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Queer in Zero G: An interview with Frank Pietronigro

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Abstract American interdisciplinary artist Frank Pietronigro's work explores issues that arise from two seemingly disparate fields: queer culture, and the culture of space travel. His writing and artwork – some of it created on parabolic flights simulating the microgravity environment of outer space – interrogate the relationships, existing and potential, between the queer and the extra-terrestrial. Pietronigro was kind enough to agree to be interviewed for this special issue on the horizons of contemporary queer theory. In the interview, we discuss his life as a queer artist, his work in microgravity spaces, and intersections of sexuality, class, art, the body, and queer possibilities in extra-terrestrial space.

Keywords: Art, class, extra-terrestrial, interdisciplinarity, microgravity, outer space, space travel, queer

Assuming Gender is a Cardiff University project, comprising a journal, seminar, and lecture series. This interdisciplinary project is dedicated to the timely analysis of constructions of gendered texts, practices, and subjectivities and seeks to engage with contemporary conceptions of gender, while participating in the dialogues and tensions that maintain the urgency of such conversations.

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Queer in Zero G: An interview with Frank Pietronigro

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The term 'space art' may recall images of nebulae in watercolour, airbrushed alien skylscapes, or fantasy illustrations from the covers of pulp novels. Over the past few decades, however, space artists have created opportunities to explore truly new territory, exploiting technological advances and expansion of spaceflight accessibility to form new engagements with the extra-terrestrial.

One artist on the forefront of these engagements is Frank Pietronigro, interdisciplinary fine artist and 'Artronaut'.¹ Pietronigro's body of work explores topics including gender and sexual identity, somatic experience, and the culture of outer space. His work came to my attention through my own research into sexuality and space travel when I learned of his paper, 'The Potential of Queer Culture on the Future of Space Exploration', presented in 2008 at the 59th International Astronautical Congress in Glasgow.² Pietronigro has been kind enough to share the text of his IAC 2008 talk with me and with our readers; excerpts from this and other works appear interspersed throughout the interview that follows.

Pietronigro's work has spanned several decades and multiple media. In the interview, we discuss three works in particular- Flags in Space, Diamond Dust Workers' Boots, and, indirectly, his 'Drift Paintings'. All of these projects involve work in a microgravity environment, achieved by travel aboard parabolic airplane flights that simulate extra-terrestrial gravity conditions through steep climb-and-dive manoeuvres. In creating art in and

¹ I have borrowed this descriptor from Pietronigro himself; Frank Pietronigro, 'Expanding the Heart: A 21st Century Artronaut Contemplates Space Flight', *Journal of Space Philosophy* 2:1 (Spring 2013), available from Pietronigro's website <<http://pietronigro.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/Expanding-The-Heart-A-21st-Century-Artronaut-Contemplates-Space-Flight-by-Frank-Pietronigro-2013.pdf>> [Accessed 28 November 2012].

² Frank Pietronigro, 'The Potential of Queer Culture on the Future of Space Exploration', in *59th International Astronautical Congress, LESS REMOTE: The Future of Space Exploration* (Glasgow, 2008).

with this environment, Pietronigro explores the intersection of art, body, and the extra-terrestrial, as well as the relationship between queer culture and the culture of spaceflight.

Pietronigro's 'Drift Painting' involves liberating liquid paint into a partitioned space during parabolic flight. The resultant paint trails interact with canvas, plastic sheeting and the artist's body to create works including Diamond Dust Workers' Boots, discussed further below, Document 34, the canvas, and the plastic sheeting of the partition itself, now both a work of art and a record of the experience of art-making in microgravity. As Pietronigro discusses below, the incorporation of his own body into his work can be seen to leave a 'queer imprint' in the art; perhaps this imprint is also symbolically left in the microgravity space itself.

In his written work, Pietronigro further articulates the issues raised in his visual and performance work: what can queer culture offer to outer space, and how can outer space be a space for queers? I am very grateful to Frank for his willingness to discuss these matters with me in this online interview conducted in autumn 2013. His work illustrates what in one sense could be the most 'out there' definition of the 'There' in 'Queer and There' – taking queer theory beyond the Earth itself.

Frank Pietronigro: What a great time to have lived, with a taste of the 1950s during my early childhood to dancing to Motown in the 1960s and hitch-hiking to Washington D.C. for the anti-war demonstrations while still in eighth grade, I was primed for Gay Liberation to move Philadelphia's queer community at a time when I was coming out in 1973. I was enjoying intimacy with men and came out of the closet moving to downtown Philadelphia while continuing my studies at the Philadelphia College of the Arts. I was a hippie in high school with long beautiful hair whose length established my credibility among my Catholic high school comrades as one who was challenging the system. I was delighted to be able to wear my hair at a length well below my ears. I was respected by my high school peers and no longer felt peer homophobia as I once did in grade school.

Artistic creation has been a part of my life as long as I can remember and a circuitous route unfolded leading me from working as a ‘creeler’ on a Jacquard broad-loom, the industrial revolution’s answer to the punch-card computer; to debating at Pennsylvania State University and Harvard University’s Module United Nations; to working with entities like the San Francisco Arts Commission, the Discovery Channel, and Intergeneration: Building Queer Community Across the Ages Through the Arts.

KD: *Can you say a bit about the work that you’ve done?*

FP: Lucky for me, I matured during an age of synthesis, hybridization and a breaking of disciplinary boundaries fostering an expansive creative sojourn. In finding my voice, a process that is continually in articulation, I’ve enjoyed painting, digital and new media projects, writing, installations, public art projects and sculpture. I have not limited myself to any particular media and have enjoyed experiencing the creative process with many. Freedom, pluralism and a queer sensibility pervade what I consider to be an interdisciplinary fine arts career where I hope to have grown and struggled while helping others in some small way.

Given the number of peers I got to play with in the streets of Philadelphia as a young child growing up there, I enjoy working with lots of other people. A strict in-studio only practice like painting, though enjoyable, transformative and meditative, leaves me feeling appreciation for working in collaboration with others. Though creative collaboration is more challenging I appreciate the fact that my work drifts into the realm of new genres: video documentary and performance art.

I am intrigued by social engagements even though at times it’s very scary to be so out there; but, when that fear is replaced with hope, then a positive attitude shifts towards opening to collaboration.

KD: *What are you working on now?*

FP: I am invigorating my activities with focus and renewed dedication to that which brings my soul joy. I am distancing myself from being on technology a good amount of time to utilizing it less in my work relegating it to teaching, digital video production, image processing and concept design, writing, marketing and sales activities as a compliment to my other creative activities.

I am pondering 'focal point' in my creative practice while eliminating activities in order to enrich time spent creating what remains.

At this time, I am serving as Director for the Space Arts Special Programs for the 33rd International Space Development Conference that will take place in May of 2014. I am also creating Space Wishes: Spacecast Chorus, a work that I discussed in my last paper published during the International Astronautical Federation's 64th International Astronautical Congress in September 2013, Beijing, China. That paper is available by contacting me at zerogartist@mac.com.

Space Wishes: Spacecast Chorus, is a new media interactive performance collaboration that will unfold between a social media audience and an 'Artronaut' experiencing sub-orbital flight. This work will synthesize content that is created both in flight via video, audio, flight and biometric data and content that will be created by an audience that will have opportunities to contribute digital audio, text, and video files before, during and after the artist's suborbital spaceflight. While contributing digital content to Space Wishes, the audience will be asked to consider and express their individual and collective space wishes as to how human life and cultural expression might be lived and experienced off our gravity-bound home planet, Earth.

To inspire and spark audience imagination, collaboration and contemplation, the artist will function during flight as a point of emotional human connection. [...] During each moment of flight, the artronaut will sense the myriad of feelings and sensations that one experiences during any space flight: joy, fear, excitement, transcendence, pain, pressure, and curiosity. It is his intention that these emotions will be monitored by an in-flight EEG system that the artronaut will be wearing. All of this content, including flight documentation, will be integrated into a social media web-based collaborative space with the derivative biometric data contributing as a part of the artwork.³

KD: *What interests you about outer space?*

³ Frank Pietronigro, 'Arts in Space Exploration and Space Wishes', *Pietronigro.com* (2013), <http://pietronigro.com/?page_id=28> [Accessed 28 December 2013] (paragraphs 3-4).

FP: Living as a product of the 1950 sci-fi movie craze and the time of the Moon landings and the Cold War challenge to the Moon, I was primed to love outer space from my moment of birth into Spaceship Earth. I remember writing a letter in crayon to President Kennedy when I was in first grade, of my desire to go to the Moon and how my cartoon might help that vision unfold. Granted I never heard back from my crayon written letter to President Kennedy; but, the love of outer space and space exploration was imprinted on me as I lived that time as a young child mesmerized by the fasciation of space flight.

KD: *Can you say a bit about 'flagging', why you chose this for a zero-gravity artwork, and why you chose the specific flags you used?*

FP: I specifically decided to engage in 'flag-dancing' on both of my parabolic flights. Theoretically, I knew it was significant and symbolic for me to dance within zero gravity by bringing authentic queer cultural production into those interdisciplinary sites. During my first flight I used blue silk flags. During my second flight I asked Gilbert Baker, the creator of the Rainbow flag, to sew for me two flags: one rainbow flag and one American flag. I decided to collaborate with me as we have worked with one another since 1982 during various events I produced where Gilbert Baker would fly his various flags including the rainbow flag. That collaboration was titled: "Flags In Space"

During his second parabolic flight, Frank Pietronigro created Flags In Space! - a space art project where the artist dances with a Rainbow flag and an American flag. This form of dancing originates within the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender community and is usually experienced late at night in gay dance clubs around the world where you can see people 'fan-dancing' and 'flag-dancing'.

The action advocates a message of equality and justice for all diverse life forms yet to be discovered in the universe. The artist dancing reminds us to move forward with space exploration in the spirit of diversity, inclusiveness, hope and celebration.

The rainbow colors represented in the flag, sewn by Gilbert Baker the original creator of the Rainbow flag, serve as a reminder that the power of love can transcend hatred and that the diversity of life forms we will encounter in the universe should be met with a spirit of love and peace rather than a spirit of hatred and war.

Pietronigro flies proudly as an American patriot floating with the American flag with the situation amplifying his right to celebrate freedom and democracy, liberty, and justice for all. Through the dance the artist honours core values identified by the founders of the United States as values extended to the benefit of all

Americans including members of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender community (LGBT). This work is offered by the artist as a refreshing antithesis to a futile perpetuation of a negative LGBT identity.

'Creating art in space presents challenges and opportunities unlike those artists encounter in our gravity-bound studios. Art created in a space-bound vehicle is public art; the creative act is no longer a private experience because other people are observing the artist. My first journey into this space required me to confront significant cultural and political questions: was I willing to abandon my gay identity in order to escape the laws of gravity? Could I, a gay-identified artist, function creatively in what I sensed was a "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" environment? Ultimately, I decided I could not allow any dominant culture to suppress my creative impulses, which to no small degree have been defined by living in San Francisco as an out gay man for over thirty years.'⁴

KD: *Your work Diamond Dust Workers' Boots deals with multiple perspectives on identity, in terms of sexuality, class, and spaceflight. Could you comment on how your work raises issues of class in relationship to sexuality and space?*

FP: Having grown up in a working class neighborhood of Philadelphia and having worked in factories while also studying at the Philadelphia College of the Arts, fostered for me a close affinity with working class people. I choose to reflect my class heritage by choosing to wear 'workers' boots to paint in zero gravity. There is a certain queer magic with the introduction of the diamond dust as the butch nature of these workers' boots is softened by what I consider feminine, of the boot's leather by the addition of the diamond dust. The addition of the diamond dust, during my work, was significant as a material of catalases that function to change things on many levels, I believe.

KD: *Intertextuality seems to me to play a role in much of your work. One example would be your adaptation of Warhol's Diamond Dust Shoes, but it also seems present more broadly, for example, in your engagement with artefacts of space programmes. How do these references and encounters function in your work?*

⁴ From the artist's project statement; Frank Pietronigro, 'Flags in Space', *Pietronigro.com* (2006) <<http://pietronigro.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/Flags-In-Space-by-Frank-Pietronigro-2006.pdf>> [Accessed 28 November 2013] (p. 2).

FP: I feel because my essence is somehow woven into the actions I take that this intertextuality is a natural outcome of my openness to weave my queer body into my work. I am queer no matter what I am doing and in honor of that fact, showing up with my essence in each instance, creates a naturally occurring queer imprint reflected in the work, my life and its diversity. That sense of overall unity comes from my ignorance in self-censorship. Maintaining strong boundaries has always been a challenge for me and I take pride in that fact.

Because queer boundaries aren't fixed, queer identity and physiology reside not only within the masculine and the feminine, but all physical, emotional, and cosmological spaces in between. The space industry has an opportunity to weave this spectrum of wisdom, flexibility and tenaciousness into the bounty of human spirit already manifest within today's community of space entrepreneurs, pioneers and explorers.⁵

KD: *How do you define queer culture?*

FP: I think queer culture is like God and it cannot be defined. Metamorphosis, transformation, expansion, and freedom come to mind when I imagine a meaning for queer culture. Its cultural adventure and expansion define itself. In considering my experience, I feel that queer culture, during my lifetime, has never been the same and is nuanced by the color of its time and historical context. There are many queer cultures, over time and space, each with a unique quality, contribution and set of challenges. In looking back on the queer party I lived in the 1970s and early 1980s in San Francisco before HIV turned my world upside down forever, I can see a human response that has molded and foundationalized queer culture within the confluence of mainstream America. That hybridization within the context of our world's diversity of cultures is too complex for an ignorant artist like me to comment upon.

Both cultures, queer and space, exclude the majority of people from their ranks and there is strong bonding created among teams of close friends formed to depend on one another in order to survive and face what are many times harsh environments. In both cultures people have learned how to navigate around desire or repressed desire as experienced within private and public spaces. Individuals identifying as a member of one or both will have had to learn how to

⁵ 'Potential of Queer Culture', p. 12.

navigate, around behaviors that are considered 'taboo' such as those relating to sexuality and bodily functions.⁶

KD: *In 'The Potential Contributions of Queer Culture on the Future of Space Exploration', you suggest that 'Floating in space' is 'the perfect way to see queerly'.⁷ Can you explain what you mean by this?*

FP: Having no fixed point of view, that is always transient and changing, as one experiences in microgravity space, reflects for me the ever-changing process and nature of queer cultural creation.

Queers see the world differently and our unique way of looking at the world offers a differentiated viewpoint on space exploration that can help reveal many hidden benefits yet to be discovered for all space travelers regardless of their sexual orientation. There is inherent value in understanding space travel, specifically in weightless environments, from the vantage point of queer spectators, as queer perspectives have and will continue to contribute, as a counterpoint way of seeing for the larger numbers of all people living in the ever-changing kinetic environment of microgravity space.⁸

More details on Frank Pietronigro's projects are available at <http://www.pietronigro.com>.

⁶ 'Potential of Queer Culture', p. 25.

⁷ Ibid, p. 11.

⁸ Ibid.

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