

TOMÁS SARACENO

OUR INTERPLANETARY BODIES



In a fabled experiment conducted in 1937, Harold Saxton Burr, a neuroanatomist at Yale University, proved the presence of electrodynamic fields around salamander eggs. The experiment would be fundamental to scientists who have since posited that the basis of life is found in fields of electrical energy, through which we interact with other living things. In other words, human beings are, by nature, not simply biochemical, but informational creatures that communicate constantly via invisible frequencies. Such new-agey theories have been sidelined as mysticism or quackery, perhaps because humankind has yet to subsume such ideas under its political agendas and capital machines, and because civilization has engendered that we favor the energetically masculine approach of screaming until our faces are red, producing a hullabaloo, instead of tuning in to the insensible.

Argentinian-born, Berlin-based artist Tomás Saraceno goes further to say that we are now in an “age of urgency of communication”—as in *our* narrative is controlled and written by a privileged few, and, in our “post-truth” society where commitments such as the Paris Agreement on climate change are now negotiable, we have become so ignorant of our relationships with ourselves and those around us, human or otherwise, that homo sapiens are shaping up to be an altogether insociable species. The artist’s response to this? Give a spider the damn microphone.

Arachnidan vibes filled the darkened entryway leading into the exhibition hall at the Asia Culture Center, because any minute movement on the performer’s web-turned-musical-instrument was detected by a sensor, mapped and processed algorithmically, then amplified and broadcast from a wall of speakers 12 meters high, adjacent to the entrance. By the artist’s own account,

the sounds that emerge resemble the vibrations of Saturn recorded and shared by NASA, but also do not stray too far from human imaginings of outer space, reminiscent of the sound effect signifying a UFO’s fly-by in a 1980s science-fiction movie.

On the gargantuan screen that concealed the sound sources, on the other hand, was an aggrandized constellation charting the movements of dust particles that were collected on a speaker’s surface, momentarily dispersed in the air by its thumping. These aerial pathways were further agitated by visitors in the room, and then registered by a motion-tracking device. The spider was a star of a different sort, illuminated by a spotlight that projected a disc of brightness onto the same screen showing the dust’s flow, evoking a moon—a reminder of how Earth’s shadow is cast on the satellite during a lunar eclipse, as well as the exhibition’s title: “Our Interplanetary Bodies.”

The range in the artist’s scale of thought—transcending and connecting realms from dust to planets, human to cosmic, artistic and scientific—is also evident in the question that he posed to visitors on the exhibition’s opening day: “How do we fly with our feet on the ground?” The experience of verticality was relayed by nine inflated glowing orbs of varying volumes that took up the majority of the room’s vast capacity. Tethered to the floor and ceiling, the installation dwarfed visitors in its direct mimicry of a planetary system, demanding viewers navigate around the globes in trajectories dictated by imagined gravitational pulls, activating the otherwise dead space. In *Aerocene* (2016), the same question is explored in straightforward physical terms: participants were invited to maneuver an air sculpture in the institution’s courtyard, utilizing solar energy to heat the air within the pyramidal form and carry it upward. The work calls out the false promises of modernity—including the many freedoms that are often heralded as part of our universal rights, such as that of movement—as well as highlighting the consequences of the anthropocene.

While the exhibition resembled the world expositions and science fairs of preceding centuries with its grand scales as well as explorative dialogue with technological and scientific developments, it lacked the joy and hope of such precursors. Most definitely not a celebration of human achievement, the proposals of “Our Interplanetary Bodies” were antithetical, in that the artist called for a liberation day from fossil fuels, though he nevertheless underscored the significance of human agency.

CHLOE CHU

Opposite page

KOO JEONG A

Installation view of *Mysteriouss* and *Curiousssa*, both 2017, at “Ajeongkoo,” Art Sonje Center, Seoul, 2017. Photo by Sang Tae Kim. Courtesy Art Sonje Center.

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Installation view of “Our Interplanetary Bodies” at Asia Culture Center, Gwangju, 2017. Photo by Swan Park. Courtesy Asia Culture Center.