

Looking Up, Looking Down. An interview with Holly Schmidt

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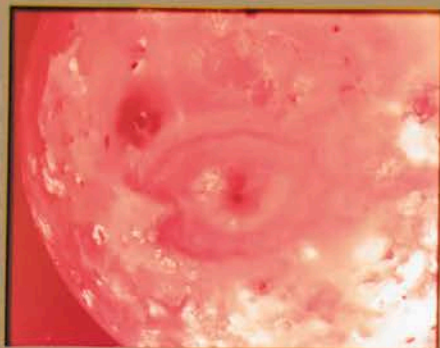
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Voyager 1

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Voyager 1
Saturn Encounter



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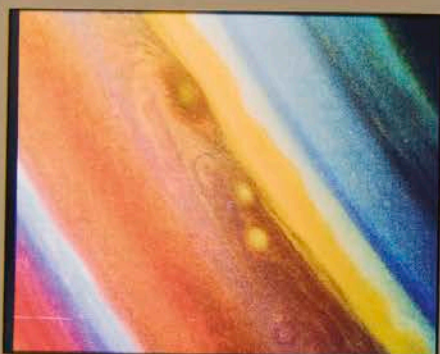
fig. by FINLEY HOLIDAY FILMS

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19. Saturn and moons Tethys, Enceladus and Mimas. Nov. 10, 1980. Distance 11 million miles.

VOYAGER 2
SATURN ENCOUNTER

© Finley Holiday Films



P-23922

18. Saturn's Northern Hemisphere. Aug. 19, 1981. 4.4 million miles.

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VOYAGER 2
SATURN ENCOUNTER

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42. Saturn Rings. Color variations indicates different chemical composition.

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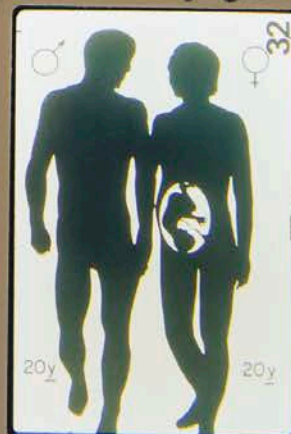
Voyager Record

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Search for Extraterr. Intell.
ASTRON SOCIETY OF THE PACIFIC

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Image from Voyager Record



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ASTRON SOCIETY OF THE PACIFIC

Looking Up, Looking Down. An Interview with Holly Schmidt

By Caitlin Chaisson

In 1977, Voyager 1 and 2 were launched into space with the primary mission to explore Jupiter and Saturn. As the first human-made objects predicted to reach interstellar space, an ambitious message was affixed to each spacecraft in the form of a Golden Record. The phonograph record is meant to serve as a time capsule that tells the story of human life: it contains music, photographs and greetings in sixty human languages. Intended for extraterrestrial spacefarers, the messages will survive for millions of years in the vacuum of space, free from the frictional and gravitational pressures on Earth. In 2014, artist Holly Schmidt began collecting slides of the galaxy from her father, a now-retired astronomy professor who taught during the nascent era of space travel. These types of archival materials have led to the development of Schmidt's artwork, *Midnight Picnic* (2014-), a series of ongoing stargazing events that explore what it means to be tethered to the Earth. With the support of a Canada Council grant, Schmidt is currently working on the next iteration of this piece as a collaboration with the theatre company Boca del Lupo.

C. C. Could you start by introducing your practice and the themes driving your recent work?

H.S. I think about my work in terms of a social practice. I'm most interested in practices of knowing and making, how they shape a certain kind of self, and how that desiring self creates and participates in complex systems. Sometimes I think about my work as learning in public, drawing people with different expertise into projects and conversations. The work can take many different forms of exchange, including: workshops, walks and meals. I've spent quite a bit of time thinking about our relationship to food and to food systems; about plants and our human relationship to plants, including fungus. Recently, I've been thinking about this notion of the universe and our place within it.

C. C. How did you first start thinking about the universe?

H. S. My dad taught introductory astronomy at the college level, and it was something he was always really curious and passionate about. When I was a child, he often would spend time with my brother and me, taking us out to look at the night sky or to watch meteor showers. He would bring telescopes home from the college so we could see Saturn's rings at three or four o'clock in the morning.

He had an extensive collection of slides for his course that ranged from the 1970s through to the 90s. You could order them easily from NASA or other observatories around the world. He would bring these slides home and give lectures for us in the basement while playing Gustav Holst's suite, *The Planets*. It was – at that time – a multimedia experience.

C. C. You are currently partaking in a residency with the theatre company Boca del Lupo, could you describe what you are working on for that project?

H.S. Yes, I proposed to explore this slide collection as the basis of a micro performance. These micro performances are really about bringing a small group of people together, and are often participatory or interactive. There seems to be an interesting fit between this experience I had as a child, and what I might do to explore the universe through this collection, with an audience.

Something I've also been experimenting with during my residency is thinking about my childhood fascination with the universe. It's an age when we ask philosophical questions about life and where life comes from, and try to understand our place in the world. It's a time when we don't really have any preconceived notions about these things. How we comprehend the universe and our place in it is... open for speculation. I brought preschool-aged children into the theatre and we did some drawing together, we listened to space sounds, we made space movements and told stories about the moon. Although the universe may be incomprehensible, it is also this place of imagination. I am interested in the factual and scientific aspects of how we understand the universe, but then also, this more imaginative and speculative side of things.

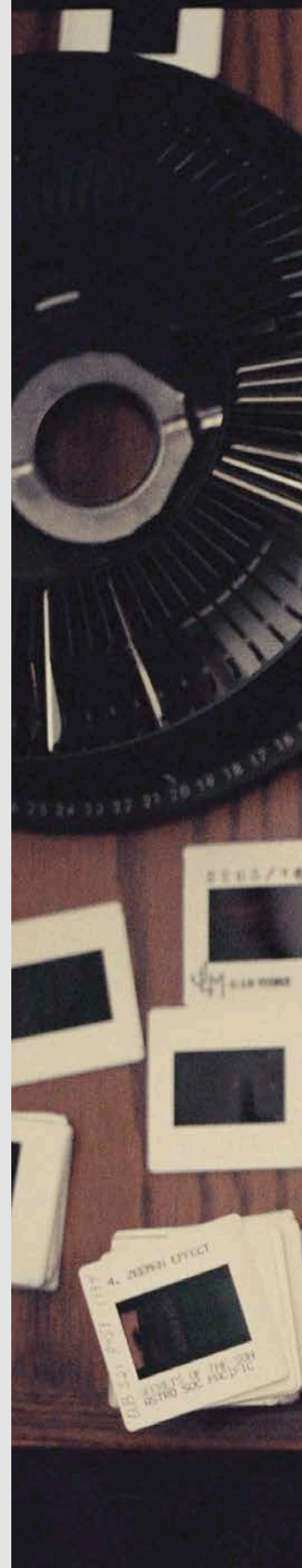
C. C. Speculation so often forms a bridge between pasts, presents and futures. How does a project like the Golden Record allow us to revise the way we think about temporality?

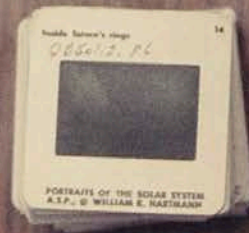
H. S. For Carl Sagan, who was the chair of the project, the Golden Record is a poetic gesture: a message in a bottle sent into the ocean of interstellar space. Looking at it now, it is a failed attempt to represent humanity. As a universal message intended to last for a scale of time we can't even comprehend, and for an extraterrestrial "other" that is impossible to imagine from our human perspective – it becomes a portrait of the particular. It represents a concept of humanity situated in Western ideology during the sociopolitical climate of the Cold War.

It's really interesting for me to revisit this particular moment in time through the Golden Record. To listen to it today, it seems incredibly naïve in its optimism. The faith placed in science and technology as a path to modern progress and a better future for all, seems hard to imagine or comprehend in this present state of ecological crisis. And yet, there is this lingering narrative that technological progress will save us either by improving the planet or by creating an alternative to Earth. Near the beginning of the Golden Record, there is a sound sequence that creates a portrait of human progression. It begins with earthy geological sounds, moves to weather and animal sounds, and eventually human technologies as they advance to the launching of a spacecraft. I wonder how that sound sequence could be reworked today to capture a different kind of narrative, one where ecological destruction is the inevitable consequence.

C. C. Ecological anxieties or terrestrial crisis have a lot to do with the interstellar imaginary world. How do we reconcile our earthbound lives with aspirations of being elsewhere?

H. S. One of my fascinations with space is that you have to bring the Earth with you in order to survive. It's a reminder of the porousness of human bodies, and that we can only live within a certain set of relations. But, that goes counter to the concept that we are discrete individual entities that can leave and be free of the Earth. There's an anthropocentrism in believing we are the ones that are dominant and in control, or that it's possible to "outthink" our relations.





<p>Second Flight of The Shuttle STS-2-13-267</p>  <p>© Philip Holiday Film</p> <p>15. Giant snow covered mountains.</p> <p>© 1995 W. W. Freeman and Co.</p>	<p>E-01 44</p> <p>Kaufman & Conner DISCOVERING THE UNIVERSE, 4E</p>  <p>© 1995 W. W. Freeman and Co.</p>	<p>History in Space Colony</p>  <p>© 1995 W. W. Freeman and Co.</p>	<p>HISTORY OF THE APOLLO PROGRAM</p>  <p>© 1995 W. W. Freeman and Co.</p>
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<p>1. ANDROMEDA GALAXY</p>  <p>© 1995 W. W. Freeman and Co.</p>	<p>COLORTON 4674</p>  <p>© 1995 W. W. Freeman and Co.</p>	<p>Arecibo Radio Telescope</p>  <p>© 1995 W. W. Freeman and Co.</p>	<p>71. Astronauts and Mt. Hadley</p>  <p>© 1995 W. W. Freeman and Co.</p>



Holly Schmidt, Organizing slides on the light table (Collection of Andrew Schmidt), 2018.
Photo: Caitlin Chasson.

A set of illustrations was made in the 1970s, through NASA's Ames Research Center, of a whole world created in a space colony, floating out there, somewhere. It's very pastoral, there are farms, rows of green vegetables, and then there's a whole other level dedicated to livestock. You see this utopia they wanted to create or imagine based on a re-creation of the "perfect" suburban America. These images are really fascinating and also incredibly depressing. If you look at this from a food system perspective, you think, they can imagine themselves in space, in a lab-like colony that is a totally closed system, but they can't imagine... vegetarianism? Or something other than a bungalow to live in? I think sometimes that being fascinated with the universe is a way of looking elsewhere, and not really contending with the complexity of interspecies relations we are entangled with here on Earth.

C. C. It's remarkable how limited these futuristic imaginary worlds can be in their scope. What do you think is constricting a broader re-imagining of our social systems in this context?

H. S. There's a set of dominant narratives based in human superiority that come out of Western philosophical and religious traditions. They are stories of colonization and acquisition, power and dominance, and survival dependent on human ingenuity and mechanization. These narratives obscure many other kinds of stories and practices related to the observation of the night sky. With more voices and perspectives comes the potential of thinking otherwise. As science fiction writer Ursula K. Le Guin talks about in her *Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction*, stories of hunting and killing focus on individual heroism, but there is another approach to storytelling that more closely resembles foraging than it does hunting. This involves gathering diverse things of value.

C. C. Our inability to achieve inter-cultural understanding within the bounds of this planet, let alone the inter-species communication the Golden Record aspires to, is quite pronounced. There's this really poignant failing there.

H. S. And that failing obscures the profound beauty, terror and everydayness of the Earth and our relations within the universe. I can see something of the foraging process Le Guin describes through the narratives that children can conjure up together. They are filled with dark, beautiful and absurd pronouncements, each building on the other to form stories with a deep emotional register. Attending to the complexity of a range of stories is needed for imagining possible futures.

C. C. To conclude, let's return to the upcoming *Midnight Picnic*, what kind of role do you see yourself playing in the micro performance scenario?

H. S. Within my projects I am often instigating and facilitating some kind of interaction. I'm creating a set of parameters, and inviting people into those parameters. I also imagine a part of my role is going to be a bit like my dad's was when he was doing these performances for our family. I don't want to lose sight of that. I want to maintain the fascination of the curious amateur, or, of this person that is learning something and sharing it with other people.

C. C. What are you hoping participants will experience?

H. S. More than anything, I want to share these images with an audience, to think and talk about them together. I'm hoping for moments of dialogue or exchange within the work. It is, in some ways, just as we are talking now. Re-evaluating, re-thinking, and trying to understand these narratives of the past and how they don't really serve us in the present. I hope to generate an awe of the universe, while asking critical questions about our human place within it.



Holly Schmidt is a Vancouver artist with a research-based practice that engages collaboration and informal pedagogy. Moving across disciplinary boundaries, she explores relationships between processes of making, knowledge creation and the formation of temporary communities. Her exhibition, public art and residency projects include: *Pollen Index* (2016) Charles H. Scott Gallery, *Till* (2014/15) Santa Fe Art Institute, *Mess Hall* (2013) Banff Centre, *Moveable Feast* (2012) Burnaby Art Gallery, *Grow* (2011) Other Sights for Artists' Projects. Upcoming projects: *Midnight Picnic* (2018) Boca Del Lupo, *Locals Only* (2018) AKA Gallery, and *Accretion* (2018) ECUAD Living Labs, City Studio and Vancouver Public Art.

Caitlin Chaisson is an interdisciplinary artist, writer and curator based in Vancouver, British Columbia. Her practices intersect with questions of the body, the environment, and social systems. She is the founder of Far Afield, an experimental artist-led initiative that supports regionally-connected artistic and curatorial practices. Her writing has been featured previously in *Breach Magazine* (Vancouver), *Decoy Magazine* (Vancouver), *ESPACE art actuel* (Montréal), and *Whitehot Magazine* (New York City).