



Ephemeral Afterimage

Carmelo Pampillonio and Samuel Hertz project statement

2022

Ephemeral Afterimage is a sculptural extension of Carmelo Pampillonio and Samuel Hertz's *Librations* project. It launched into space on February 19th, 2022, where it will orbit aboard the International Space Station until 2025, when it flies to its permanent destination: the surface of the moon. The piece consists of a recorded echo of the artists' own reflected voices — which was bounced off of the moon and received by radio observatories around the world — and kinetically seared into a reflective sphere.

“Burned into the retina” is engraved with CO₂ into steel, the most commonly used metal in industry, like a last metabolic breath. The mineral history of the earth bubbles up and towards the moon, and as industry lurches outward to extend its grasp on our planet's satellite, we experience a flattening of our collective romanticized fantasy of the moon as a pristine object of our heavenly firmament.

The rhythmicity of the Earth-Moon system and the echoes within emerges through the line, palpably tethering our social timescale to a more-than-human geologic timescale, and casting it off to our planet's satellite to be found again.

However, *Ephemeral Afterimage's* outward journey happens by way of an unfortunate and unexpected carrier: one of the world's largest weapons manufacturing and military contracting corporations. In this case, Northrop Grumman – in the role of mission resupply contractor for NASA – handles the launch of our etched voices towards the International Space Station.

Whereas shipping the piece to space is part of a general capitalist positivism, it also delineates some of the most ubiquitous and problematic aspects of working with technology in the art world – namely, how the proverbial intersection of Art and Technology is always one block away from the corner of Silicon Valley and military contractors.

The modest reticence of art-world endeavors to acknowledge the silicon tentacles-in-the-room stands in stark contrast to the colossal industrial complexities seeping through the gallery floorboards, financing and appropriating their labor and dreams.

The 'benign' nature of this specific ISS resupply mission – in addition to works of art, this mission carries aboard numerous scientific experiments – further articulates the bare truth that technoscientific engagement both at state and international levels (not to mention those of art/science collaboratives) are continually predicated on military infrastructure and resources. Where the robot arms, neural networks, blockchain initiatives, and rocket engines are fed by market interests – the steel-bound trace of our voices encircling the Earth leave behind, within the atmosphere, chemical traces of a private military supplier which has enabled it.

As the Earth-Moon-Earth communications we work with have complex historical roots intertwined within military, surveillance, and scientific regimes, we are under no illusion of the embedded connections behind technologies and institutions, and recognized no difference in whether or not the piece was withdrawn from the depths of the cargo hold.

As Laboria Cuboniks has argued, “to secede or disavow capitalist machinery will not make it disappear”. As artists who work with technology, we found a way to participate by reserving a vacant seat without providing funding or support, nor yielding to any curatorial pressures — but we would have preferred to be on a different vehicle altogether.

It was our project’s ethos of repurposing technologies and granting them reprieve from their regimes, combined with our initial rejection of this opportunity’s premises, that pushed us towards embracing this dilemma as an object of discourse. The reality of working with technology in the arts is one in which artists can only navigate so far before running into the machineries of either commercial, military, or political facilitators.

This is precisely what prompted us to be transparent with the material relationships behind this work. We take for granted the ubiquity of these material relations, and for those of us who “work at the intersection of art and technology,” illuminating these opaque relationships benefits both the quality of the work, the future discourse, and possible alternatives.