and virtual space can be monitored and scanned to describe multiple dimensional positions and occurrences.

Now is the time to ask the relevant people to explain to the world: why not artists in space?

As a public artist and through her involvement with the Exploding Cinema in London, Lorelei Lisowsky experiences the power and potential of social interaction. Her recent parabolic flight was a life-changing experience.



Noordung performing artists in microgravity aircraft flights.