

IAF SPACE EDUCATION AND OUTREACH SYMPOSIUM (E1)
Space Culture: New Processes of Public Engagement in Space through Culture and Art (9)

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SOUND SYSTEMS: CRAFTING AND PERFORMING SPECULATIVE ETHNOGRAPHIES

Abstract

With every passing year, the promises of “space colonies” become increasingly tangible in the collective imagination, despite the absence of established settlements. With each passing year, Material Instantiations of the extraterrestrial steadily grow in numbers.

As these future artefacts and technologies infuse the current reality, they also present a seemingly homogeneous vision, perpetuating certain practices and concepts inherent to specific belief systems. This proposes a view of the world loaded with ideas of universalism and lacking nuance.

However, the present reality, as far as it is encountered and not only imagined, exhibits a great deal of heterogeneity in experiences. Rather, it portrays a heterogeneous set of realities, showcasing a complexity that is seldom addressed or expected to naturally resolve itself as progress is achieved and technology advances.

But looming on the horizon are familiar caveats, waiting to manifest — a repetition of past mistakes that many continue to grapple with today.

As such, it is important to interrogate which realities are being edited from prevalent cosmological visions and, moreover, to develop alternative cosmologies that can reshape our engagement with certain realities.

Over the past two years, I led the first unit of a two-year master’s course in Industrial Design at the University of the Arts London. With a diverse student body from around the globe, I introduced a design brief known as Sound Systems, aiming to harness the collective experience to envisage new modes of existence beyond Earth’s atmosphere. Sound Systems attempts to present a speculative ethnography shared through extra-planetary rituals, artefacts, and performances during a public event held at public venues in London.

This paper discusses the work produced by students during the unit in 2022 and 2023. It presents a critical analysis of the outcomes, aiming to refine and progress the unit’s methodologies and techniques while unearthing insights guiding the reimagining of our relationship with outer space. Ultimately, the purpose of this initiative is to inspire new design work, alternative cosmological visions, and narrative frameworks, embodying humanity’s future beyond traditional extractive and exploitative practices, and worlds domination.

This opportunity allowed our cohorts to inhabit and manifest tangible worlds we may hope for and the concerns arising from present conditions. By situating design at the intersection of speculative fiction and anthropology, our goal is to craft moments where the imaginary infuses our shared realities. It isn’t about escapism but rather an opportunity to mould, feel, and probe new ones.