

An Interview with Arthur Woods (Part 1)

Introduction by: Meaghan Brierley

Arthur Woods has been dedicated to the cultural dimension of space endeavors for over 50 years. Growing up near the Kennedy Space Center (1959 – 1970), Woods witnessed the beginning of the American space program and the Apollo project. The dynamism of this time period influenced his art practice, providing the formative impetus for art-in-space projects such as the prototype for the OUR-Space Peace Sculpture; “Cosmic dancer,” which became part of the living space on the Russian space station Mir (1993); and “Ars ad Astra: The 1st Art Exhibit in Earth Orbit” (1995), a curated exhibit of 20 works as part of the EUROMIR95 mission. In addition, Woods advocates artists’ involvement in space activities through The O.U.R.S. Project, dedicated to “cultural, astronautical, humanitarian, environmental and educational activities...deemed as beneficial to the development and advancement of human civilization” (<http://www.ours.ch/>).

The Canadian Space Society’s Arts and Culture program is honored to have the work of Arthur Woods present at its inaugural show “Revolutions: The Inexorable Evolution of Art” in Calgary Alberta on September 12th, 2013. Here is an excerpt of Arthur Woods’ conversation with Catherine Hazin, July 26th, 2013.

Catherine: What are your principal objectives as a space artist?

Arthur:

Actually, each of my projects has had a specific objective. However, having grown at the US space center, and working there as a student during the Apollo program, later as an artist, I began to consider how space could be explored and utilized in an artistic manner. Art is about

communication and the novelty of realizing an art work in space would definitely access a large, perhaps global, audience. Such, a “global” artwork would also have a meaning that could be understood in the diverse cultures around the world.

When I began in 1985, the US and the USSR were still locked in the Cold War. The new millennium was coming and I believed that in the 21st century humanity would be ready for an era of optimism, with peace and hope. All forms of technology would help us solve many of the social and environmental problems in the world. Also, I felt that international cooperation would be necessary to open the space frontier and this would lead to lessening of tensions between East and West leading to a peaceful and prosperous future for everyone.

I believed it would be possible to create an international movement to place “a visible circle in the sky” to celebrate our passage into the next millennium. This was the O.U.R.S. Project which I introduced in 1986. O.U.R.S. stands for the Orbiting Unification Ring Satellite, but it also means “belonging to us” as I envisioned that people around the world could be involved. I held public events with large sheets of Mylar could be painted on by the public and everyone could have “piece of the ring” to help realize the project. It was like “Crowdfunding” in 1988.

In order to be visible to viewers on Earth, the O.U.R.S. sculpture would have to have a diameter of 1 km making it the largest structure ever deployed in space. Thus, like any large space project involving technology we needed to make some tests and develop a prototype. This is how the OUR-SPS or the OUR-Space Peace Sculpture developed—which would have been a six-meter in diameter inflatable sculpture that would be deployed from the Mir space station during a spacewalk.

This project was proposed in 1988 for realization in the year 1992—which was called the International Space Year. Up until then, international cooperation in space had not really gained much traction. But the USSR wanted to open up their space program to Western involvement and in 1988 I signed the 2nd commercial agreement with the USSR agency Glavcosmos—the US Company, Payload Systems signed an agreement just a few weeks before.

The idea was that an American artist would utilize European technology called ISRS [Inflatable Space Rigidized Structures], which was under development in Switzerland by ESA, and send it to the Soviet Mir space station. The shape of the OUR-SPS was circle divided by a central cross which is the astronomical symbol of the Earth. The word “peace” in all the world’s languages would be printed on its reflective surface.

The Cold War was still going on and I wanted to put this symbol of peace in space as a hopeful and political message about the how space could be used for peaceful purposes. As the word “Mir” in Russian means “peace” the Soviet space people were already supportive of the idea.

My colleague, Dr. Marco Bernasconi was head of R&D at the Swiss space company Contraves and had joined my project as an advisor and became vice president of my OURS Foundation which was set up for the development of such projects. Contraves had just built a six-meter ISRS torus object so this would have drastically reduced the development costs for the OUR-SPS. We were pretty far into the funding aspects, having secured a flight opportunity; we had several meetings with a Swiss bank that was interested as well as a Swiss watch company but Contraves—for reasons still unexplained, but I assume it was political—withdrew their support.

This setback, of course complicated my agreement with my partners in the USSR. However, it turns out that they also had an inflatable technology under development and offered to build and fly the OUR-SPS as a package deal. I agreed, and in 1990 the Russian space company NPO Energia delivered a full size inflatable model which was demonstrated at the Space Commerce conference in Switzerland. Then, as you know, the USSR dissolved in 1991 and the Cold War was suddenly over. With the ensuing uncertainties about who was in charge of what in Russia my chance of funding the \$1 million for the project in time for the 1992 goal became too big of a challenge and the project was postponed.

Soon after, in 1992, I was contacted via a German space company and told that the Russians were still interested and if I had another project which would be possible to fly to the Mir they would be open for business. This led to the Cosmic Dancer sculpture project which only weighed 1 kg, was small enough to be placed inside the Mir station and required no special technology. This was a purely artistic project designed to investigate the properties of sculpture in weightlessness and to investigate how art could be integrated into a space habitat.

This project was done on a commercial basis and I made a multiple of the Cosmic Dancer which I sold to raise the \$100,000 to realize the project. Again, in pre-Internet days this proved to also be a challenge. However, on May 22, 1993, the Cosmic Dancer was launched to the Mir and may have been onboard when the Mir was de-orbited in 2001.

Catherine: Can you offer some advice for emerging space artists?

Arthur:

Over the years when asked the question: “Why I make Space Art?” I eventually had to answer the question: “Why Space?” In trying to answer this question I learned that “Humanity's future on Earth is irrevocably connected to its future in space.” To justify the importance of space art and essentially “Space” in the early 1990’s my associate Dr. Marco Bernasconi and I came up with concept we call “The Space Option,” which is an evolutionary plan to meet the basic and anticipated needs of humanity through the utilization of near Earth resources—not for the in-situ support of science or exploration—but rather to apply these resources and/or their products for use on Earth at a conspicuous level.

Many of the problems facing our civilization now in the immediate future as well as in the years ahead could be addressed by accessing and utilizing the infinite resources beyond our atmosphere and using these to make life more comfortable, more secure, more peaceful and more prosperous here on Earth. This would insure the ultimate survival of our civilization and our species as well as life itself. Thus I believe this should be the fundamental motivation for humanity to finally open the space frontier.

We have recently initiated a website dedicated to furthering public awareness about the Space Option (<http://www.ours.ch/spaceoption.php>). So my advice for emerging space artists is to do some research and answer the question “Why Space?” in your own terms and then explore how your art can help humanity make the right cosmic choice.[MB1]

For more information about the work of Arthur Woods, visit his website:
<http://www.arsastronautica.com/>

Catherine Hazin Interviews Space Artist Arthur Woods

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