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NASA'S GOLDEN RECORD: PROTOTYPING ART-SCIENCE PRACTICE FOR SETI

Abstract

Nearly half a century after the launch of NASA's Voyager probes, the Golden Record stands as a prototype of transcultural art science engagements in the Search for Extra-terrestrial Intelligence (SETI). This paper explores an art historical and media archaeology account of NASA's 1977 Voyager missions, tracing back the spiralling journey of the Voyager probes to ancient and early modern imaginings of the Soul's journey in textual and visual imaginaries, from the 'Dream of Scipio' described in Cicero's work "De Re Publica," to illustrations of Paradiso in Dante's Divine Comedy.

While the design of the mission itself can be read as a developing creative and cultural traditions, the Golden Record itself is an art science artefact that enacts its own kind of 'worlding' through aesthetics, cultural practice, and imagination. The artefact integrates a diverse mix of creative methods from art history and music studies, anthropology, xenolinguistics, the psychology of perception, and zoological research. The plurality of ideas and reference to linguistic and cultural diversity and communication protocols continues to influence practical and poetic design approaches for interstellar messages in METI (Messaging Extra-terrestrial Intelligence) and throughout the arts.

Various artists over the last five decades have responded to the project through fresh creative experiments, and engage creatively and critically with the Voyager missions, from Trevor Paglen's critical treatment in "The Last Pictures" (2012), to art science initiatives like the author's own immersive performance "Of the Spheres" that uses deep listening and sonified data, to diverse creative practice and participatory art.

Can planetary life be read as a form of communication to Extraterrestrial intelligence (ETI)? The More-than-Human perspectives mediated by the Golden Record expand ideas and critiques of SETI, and they enact a provocation for fresh thinking on planetary perspectives and epistemic value that suggests a radical recontextualisation for art history. The More-than-Human thinking engaged by the project invites a perception of the ecological world—and life on Earth—through an aesthetic lens. Now that both probes are beyond the Heliosphere, the Voyagers uniquely expand the frame of reference for creative and poetic material practices. This paper suggests they signal a reimagining of art history that might root a more decolonial aesthetics in eco-cosmological knowledge and plural creaturely and planetary imaginaries.