

SPACE EDUCATION AND OUTREACH SYMPOSIUM (E1)
Space Culture –Public Engagement in Space through Culture (9)

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AN UNEXPECTED INREACH: AN ONSITE ART INTERVENTION WITH THE CLUSTER MISSION
FLIGHT CONTROL TEAM AT THE EUROPEAN SPACE OPERATIONS CENTRE

Abstract

To substantiate the programme marking the occasion of the 15th Cluster Mission Anniversary celebration event, the European Space Agency's satellite control centre (European Space Operations Centre, ESOC), recently hosted an artistic commission for outreach that also became the Human Spaceflight Image of the Week on ESA's website.

Subject of the work were fragments of debris from the satellites of the original Cluster mission recovered from the swamps and mangroves of French Guiana after the Ariane flight 501 explosion in June 1996. While partially being on display in glass cabinets at ESOC, they are in danger of being forgotten about. For the commission, images of the debris were produced using a unique image-scanning technique that had previously been developed by the artist to capture remnants from a controlled explosion in a different governmental context. The resulting digital production of 18 images was then shown in a site-specific installation at the control centre, using additional material (including operational products, sonification applications of the mission's science data) collated in dialogue with the members of the current Cluster Flight Control Team during a 4-day residence on site.

In this paper we give a short overview on the launch failure and the resulting debris, and provide an outline of the commissioned project. We contextualize this with contemporary theory on outreach and artistic practice for corporate organizational engagement, and revisit the outcomes of the project in light of this. We then show how what was designed as a small-scale outreach project resulted in unexpected and prolific interactions within the organization in view of collective memory, coping with organizational trauma, honoring legacy technology and the positive efforts emerging from disaster, and, incidentally, challenging perceptions of 'art' in a science and engineering context through a collaborative effort of technical operations personnel and an external cultural practitioner. By re-conceptualizing these unexpected synergies as 'inreach', we argue how, in fact, the intervention had internal engagement value on various organizational levels as much as outreach value. Finally, we close by reporting how this project can be scaled further, both as a public engagement project, but also as a means of internal 'interdisciplinary diplomacy'.