

30th IAA SYMPOSIUM ON SPACE AND SOCIETY (E5)
Contemporary Arts Practice and Outer Space: A Multi-Disciplinary Approach (3)

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SPACE EXPLORATION AS A CULTURAL OBJECT: HOW AND WHY SPACE AGENCIES SHOULD
ENGAGE WITH ARTISTS

Abstract

Space exploration has long provided inspiration for art, from the high-brow to the low; from visual art, to literature, fashion, film: space permeates culture. This 'cultural imagination' of space is, however, effectively divorced from the actual reality of space exploration as practised by engineers and scientists today: it might as well exist in a different galaxy. That the cultural imagination and the concrete reality are quite distinct is not a novel observation. Attempts have been made to address this, but are often stymied by lack of common vocabulary, or a one-sided approach to engagement, or the incompatible expectations and objectives of participants from either side. Equally, many space/art projects start with noble ambitions but result in an interesting but relatively simplistic exchange of ideas. Bernstein's 'aesthetic alienation' provides an instructive starting point for understanding this divorce with the argument that in a post-Kantian world, the truth-value of art has been diminished. Our concrete practice of space exploration might also presents reason for the gulf between space-as-cultural-object and actual-space-exploration: on a basic level, when launching expensive things into space, the scientific basis and conventions of testing and qualification are critical to success. No wonder art is relegated to an optional extra. There are however strategies for fostering meaningful exchange between the arts and the space community. Approaching this challenge from a space agency perspective, this paper examines the conceptual underpinning, practical engagement and exciting outcomes of a recent collaboration between the UK Space Agency and the artist Aleksandra Mir. Mir proclaimed herself First Woman on the Moon in 1999; in 2017 her Space Tapestry charted a new history of space exploration. Artists have the freedom to approach the subject unbound by the constraints of physics or existing technology - but I argue this does not mean that their work demonstrates lesser intellectual rigour or a subordinate truth, and further that the space sector can benefit from a more thoughtful, engaged approach to the arts and humanities. Space agencies are good at utilising the skills of economists, lawyers and artists to achieve specific, narrowly prescribed ends. Working directly with artists in a more open and genuinely collaborative way comes with challenges and risks, but re-thinking the way the space sector engages with culture can benefit all and enhance the democratisation of space.