Chapter XVII

Commerce in Space: Infrastructures, Technologies, and Applications

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ABSTRACT

It is hard to track the history and meaning of space art because it holds such widely varied meanings for differing constituencies and, compared with other disciplines, has diverse participation, but little formal history in space development. However, we all seem to be interested in following the exploration and discovery of space, largely through the powerful images that characterize its progress. There are two major constituencies that are worlds apart: the usually consistent formal and popular visual documentation of the development of space, and the intermittent and reluctant interest of the fine or academic arts.

PART 1

The first world of formal and popular visual documentation includes all of the photographs and illustrative documentation of far away places and the vehicles and hardware to get us there. Space agencies have documented every aspect of this development, from the first whole views of our gentle planet and astronauts stepping onto the surface of the moon to the unusual surfaces of Venus and Mars and constantly increasing telescopio information about deep space. These images first act as a means of simply keeping track and recording any anomalies, but because of their sheer number and perspective, contain information that reach at the soul of our curiosity and desire to know. The space shuttle has a collection of onboard cameras that click away in independent observation, recording many possibly interesting or informative elements; most of this film remains undeveloped and unobserved, and that doesn’t even start to consider the influence of moving images. The best of these images end up in press releases, on walls of museums, and in
entrepreneurial coffee table books about space. They range from beautiful examples of other worlds to “discoveries” of the face of Jesus in a deep space nebula.

There has also been a large collection of illustrative artists, graphic designers, and artistically curious others who find allure, creative motivation, and subject matter in this photographic documentation. Their use of these images as an artistic base commonly transpose the formal documentation of space into recognizable forms of artistic process such as traditional drawing, painting, printmaking, and sculpture.

Space agencies recognize the vital role that the arts play in public understanding, mediation, and the subsequent popular interest, support, and related funding. The National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), as well as the proceeding military organizations, have programs designed to allow artistic participation and promotion. But this is also where we start to see some of the dichotomies that surround space art. While some in these organizations may have an awareness of the significant role that the arts can play, they also realize how frivolous these endeavors may and can be made to appear to a critical eye, especially when they fall so apparently far from the intended practical purpose of the scientific organization. Contemporary space exploration and its related innovations are documented by traditional and historic modes in the arts. The continuing reality is that it is hard for administrators, in ever tightening public budgets, to justify even these activities that appear so unnecessary and are so hard to define, especially pragmatically to those that provide and control the necessary funding.

Like so many other elements of space development, these fledgling programs started in the military services and evolved to the space agencies. The Salmagundi Art Club in New York City has administered some of the programs for United States military and space organizations and the organizations have found ways to established ongoing programs and program support. They represent various forms of characterization and justification and their own descriptions provide a fair and accurate understanding of the underlying scientific development.

Military Programs

The Navy Art Program, founded in 1941 by Griffith Baily Coale, sent artists into the field in an effort to record the drama and complexity of combat through works of art. Later in World War II, Abbot Laboratories of Chicago, with the help of the Associated American Artists (AAA) and the military, commissioned artists to document all aspects of the war. The Navy Combat Program was revived in Korea and Vietnam with the assistance of the Salmagundi Club, later merged with the Naval Historical Center, and artists were also sent to the Persian Gulf and Desert Storm.

While these programs may have been started by creative and ambitious artists employing creative processes to significant cultural occurrences, over the years they seem to have lost that edge or, at least, brought into debate the concepts of meaning and competency. The resulting artwork often depends too much on visual depiction and the inherent beauty and interest in the subject matter, that they often miss fundamental aspects of design and the value of broader meaningful content.

Nonetheless, the Navy Art Collection has over 13,000 works of art covering all aspects of U.S. Naval history, including aviation and space (Naval Historical Center, 2006).

These programs were often buried under the complexity of government jargon and not well publicized or easily accessible, and therefore were open more to those who had some means of connection, or understanding of bureaucracy, access, or persistence vs. those who satisfied any kind of consistent professional measure (The Federal Register, 2004).