

ARTE EN ORBITA
post-colonial space exploration

Abstract :

Arte en Orbita (Art in Orbit) is an exhibition of contemporary postcolonial space exploration, centred on South America but with contributions from Africa, Asia and Europe. Space was once the exclusive domain of the super powers, militarized and commercialised, but these artists and agencies from the fringes of the Empire are appropriating the imaginaries and technologies of outer space in a popular movement of empowerment and postcolonial praxis.

"Volveré y seré millones ”
Tupac Katari

Arte en Órbita (*Art in Orbit*) is an exhibition that I curated with Fabiane Borges that was first shown in the Centro de Arte Contemporáneo de Quito in Ecuador from the 7th of March to the 6th of June of 2015. The exhibition focusses on subaltern or peripheral space exploration - from the ancestral to the contemporary, from art experiments to launching satellites. The participants are principally from South America but projects from Africa, Asia and Europe are also featured.

Our contemporary imaginary of space has been dominated by the space race and the cold war of the twentieth century, super powers and menacing aliens. This exhibition seeks to reappraise this imaginary in the light of postcolonial thinking, open software and hardware, the Anthropocene and art, because the way we see space is the way we see ourselves.

This intimacy of space and earth, the constant back and forth between cosmos and planet, the Overview Effect felt by many astronauts when seeing the planet from space, is a continual thread throughout the exhibition and is announced in the first works, three reproductions of Simone Chambelland's seminal 1970 space prints. In two of them we see enigmatic missile or rocket like forms floating above the earth, in the third, entitled *University of Space*, we see a space station covered with antennas, announcing another theme of the exhibition, the antenna, the ability to listen and observe, key to our relationship with space.

Simone was a French artist who emigrated to Chile in 1939 and died there in 2013. The print was an important technique in this period for a whole generation of South American artists, generally from the Left, who sought to step out of the privileged world of fine arts and assure that their art arrived to the people. The workshop was a fundamental place for both production and meeting, like Taller Rojo in Bogotá, Colombia, and Taller99 in Santiago de Chile where Simone Chambelland created these pieces. This DIY and popular ethic is also a constant presence in the exhibition, the reclamation and appropriation of space as a commons and the Overview Effect for everybody.

Haiku A Gaia, the second work of the exhibition and the first of two works included by the Mexican Arcangel Constantini. In this installation old decaying model of the earth is bathed in electromagnetic pulses from a parabolic antenna, their form and frequency generated by a text to voice software reading haikus. Between the earth and the antenna is a mist of water generated by sound. Its a mistreated earth

suffering from global warming and political and economic regimes that are unable to change. The Anthropocene is the geological age that we are living in, where the effects of humans have become one of the most powerful forces modifying the earth. The overview effect permits us to think about the earth in another way, but this thinking seems so far from the economic and social realities that surround us.

It is from observation and listening that we can build our relationship with the cosmos and this is very clear in the Pre-Colombian civilisations of the Andes. In the area of Quito, especially in Cayambe where the equatorial line passes, many ancient architectural formations can be found, aligned with solstice and equinoctial positions of the sun. The work of the Chilean artist Carolina Ibarra *Kunan Skywatcher* opens the section of the exhibition that we call *Escucha* (Listening) but it could also be called Observation or Connection. The section starts with Ibarra's work, a floating planet based on a Pre-Colombian solar observatory from Cayambe depicted in an 18th century engraving by Juan de Olloa and continues with the *Artisanal Kosmic Drawer* by the Brazilian artist Denise Alves-Rodrigues, a dispositive made of bamboo to draw one's own maps of the stars, and 13 sculptures by the Ecuadorian artist Felipe Jacomé, burnt trees becoming persons (or *vice versa*) looking up at the sky, searching for the overview from a dying planet, or observing the movement of the stars as we have for millennia.

Today an antenna is the mandatory interface with the celestial beings we call satellites and if the antennas seemed remote and unobtainable in Chambelland's images, the videos by Plathedro from Colombia and Bruno Vianna from Brazil show them in a completely different light, home-made from recycled parts, based on the physics commons of waveforms and frequencies, they can be built by anyone. This challenge to technological hegemony, the appropriation of the radio waves and the fight against imperial dispositives is central to Alejandro Duque's work. Originally from Medellín, Colombia, and now living in Switzerland, Alejo is a founding member of the Movimiento Do Sem Satelites (MSST), an influential alliance of activists, technomagicians, performance artists and space investigators who have a lot in common with the Association of Autonomous Astronauts (AAA), pioneers of people's space travel, back in the 1990s. Duque is one of the exponents of the anti-launching wing of this movement, split between those who are in favour of launching a satellite and those who are not, arguing that space is already full of artefacts - thousands and thousands in orbit around the planet - better to hack what is there, penetrate security systems and occupy radio space. His sound piece *You'll never be an astronaut* is a homage to radio and its position as principal mediator between humans and space, and thus an ideological and technical battleground.

The first country to launch a satellite was the Soviet Union in 1957 with the Sputnik. It circled the earth approximately 1400 times before falling, 92 days after its launch and burning up. It was a sphere of aluminium, 58 cm wide with 4 antennas of 2.4 and 2.9 length. The same dimensions as Simon Vega's version, which appropriates the form and the material of the Sputnik but the sphere is made of pieces of aluminium from beer cans and the antennas are bamboo. The *Third World Sputnik* is part of the El Salvadorian artist's *Tropical Space Proyectos*, a series of historical spacecraft made from trash, and an imaginary space agency, where these trash constructions appropriate the imaginary of space power. As co-curator Fabiane Borges writes in one of the curatorial wall texts that accompany the exhibition :

"Imaginaries and symbolic appropriations function as tools for the struggle and for the affirmation of territories. There is always outer space for the dispossessed and the cultivation of empowering technologies and poetics. Satellites and spacesuits made from rubbish, home made precarious space craft, are a political critique, appropriations of the codes of the dominant cultures, assuming the imagination as an extremely real intervention in the codes of the intelligibility of society."

The question of the affirmation of a territory through the imaginary of space travel or exploration is most explicit in the projects of *Che-Wan* and the Palestinian Space Agency. *Che-Wan* is the proposed satellite for a new country, called Cubec, that the Rhinoceros party of Canada is seeking to create through the fusion of Quebec and Cuba, while the Palestinian Space Agency arose as a node of possibilities in the almost completely blocked reality of life in Palestine. The PSA, currently represented by Aisha El-Salou, began as an art project with the Swiss artist Gilles Fontollet but then Aisha was appointed First National Point of Contact of the State of Palestine by the Space Generation Advisory Council, a United Nations advisory body. As she writes :

"When I received the letter from the executive council that approved my application I was amazed and happy at the same time because I am representative and co-founder of the Palestinian Space Agency, and it confirmed my belief in this as a real agency more than an art project. It makes me more powerful to keep going forward despite the life in refugee camps that make dreams of us as human beings broken, hopeless, looking for a job, for food, for a land, looking for the sky for movement for freedom. This appointment opened a great doors to the youth of Palestine to contribute in science and learning the art of building the satellite, I hope one day to see a real Palestinian satellite moving in orbit to discover outer space."

These projects open the section of the exhibition centred on Agencies, understood both in terms of Space Agency and to have Agency, that is the capacity to act on the world. The African Space Research Program, also part of this section, and headed by Chris Nsambe, is working towards nationalist space participation, for Uganda and Africa. His tireless labour in precarious conditions combines technological experimentation and building space vehicles with political lobbying. Like *VUFOC* from Indonesia and Pilar Quinteros from Chile, the group is also fascinated by aliens and UFOs, indeed ASRP was originally founded in the hope that the first discovery of extraterrestrial life would be by Africans. Leila Lopes, a black women's activist from Brazil and explicitly inspired by afrofuturism (the appropriation of future narratives from black realities), imagines in her photo compositions the possibility of an escape from earth and the return to an original black planet with a spaceship body, ancestral African knowledge, breasts like moons and the yearning for a lost world. Similarly *La Oficina de Asuntos Extraterrestres* from Bogotá, Colombia, mix practises of the indigenous peoples of their country with 20th century space flight, exorcising the USA moon landings and explicitly linking ancestral practises with contemporary technologies and imaginaries in what we could, maybe, name as ancestrofuturism.

The Kongo Astronauts (KA), based in Kinshasa, DR Congo, explicitly refer to afrofuturism and post-colonialism when they describe their practise. The Congo is a country that has been viciously colonised and is now the main world source of coltan and a wide array of other precious metals and minerals that are fundamental for the 21st century global civilisation while the majority of the population is submerged in poverty and war. In their videos and photographs we see an astronaut, in a spacesuit made of recycled materials, making unexpected appearances in popular neighbourhoods, or in the forest. The video that is shown in the exhibition, *Postcolonial Dilemma Track 3*, shows our astronaut trapped in barbed wire, a monkey appears, and then he is walking through the forest, he seems to be exploring, sensing. It is not clear if he is an alien visitor or an exile returning from a journey of light years to a familiar but unknown world. It has often been said that science fiction narratives can have a special sense for those who have experienced the radical displacement of slavery or colonial regimes, and thus it becomes a laboratory of postcolonial thought and action.

When the exhibition was being set up and it was the moment for the Kongo Astronauts to send the material the internet was cut in the Congo and it was impossible to send anything. They suggested that

we look for a painter in Quito who could effectuate this teletransportation equatorial, inspiring themselves in the world of the KA. The translation of the KA astronaut from Kinshasa to a canvas in Ecuador was carried out by the artist Irving Ramó who painted a portal where we see the Astronaut stepping into the chakana, the Andean cross that represents the Andean cosmovision and its relation with the solstices and equinoxes.

Amongst the nearly 30 groups and artists from Latin America, Africa, Asia and Europe that participate in the exhibition, 6 of them belong to equatorial nations, reactivating the collaboration heralded by the Bogotá Declaration, signed by 8 equatorial nations in 1976 to demand territorial rights over the geostationary orbit above their territory. The Declaration, that was roundly ignored by the international community, was rediscovered & revisited by Alejandro Duque and the space investigator and artist Joanna Griffin, author of some of the most interesting contemporary satellite and space research, who includes in the exhibition her interpretation of the Declaration through exercises with chalk and stones to help us imagine it. The Instituto Espacial Ecuatoriano (IEE), part of the Ecuadorian military forces, has declared its support for geostationary orbital sovereignty and in the constitution of Colombia the geostationary orbit (38 000 km) is included in its national territory. Maybe the African-Latin American summit of 2016 in Quito could be a critical moment to reactivate the Declaration and herald a new era of equatorial collaboration.

Cristobal Cobo at least would be happy. He is one of the principal experts in astroarchaeology, tracing the celestial alignments of Pre-Colombian constructions and directs the Quitsato project in Cayambe, an hour from Quito, that takes care of a solar observatory situated exactly on the Equator. A guided visit was part of the Observatories workshop that accompanied the exhibition (as well as workshops on satellites and antennas) and that consisted of visits to ancestral and contemporary observatories, including a satellite ground station abandoned by NASA in the 80s and currently recuperated by the IEE. Cobo explains that our view of the world with North above and South below is false in relation to the sun, in fact the earth is orientated East-West (that's why the sun rises and sets in these directions) and that this vision could have profound implications for our view of the world, replacing the imaginary of the equator as North-South divide with an East-West union.

Cristobal is one of a trio of Ecuadorian space experts included in the exhibition, the others are UFO expert Jaime Rodriguez, a famous figure in Ecuador for his television series and tireless work communicating and researching the UFO phenomenon, and Ronnie Nader, the only Ecuadorian NASA astronaut and director of EXA, the Ecuadorian Civil Space Agency that recently launched the Pegaso and Krysaor microsateles. Ronnie is an unwittingly comic figure, completely absorbed in his role as Space Commander and known for his machismo and exaggerated nationalism, but the imagery and discourse that EXA has developed places it firmly amongst the most interesting agencies, blurring the line between imaginaries and technology. "Yes I Can", Ronnie shouts out loud in response to a space age remix of Spivak's fundamental question, "Can the subaltern speak?".

Ronnie Nader's EXA opens the third and last section of the exhibition devoted to the fine art of launching satellites, such as *Ulises I* the Mexican satellite/art program, and building rockets, such as Copenhagen Suborbitals. There's something about masculinity and rockets that seems confirmed here by the absence of women in this area of the exhibition (with the notable exception of Remi Hoefmueller, sound artist and radio activist, from the Mur.sat collective in Austria), even if there are also more ambiguous masculinities like Hong Sojun's, the young Korean artist and designer behind the delightful *Open Source Satellite Initiative* (OSSSI). Co-curator and rocket enthusiast Fabiane Borges contributes a fascinating video interview with Peter Madsen, co-founder of the Copenhagen Suborbitals, the only non governmental and non military group that we know about doing serious open

source rocket research and testing.

If we want to listen to the satellites that are already up there then we need a map and this is precisely what the software *GPredict* does, showing us the location, inclination and radius of reception of open satellites on a world map. Luca Carruba first intervened the software for his work *Sonando Satelites*, translating satellite data to sound, that was developed in the hacker workshop *Orbitando Satelites*, organised by Plataforma Cero in LABoral Art Centre in 2011. In this new version created for the exhibition he includes, as well as the standard "real" satellites, all the space vehicles that are shown in the exhibition so that all the agencies have their satellite in orbit. Undermining the veracity of the map or engineering it's capacity to generate reality, even if its only a little bit, or, as President Correa mentioned to Ronnie Nader on the launching of Pegaso, "Its very small, but it's a start".

Bolivia's satellite, Tupac Katari, is anything but small. A 5.2 ton commercial telecommunications satellite bought and launched, in 2014, from China into geostationary orbit above the mountainous country, bringing previously inconceivable national communications coverage. The art and publicity campaign for the project is also totally ancestrofuturist, explicitly connecting ancestral spiritual themes with satellites and space travel. The satellite is named after Tupac Katari, husband of Bartolina Sisa and an important leader defeated in the struggle against Spanish colonisation at the end of the 18th century, and takes as one of its slogans his famous cry as he was dismembered "I will come back and I will be millions" (*Volveré y seré millones*). This idea of return runs through the cosmovision of the Andes where time is cyclic and balanced and thus the satellite becomes a new leader to fight against colonialism, but now as millions, the whole Bolivian nation united by the satellite and Evo Morales, the first indigenous president. Ancestral cosmovision meets contemporary satellite technology generating new intercultural mythologies and plurinational commons. Critics accuse the program as pure propaganda and manipulation of imaginaries by a state intent on perpetuating itself in power, backed by Chinese neocolonialism, although nobody can deny that the satellite works.

Considerably more speculative but no less visionary is Arcangel Constantini's *SIMS* project that closes the exhibition, the prototype of a satellite that would bathe the earth in the AUM mantra converted into electromagnetic waves. Basing his investigation on Tibetan prayer wheels and the electromagnetic discoveries of Tesla and Faraday, Constantini proposes an orbital happy ending to the nightmare situation he depicted at the beginning of the exhibition in *Haiku-A-Gaia*, merging spirituality and technological progress for a world in harmony and balance for everybody.

Pedro Soler
ps@riseup.net