

28th IAA SYMPOSIUM ON SPACE AND SOCIETY (E5)  
Contemporary Arts Practice and Outer Space: A Multi-Disciplinary Approach (3)

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STAGING AND RE-STAGING MARS: THE MARS YARD

**Abstract**

This paper presents an interdisciplinary reading of virtually immersive images used in Mars exploration, re-examining contemporary rover images within a broader framework relating to examples from the history of visual culture, through the prism of photography's relationship to reality, theories of vision and perception and digital and virtual image theory. More specifically the paper looks at the first full resolution composite image taken by the Mars rover Curiosity titled Curiosity's New Home to introduce the concept of 'glitch'. It likens this image to the museum dioramas at the American Museum of Natural History and as photographed by artist Hiroshi Sugimoto; with this in mind I propose the 'Mars Yard' as a similar space of simulation and reconstruction which combines object and image. This paper highlights primary research at JPL's Mars Yard and the Roverscape at NASA Ames but takes as its main case study the indoor Mars Yard being used to test ESA's ExoMars rover. It is this Mars Yard's use of panoramic image along with rocks and sand that enables us to see it as a space of illusion. Drawing on Jean Baudrillard's simulation theory and Christopher Stewart's writing on military test sites as spaces of 'rehearsal', the Mars Yard may be seen as a space of simulation; a staging and re-staging of a landscape that is without a referent. I argue that the Mars Yard is an immersive testing space for the rover, but it is the rover – having Paul Virilio's 'machine vision' – that reveals the glitch: unlike the human visitor to the space who has the ability to imaginatively suspend their disbelief, the rover 'sees' the panoramic image as it is: a flat wall. Revisiting the photographic works of Sugimoto and looking at the artwork of Debby Lauder the paper goes on to explore the ability of the photographic lens to create a feeling of proximity. Drawing on the ideas laid out in both artists' practices, and further definitions of the 'glitch' as a 'slippery area' and productive process that enables us to question what a photograph is and can be (ideas proposed by Edward Dimsdale and Simon O'Sullivan), the paper concludes with a series of photographs. These photographs were captured during a research visit to the Mars Yard and in this instance are the result of a speculative act, performing an immersive encounter, allowing me to 'step' into the image of Mars.