Strange Attractors

The Anthology of Interplanetary Folk Art

Vol. 1 Life on Earth

Organized by Bob Nickas

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Josh Tonsfeldt
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The twin Voyager space probes were launched by NASA between August and September 1977. Almost forty years later, their instruments are still providing data to scientists here on Earth, though they may not include any members of the original team, and how useful the data will prove is open to debate. Having traveled beyond the rings and moon of Saturn, the probes should continue their mission in interstellar space for another seven or eight years, until about 2025, at which time nearly a half century will have passed. The Voyager probes are the oldest man-made objects sent furthest from the Earth. Yet considering the age of the universe—the Big Bang is thought to have occurred about 14 billion years ago—a half century only sounds like a long time to mere mortals. Even a centenarian, someone who lives to 100, is embryonic, comparatively speaking. One year in the life of the universe is equal to about 1/100th of a second, so whenever you blink you miss much more than you may have thought. But no matter. There's always more to see, more to experience. Imagine a Voyager probe, its power generated by plutonium and thus destined for radioactive decay, not so many years from now, its radio signal fading, endlessly adrift, a mini-Chernobyl afloat in the vastness of deep space, buoyed by the quasi-infinities of thought and perception, deadly space-junk far above our heads, out of sight, not entirely out of mind.

A half century. This is also not particularly long when you consider some of the oldest sculpture created on the planet: the Venus of Hohle Fels and the Lion Man of Hohlenstein-Stadel. Dating from 35,000 to 40,000 years ago, these are

Image caption: Josh Tonsfeldt, Monkey, Elephanta Island, 2017

the earliest representations of humans, or of human-like figures that we know of; carved from the tusk of mammoths, from ivory, an entirely non-threatening material compared to plutonium. Although disagreement continues where the gender of the Lion Man is concerned, in pairing them we may yet recognize the Venus and the Lion Man as a couple, perhaps more representative of the beginnings of life on earth, and by extension of art, than the stylized line drawing that accompanied the Voyager space probes. The NASA couple is clearly male-female and white, the woman visibly pregnant, designating her ideal primary function: to reproduce, to carry forth the species. With the gender of the Lion Man in doubt, claimed by some as male, by others female, we might identify this as possibly the earliest representation of a transitional body, in which case, although 40,000 years old, a prehistoric figure resonates that much more deeply for our time. And the Venus, also descended from the Ice Age, may appear that much more resonant than the Venus de Milo, whose cold classicism alienates it from the very earthly-womb that connects us, if not directly to the caves in Germany where those carvings were discovered, than to a place inside the ground—and not a marble quarry—in which prehistoric life found shelter, where art was first created and emerged. Art, we can see, was an underground activity from the start—the cave as studio/gallery—and yet it was a communal endeavor, meant to be shared; pictures painted and drawn, imbued with meaning, visual language predating the spoken and written word, possessing a power to communicate that reverberates still, a fulcrum between futures and pasts.

Art works are space probes of a sort. To understand them in this way is, on the one hand, to test our tolerance for what may be accepted as such, while on the other to marvel at art's heightened capacity to retrieve, translate, and transmit information beyond itself, far beyond the moment in which it was made. Works of art may thus be thought to store data for future retrieval, to aid us in imagining what came before—to possibly confound a given narrative—as well as what's to come, and in this we envision a reciprocal elasticity. Time moves in more than one direction. Hasn't it always? Even fixed images are permeable in a temporal sense. The memory-object that is a photograph takes us back to another point in our lives, allows us to explore other lives and distant worlds, otherwise unknown. These objects are portable, reproducible and circulate. Humans set objects in motion and orbit around them, animate one another, encourage exchange and in this sense live on. Art works can serve as markers in time, as history has shown. Will this always be so? Of one thing we can be sure: every work outlasts its maker. Those which would lay claim to permanence merely amplify the volume of a shared vulnerability: monuments imposed upon the surface of the earth, holding it down as it were, their creators compelled to leave behind a lasting evidence of who we were precisely because, inevitably, we were, because we disappear. Every human is gone far longer than he or she was alive.

Where are the engineers who built and launched Voyager? Where are those who conceived, and whose works are encoded within, its time capsule? Each of the probes carried with them a Golden Disc, considered then to be the ultimate "message in a bottle," a compilation of images, scientific data, natural sounds, greetings in 55 languages, and music presenting an overview of life on Earth, including everything from Bach played by Glenn Gould to Chuck Berry's Johnny B. Goode. At the time, the folklorist Alan Lomax objected to the song as adolescent, but Carl Sagan, who had envisioned the project, defended its inclusion by insisting, "There are a lot of adolescents on the planet." (Other than a stylus, the discs came with no playback system. If one of the probes was discovered, and with it a Golden Disc, how do we know if intelligent life would have figured out how it could be played? And if the intelligent life was adolescent, might a disc have more readily been used as a frisbee?) Another song that was initially chosen, "Here Comes the Sun," by the Beatles, had to be left off the disc; the group agreed but their record company, EMI, which held the copyright, refused. We can only wonder: did it occur to anyone to replace it with Nina Simone's interpretation? Would it have mattered that she was black and a woman? Or was her balancing act, infusing hope with sadness, simply too human?

Music accounts for about three quarters of the disc's contents. There is almost no visual art. Are artists, even the "great" ones, somehow too alien, of the Earth but extra-terrestrial? Why was art set aside in favor of various recordings?—the sound of a kiss, of a whale, ocean waves, and a message from Sagan's young son: “Hello from the children of planet Earth.” Art from the caves in Altamira, Lascaux and Chauvet would have communicated as much, if not more. Art works may be thought of as "strange attractors," drawing us towards them, while also being attracted to,

and possibly summoning, one another. There is an interconnectedness across distant points in time and space that cannot be denied. The very idea of the contemporary as it persists within the art world is meant to deny art's connection to the larger realm; to tribalism, ritual, and folk-magic, to history itself, which insists, and for some inconveniently so, that meaning inhabits objects and images, may be sensed, is alive inside them—and when it's not, that absence is palpably felt. At its most resonant, art vibrates, in the words of Lee Lozano, quantum-mechanically, its structure and behavior visible on an almost molecular level, and doesn't necessarily require translation, and not in more than fifty languages. An exhibition comprised of contemporary artworks, proposing them as "interplanetary folk art," questions the very notion of the contemporary, which itself appears antiquated today—the very designation representing a sort of interminable holding pattern into which art has been placed—a thing of the past.

Forty years after Voyager, the question lingers: What would we place in a time capsule today? And if art is to be included, representations from the figurative to the abstract—and abstraction is, after all, even a monochrome, a representation of space—what would we choose? This show attempts a first step, to be followed by others, towards compiling a visual record of life on Earth, never to be considered definitive, always speculative in the best sense, and inclusive in that it would never be complete, may be added to by others at other times and elsewhere, as long as interest, mischief and curiosity remains.

Bob Nickas
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A writer and curator based in New York, Bob Nickas has organized over 100 exhibitions since 1984, and earned a reputation for an individual style that transgresses the accepted. He was Curatorial Advisor at P.S.1/MoMA in New York between 2004-07, where his exhibitions include *Lee Lozano: Drawn From Life*; *William Gedney—Christopher Wool: Into the Night*; *Stephen Shore: American Surfaces*; and *Wolfgang Tillmans: Freedom From The Known*. He served on the team for the 2003 Biennale de Lyon, contributed a section to Aperto at the 1993 Venice Biennale, and collaborated with Cady Noland on her installation for Documenta IX in 1992.

His books include *Painting Abstraction: New Elements In Abstract Painting*, *Catalog Of the Exhibition*, and three collections of his writing and interviews: *Theft Is Vision*, *Live Free or Die* and *The Dept. of Corrections*. A new collection, *Komp-Laint Dept.*, is forthcoming from Karma.

Currently, Nickas is programming MAY 68, a book and record shop in New York's Chinatown, which is a one-year project, running from September 2017 to September 2018.