

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

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EXTRA/TERRESTRIAL CULTURE: PERFORMANCE AND OUTER SPACE

**Abstract**

Within the wider movement of Space art that rose during the second half of the XX century, theatre and performance artists have also turned their attention towards extraterrestrial topics. Either working through the genre of science fiction or engaging directly with space and planetary scientists and their current research, the work of these performing artists is increasingly becoming a vehicle to reflect about the larger implications of space exploration. In this light, the rise of space performance (theatre, dance, music, and performance art) is often marked as a direct consequence to the advent of new space technologies in the last seventy years. Yet, the relation between “performance” and “outer space” predates the material exploration of the universe. Since ancient times, rituals and other cultural practices have been performed in diverse cultural contexts in order to bridge the terrestrial and extraterrestrial realms. In this latter sense, the association between “performance” and “outer space” is a historic constant in anthropological knowledge.

Human cultures have had a degree of “extraterrestriality” in them even before the launch of Sputnik I. We can perhaps then say that extraterrestrial culture is a terrestrial phenomenon, and that it has been shaped for centuries by cultural practices, performative on their own right, that have established and represented the relationality between the “terrestrial” and the “extraterrestrial” in a myriad of ways. The epistemic predicates through which we know space are assembled within the parameters of this performative relationality. That is, paradigms such as “the final frontier” have thus far been formed and consolidated as axioms of outer space epistemology by way of establishing a determinate way in which “the terrestrial” is defined by “the extraterrestrial” and viceversa. As with any paradigm, these axioms are not ontological per se, but rather work as the terrestrial epistemic and aesthetic anchors for extraterrestrial culture. Consequently, this is also where much of the work of contemporary space performing artists delves, presenting diverse possibilities to understand humankind’s place in relation to the cosmos, and perhaps offering some insights into what might happen if this relationality was to be broken.

The presentation will feature a series of examples of both ancient performance practices and contemporary performing arts in order to illustrate and further the argument outlined above. In its conclusion, the presentation will share more about the launch of the Performance Studies Space Programme (held at the University of Hamburg in June 2017).