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Orbital oscillations

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DEPARTURE

For the past year and a half I have been living on a space station.¹

Thus begins another telling of the story, the story of Space Camp; our home away from home, our ideal island, our impossible machine. For us, Space Camp is a place that doesn’t exist, yet it is as real as anything else floating around, in the air, pulling us from place to place.

Josh Eklow, a fellow Intermedia Graduate student, and I have been telling this story for almost two years now and for us it has begun to accumulate its own gravity; its own presence that extrudes beyond the boundaries of its imagination, its own re-telling. While certainly we remain here on Earth, we continue to project ourselves wherever it feels right. And in the words of the prolific afro-futurist Sun Ra: “Space is the place.”²

Like Ra, whose medium of travel was music, Space Camp travels through mediums of wire, tape, and air. We exist in a constant state of departure.

Figure 1 "In some far off place, many light years in space, I’ll build a world of abstract dreams and wait for you." Still from the film “Space is the Place”, Sun Ra, 1974
The story that floats between us becomes embodied in the work we make as the artist collective Space Camp. This story, however, remains un-affixed to any stable surface. We do not merely re-enact that which is already inscribed, but rather perform new versions of a rambling tale; one being told from some uncertain location, dropping in from some unknown era.

Space Camp acts as a conductor of this story, but its modes of producing and representing itself also lack any real fixity. While we are, indeed, still in the Orbital Video Archive (O.V.A.) floating in geosynchronous orbit somewhere over the Northern Mariana Islands, there is room to wander, to bend both the physical and non-physical spaces we inhabit, folding things in on themselves to see where the edges line up and where they break. Space is infinite, or so we believe, and its potential holds us captivated as we drift through its quiet corridors.

But how do we picture this potential? And how do we come to inhabit it?

Figure 2 Enhanced digital photograph of the Orbital Video Archive, taken from Earth, 2010
As we drift though this space, we slowly unravel ideas, glimpses of other dimensions resembling our own, attempts to articulate our own existence both fragmentary and incomplete. The telling of our story has served as the catalyst for a series of actions, conversations, documents, ideas and temporary experiences, both real and fictitious, that disperse along an invisible horizon. Sometimes it is visible, sure, but there is always that space just beyond the horizon where the orbit continues, neither slowing down nor gaining momentum, just chilling, in space.

It’s the real thing.

Figure 3 Scanned image from a discarded library book, from the Space Camp Reader (forthcoming), 2011
ARRIVAL

*We have embraced our atmospheric condition.*

Finding yourself lost in space can be quite the paradigm shift. The sudden loss of gravity may feel intense, but with a few careful moments of re-calibration, you can steady yourself and adjust the tracking.

Inhabiting this space, whatever form it may take, has become a way of questioning our own position as artists as well as the continually shifting contexts in which we find ourselves working towards some sort of public presence.

Figure 4 Video still from “Amboy Crater”, a collaboration between Space Camp and recent University of Iowa MFA graduate in Painting, Isaac Sullivan, 2011
Taking up residence in an abandoned, possibly imaginary, space station may work to underscore an outsider position, one that functions best in “the contested frontier between the so-called real world and spaces and cultures operating at the edges of constructed reality.”

During some of our earlier attempts to communicate home, Josh and I began to re-inhabit the obsolete space age technologies that we had become surrounded with in the O.V.A. And since re-inhabiting something is also an attempt to figure out its inherent potential, we began to explore what made these technologies work in the first place.

These attempts were not always successful, but even the artifacts of our failure have come to serve as new images defining our relationship to the world. And just as using an existing image always creates a new one, we felt that if we were to make the right kind of videos then others may come closer to understanding our position, or perhaps even their own.

And sometimes what we were trying to say just burned up on re-entry, leaving behind only traces of our charred, broken ideals.
Figure 5 Early Space Camp communications prototype, 2010
OUR FUTURE IS NEAR

After the failure of our earlier attempts, we began to explore a different kind of space. With some intercepted signals from the Northern Mariana Islands, a dusty old communications array, and all the hours we were able to extract from an unopened box of America Online free internet trial discs, we were able to establish a new connection.  

“The Internet was the future, it was bringing us into new dimensions, closer to other galaxies.”

As we adjust our orbit slightly, new possibilities emerge.

Figure 6 Google image search result for “America Online free Internet trial disc”, 2011
Figure 7 Space Camp Relay Station, located in the Northern Mariana Islands, 2011

Figure 8 Screen capture of the Space Camp online communications system, www.spacecamp.fm, 2011
The way that Space Camp has approached working with the web has been that of a naive user, someone that is just discovering a new technology, or one that can still believe in and enact its potential. As we approach the generic forms of HTML 1.0, for example, we gesture towards an era where the web still represented a link to the unknown, to new discoveries, unlikely connections and unrealized possibilities. While in our current Post-Internet culture, the web has become less of a novelty and more of a banality.

In response to this condition, we work to construct an alternate universe where these pathways remain open and charged with a curious kind of energy, never knowing quite where they may lead.

At Space Camp, we remain nostalgic for the future.

“The cup of Internet runneth over, its contents greater than its container.”

Figure 9 Space Camp Prayer (after Alan Shepard), www.spaceca.mp, 2011
NOTES

1. From an oral introduction to Space Camp given as a visiting artist talk at the University of Rijeka, Academy of Applied Arts, Rijeka Croatia, 2010. Presentations of Space Camp’s work for the public always set up the opportunity to explore the paradox of our dual presence. While we are certain to exist in Space, further research is needed to either confirm or deny our current earth-bound existence.

2. “In tomorrow’s world, men will not need artificial instruments such as jets and space ships. In the world of tomorrow, the new man will ‘think’ the place he wants to go, then his mind will take him there.” Sun Ra, 1956

3. Shaped suspiciously like an old VCR, the Orbital Video Archive or O.V.A. serves as home base and primary research facility for the Space Camp crew. Discovered after an accidental space launch, the crew inhabits and lovingly maintains the dusty, weathered, archive vessel (which contains countless discarded books, VHS tapes, and other disposable remnants of our cultural history).


6. America Online is the Internet service provider that became the host of the world’s largest online community during the early to mid 1990s. Space Camp uses America Online’s campaign to distribute free trail Internet “hours” to the public as reclamation of all the unused time that remains embedded in each of these unused trail discs.


8. In much the style of off-coast radio pirates, Space Camp transmits their off-planet programming to a relay station in a place that fits both their geographical and philosophical needs, Las Islas de los Ladrones (The Islands of Theives).