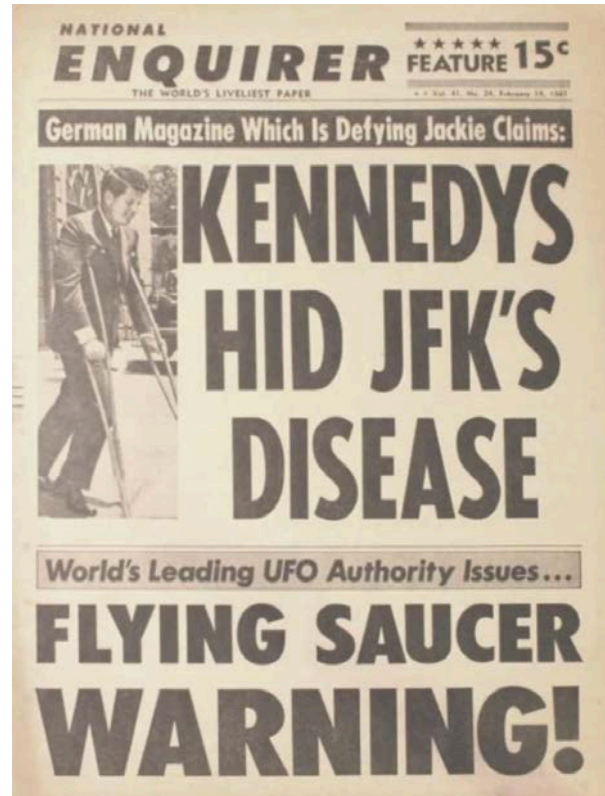




Anonymous UFO photograph c. 1960s



National Enquirer newspaper cover, 1967

In the early 1980s I became keenly interested in abduction myths. Somehow pop culture was saturated with low grade science fiction such as Star Wars which seemed to me to be a Disney-esque admixture of cowboys and Indians. I loved the possibilities of SciFi as a form of pop philosophic mind experiments which I found in the high minded low culture works of Philip K. Dick. At the same time there was a steady stream of sinister subcultural accounts of abductions by real UFOs. The counterpoint was irresistible to me. While Science Fiction was never far from the horrific fear of the unknown, it seemed to have been colonized by blue eyed soft-core fantasies played out on the Hollywood screen. In the liminal spaces of rural and suburban America, something else was taking place which involved half remembered subjugation and violation. It was as if the synthesized, nonstop party of the late 70s, fueled by amnesic soporifics had transformed its disco lights and ubiquitous mirror ball into an alien anhedonic nightmare.



Martian Portraits, Jim Shaw, 1978, gelatin silver prints

I began to collect and record first-hand accounts of UFOs, aliens, acid trips and psychotic breaks as part of my art making process in the mid 1970s. A close friend had a devastating schizophrenic episode involving a portal into a hostile parallel universe, populated by aliens, which he discovered at a laundromat in the vortex of a washing machine. Later as he flatly described his tribulations through a Thorazine haze, it was as if he had lost himself in that inter-dimension battle. As his family and friends struggled with this situation, the image of a young universe deeply affected me. First-hand accounts could be found in self-published paperbacks and the tabloid press such as Weekly World News and the National Inquirer which were sold in the supermarket. These were usually accompanied by wonderfully outrageous black and white illustrations obviously faked with the pre-Photoshop technique of retouching, which involved painting over areas of the images with monochrome shades of paint. The resulting images were somewhere between photos and paintings and operated as a comic barometer of sanity made slightly more believable by the grainy printing technique used by these newspapers. I was in the habit of reading these as was my friend and roommate Jim Shaw. When I met Jim in 1976 he was producing airbrushed photographs of young men and women in the process of transforming into aliens and he had collected all sorts of ephemera related to the topic. We had gone to CalArts together played music together and lived together for a while out in the desert where there were rumors of strange activities at the nearby "skunkworks," the pseudonym given to Lockheed Martin's highly secretive program for developing all manner of high-speed aircraft. Occasionally evidence of such activities could be seen in the sky at night. Later we moved to the hills of Echo Park near where the "Hillside Strangler" had left a victim, another sign that the utopian dreams of the 1960s had passed through a lens darkly.



The Sputnik space probe

Our generation was steeped in the paranoiac reality of the Cold War. In 1957, the year I was born, Sputnik the Soviet satellite had circled the earth for the first time. The small chrome sphere with its insect like antennas broadcast a telltale beep, beep, as it circumnavigated the globe, permanently changing the way we would look at the skies. No longer was that velvet void reserved for our deities, it was now populated by a godless communist eye in the sky. A reminder of the possibility of nuclear extinction, it also humiliated the industrial military complex of the United States. Thus began the space race and the frantic technological push which culminated in the moon landing some 12 years later. The clandestine scientific achievements which mastered of the skies was inextricably linked to the Cold War's very real doomsday scenario. In the 1951 film, *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, aliens appear as proto-techo-glam rockers, far superior yet sympathetic as they warn mankind of the dangers of global conflict. The alien has always been a product of its time (and culture). What caused the dark turn of the American psyche from 1950 to 1980 is a mystery to me. In that thirty years the notion of an altruistic other, visiting with a message of peace was slowly supplanted by an alien that probed and sampled our DNA in stealth visits. These strange alien rituals were performed upon unwitting humans only to be dimly recalled in fragments of lost time.

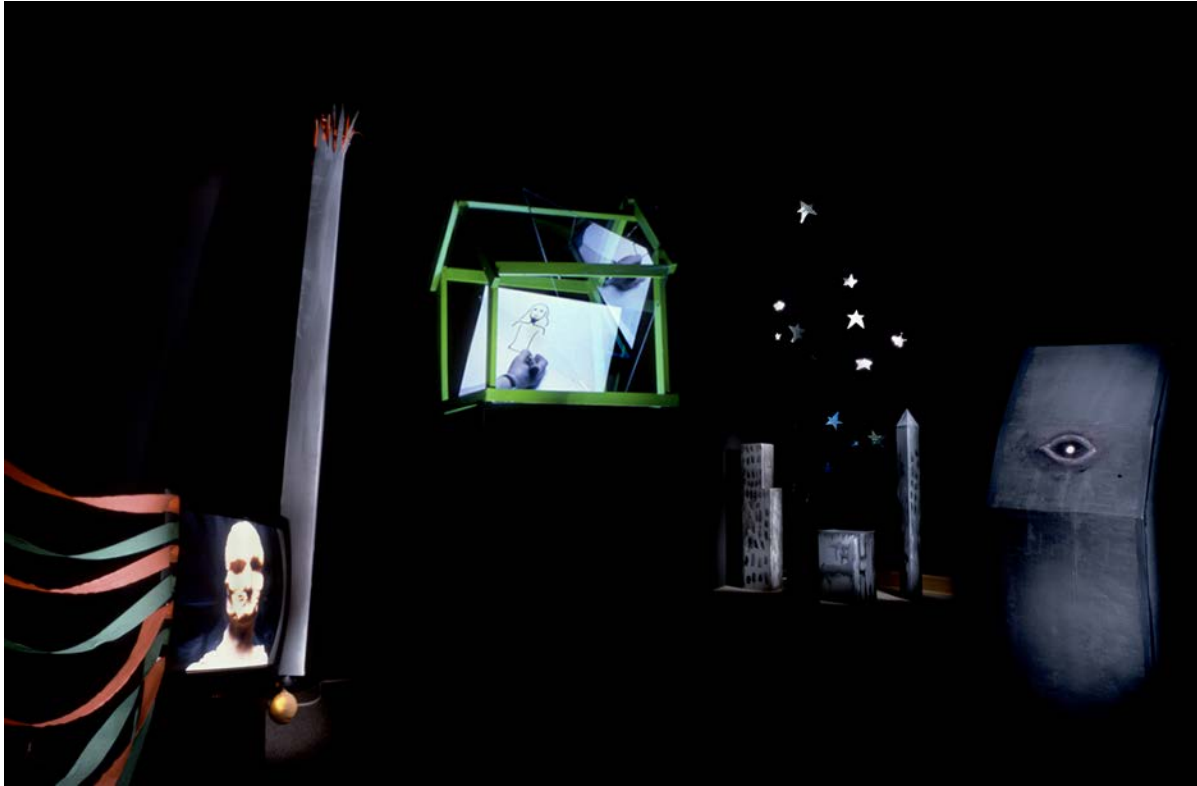


The Day The Earth Stood Still, film still, 1951



otkin adarad utaalk, 2022

In 1983 when producing my first immersive installation L7-L5 at The Kitchen in NYC, I decided to explore the counterpoints between Hollywood film and personal abduction narratives. It seemed to me that the real extra-terrestrial story was not unfolding on the silver screen but in the lives of the people wandering through the newly constructed mega malls which had invaded the suburbs. I took an ad out in the Village Voice a year before the installation was scheduled stating: Seeking first-hand accounts of UFOs or aliens. Will pay \$25 an hour. Through a long series of telephone negotiations I finally arranged a date to shoot the pseudonymous Gloria for two hours. At the last minute she decided it would be unwise to allow me to record her visage. She told me she was employed as a secretary, and she worried what her friends would think if they heard her wild story. According to her they would most likely question her sanity. Thinking quickly, I arranged for her to draw illustrations of the scenarios as she recounting them, using a piece of paper and a magic marker. Each scenario took place in her bedroom and involved a menacing character who repeatedly used needles to take samples from her body against her will. The alien, with echoes of ghosts and vampires of the past, appeared half transparent as it set about its nefarious tasks. Displayed via reflections in a broken glass house, her experiences became an important part of the installation. Her fragile and horrific documentary images and stories seemed to be a perfect challenge to the Star Wars fiction. She believed them to be real, impelling the viewer to position themselves within a belief system.



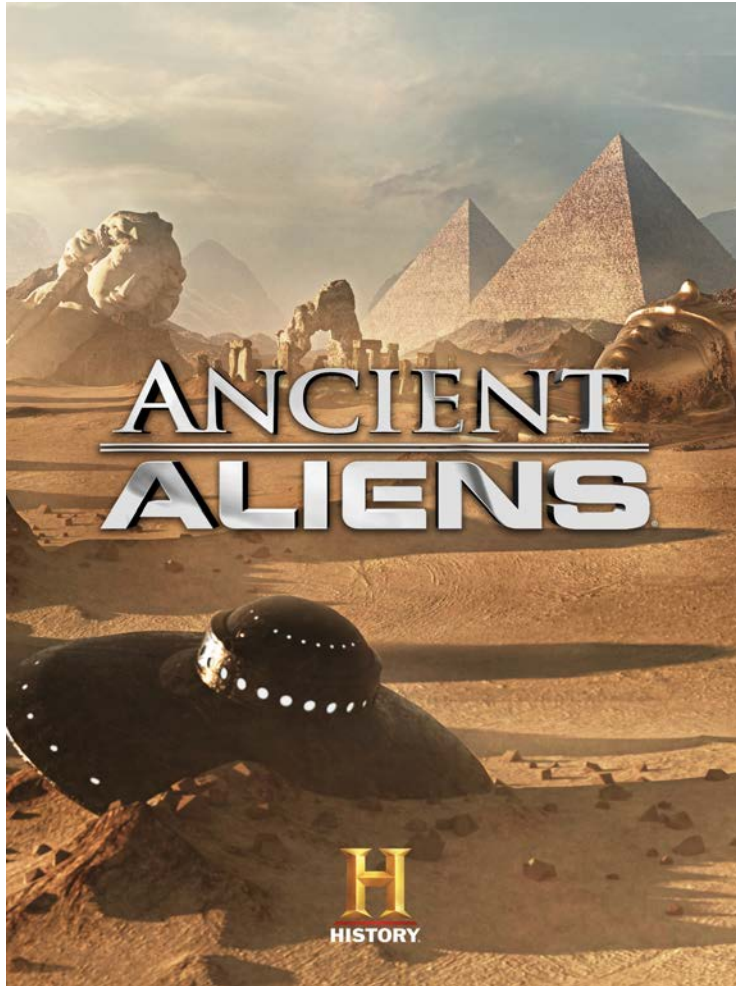
L7-L5, installation view, 1983

Have I ever seen a UFO? This question is a favorite thought experiments. A literal answer would be yes. I have seen things in the sky that I cannot identify. If one looks long enough at a night sky something will move. It could be a jet or satellite but it's impossible to tell. Although they are probably man-made, my uncertainty puts these phenomena in the category of unidentifiable flying objects.

Mystery is full of potential, a form of wonder that also rewards the individual for their lack of knowledge. This position is comforting in an age when most people have little understanding of how the rudimentary technology around them functions. In the public arena first-hand accounts of UFOs and abduction stories cast the individual narrative at odds with scientific proof. Logic is a casualty in the asymmetrical battle between the power of mystery and the academic. To confuse the situation further, many scientists agree, statistically speaking, that we are most certainly not alone. We are all part of a UFO lottery and seemingly anyone could be visited at any time.

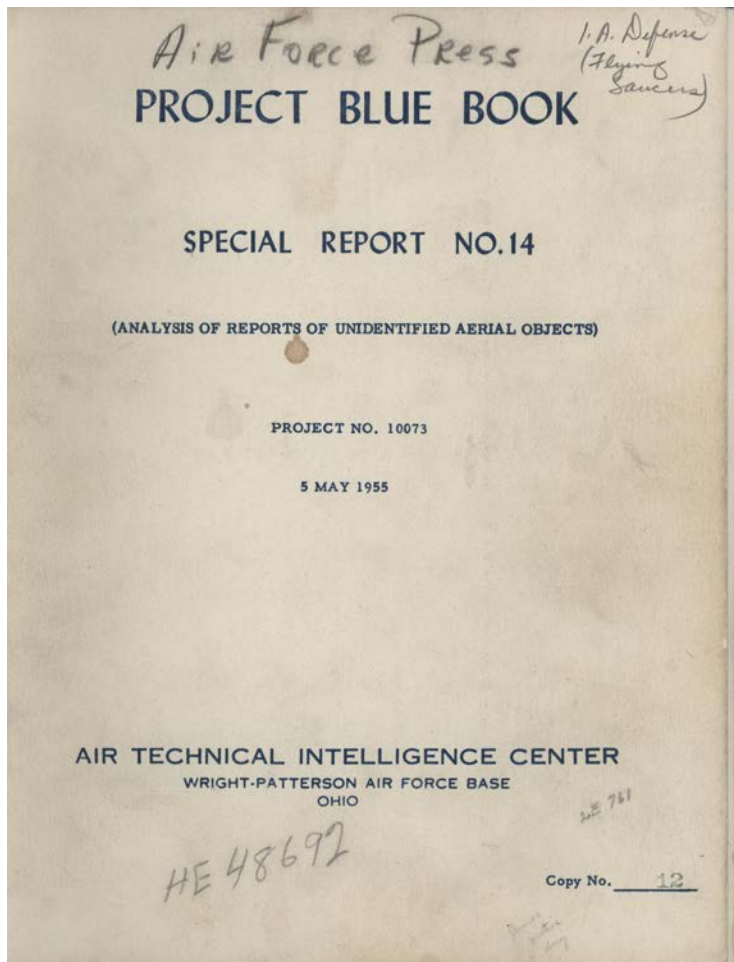


In a surreal propaganda move the Pentagon recently released official video of an Air Force jet radar's encounters with UFOs or UAPs, Unidentified Aerial Phenomenon, a new term the military insists on using. (The term UFO was introduced by the Air Force in 1953: "any airborne object which by performance, aerodynamic characteristics, or unusual features, does not conform to any presently known aircraft or missile type, or which cannot be positively identified as a familiar object.") The newly released Air Force footage caused a media frenzy and the visual evidence, while generated with digital supersonic technology, adheres aesthetically to the tradition of the genre, the images are grainy, black and white and low resolution.



Poster for the History Channel's Ancient Aliens TV show

As of 2019, 60% of Americans believe that UFOs can be explained by natural or man-made phenomenon while 33% believe them to be alien visitors. In that same year the History Channel was received on cable television in 82% of American households. Launched in 1995, the History Channel contained a steady stream of documentary films that loosely could be considered educational. By 2005 the channel was screening fictive documentaries to boost their rating, including many alien themed programs. Over the next 10 years programing slid from fact based entertainment to a steady stream of ancient alien fantasy programs that appeared to be re-edited stock footage mixed in with animated speculation, suggesting all past technologies were introduced by aliens. One program suggested that the heads on Easter Island were modems connecting earth to outer space. A recent Congressional subcommittee hearing on the evidence or problem or threat of UAPs, indicates some form of funding will be requested and generated in response to the dangers of the phenomenon. Thus, continues the long-standing strategy of the military industrial complex. Among earlier programs to investigate UFOs established by the US military are Project Sign 1947 and Project Grudge 1948, followed by Project Blue Book from 1952 until its dissolution in 1969. Blue Book investigated 12,618 reports most of which were found to be explained.



Also around the mid-20th Century, the public's attention was drawn to the possibilities of intelligent alien life forms via photographic evidence of UFOs. The pictures were produced by a loose group of characters, George Adamski, Howard Menger and Ruth Norman, who simultaneously emerged on both coasts of the US. George Adamski's photographs of flying saucers invaded the public consciousness and the accompanying popularization of the belief in UFOs generated a unique set of aesthetic and fictive codes parallel to UFO photography such as films books, sound recordings, and lectures.



My Saturnian Lovers, video installation, 2016



Ruth Norman

Adamski, a Polish immigrant, occultist and hamburger stand owner used a six inch telescope attached to a camera to photograph the Venusian mother ship. His adventures with aliens resulted in two best-selling books and countless lectures. Othon, his Nordic alien friend, presented him with camera film and an indecipherable Venusian language. He was also taken aboard Othon's ship with his camera to explore the dark side of the moon, joining one of a growing list of pre-NASA interplanetary travelers that includes mystic predecessors such as the Spiritualists. In 1920 Adamski, founded the The Royal Order of Tibet, a short lived theosophy inflected group making him a direct link between the Spiritualists and ufologists.

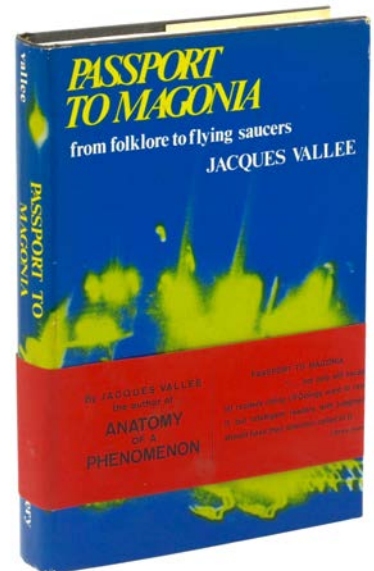
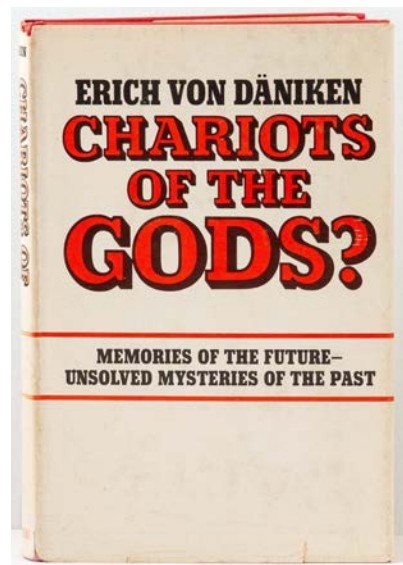
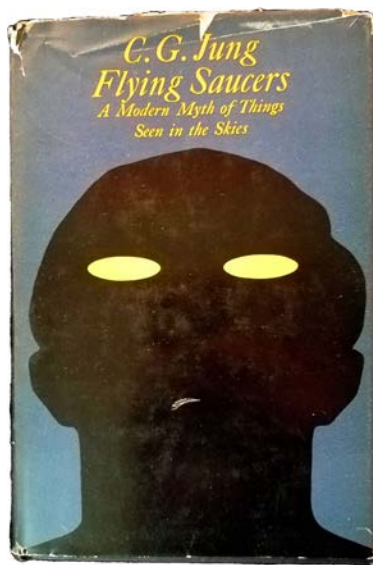


Spacemen R My Friend, virtual reality, 2016



Photograph by George Adamski, taken at the Palomar Gardens campground, 1952. Handwritten note (verso): "space ship from Venus?"

I had been collecting spirit and UFO photographs for some time and in 2013, art historian Branden W. Joseph, Mark Wasiuta, Adam Bandler and I produced an exhibition "UFO's and Effigies" which featured my collection of archival images and new video installations at Columbia University. For the exhibition Joseph writes, "UFO photos always appear as two images at once: what they depict are UFOs, since they helped construct the visual typology, even as (most likely) they are not." According to debunkers, Adamski's flying saucers are said to have been found objects such as a lantern tops and lightbulbs. I imagine Adamski producing his iconic image by attaching his construction to a slender thread and suspending it bait-like to produce a photographic trap. While Newton observed gravity's pull upon the apple and rearranged our position within the solar system, Adamski, in a stage magic inversion of gravity suspends our disbelief. The scale shift from universal to personal space implicit within these photographs fascinated the public. As C.G. Jung states in his 1959 *Flying Saucers*, the factuality of these reports are unimportant, they could be projections of the collective unconsciousness and we are perhaps witnessing the creation of "a modern myth."



Although I knew a few people who claimed to have seen UFOs, I don't think I ever have. As a kid in the late 1960s my friends and I constructed what we called UFOs out of drinking straws that held birthday candles fixed to a thin plastic dry-cleaning bag scotch-taped at the top. On a clear calm evening, we would carefully light the candles and as the heat caused the bag to slowly expand we would release it and watch it float up above the Hudson River. The luminous objects would drift for miles causing people to report sightings of UFOs to the local police. In 1968 the book *Chariots of the Gods* by Erich von Daniken had saturated the suburbs of my youth and resonated globally, selling millions of copies. Von Daniken, an autodidact who had been convicted of fraud wrote his second book while in jail. He set forth a theory that all technological development on earth was aided by aliens who had visited to be worshiped as gods. The strangely shaped head of Akhenaten and elongated skulls of his family members were said to be evidence, as were the pyramids. The massive figures drawn in the landscape of Peru which are only visible from the sky struck a chord with me (and it seems many late-1960s land artists). In retrospect, much of the associative thinking in Von Daniken's book is directly derived from the work of Jung. Jacques Vallee's (who helped to codify Project Blue Book sightings) 1969 book, *Passport to Magonia: from folklore to flying saucers*, collects over a thousand historical reports of heavenly events throughout history. I imagine Jung would have found ironic synchronicity in the book's popularity at the moment of the monumentally historic technical feat of the moon landing.



"Vespertilio-homo," illustration for the New York Sun A contemporary moon hoax illustration

Fake news may have begun with a series of articles published in 1836 in the New York Sun propagating a false discovery of creatures on the moon made visible by William Herschel's 1789 forty-foot telescope. The newspaper increased circulation by printing the sensational story in a series of six articles with detailed etchings which depicted winged, bat-like humanoids known as "Vespertilio-homo" who built temples and copulated in public. In recent years a dystopian moon hoax has increasingly taken hold of the public imagination claiming the landing in 1969 was faked by the government. I didn't take the phenomenon seriously until a few years ago when I met a young collage educated person who claimed that Stanley Kubrick, director of the groundbreaking space masterpiece *2001: A Space Odyssey*, secretly directed the landing in an underground bunker-like studio north of Hollywood. Hollywood may have planted the conspiratorial seeds in *Capricorn One*, the 1977 film which plots a Mars launch that involves fake film enactments. Today the Internet is awash with conspiracy theories debunking the moon landing, illustrated with all manner of photographic evidence circled in bright Photoshop red lines, revealing a deep underlying distrust of the technology we have created.



Sun Ra



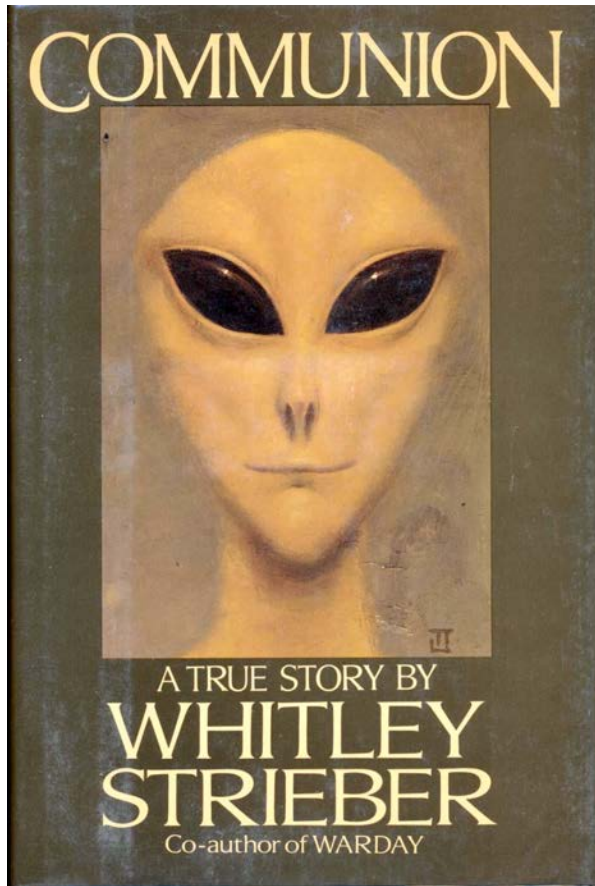
David Bowie in Space Oddity

Music of the late 1960s seemed to incorporate distinctly otherworldly tones from Hollywood Science fiction sound tracks with the cosmic introduction of LSD and the synthesizer. Gender and racial politics were intertwined with the sounds and personas of performers who identified as alien. Some of my favorite performers had special connections to the cosmos. David Bowie, for example, who released his *Space Oddity* in 1969, slipped in and out of alien skins throughout his career, and coincidentally, while visiting my studio in 2000, told me of his admiration for Talpazan.

In the 1970s the connection between funk and space slowly came into cultural focus for me as I heard that musicians George Clinton and Bootsy Collins of Parliament-Funkadelic talked of being from another planet. I eventually made the connection between that group of artists and their predecessor, free jazz composer Sun Ra. A prolific performer and recording artist, Sun Ra claimed to have been teleported as a light-form entity to Saturn. While on the planet, aliens instructed him to speak to the world through his music. His musical and theatrical persona carry a powerful message in the 1974 film *Space Is The Place* which conflates the politics of race in America, space, music and the African diaspora with a particular affinity to the cultural advances of Egypt which would later be known as Afrofuturism.

Whitley Strieber, published *Communion* in 1986 which became a best seller with more than 2 million copies in circulation. Strieber claims the work, a hazy schizoid Catholic-infused retelling of encounters with aliens, to be nonfiction. The American public resonated with the notions of lost time and flashbacks which had recently been introduced by pop psychology of the day. Staring out of the cover of *Communion* is a depiction of a haunting creature that menaces Strieber throughout its pages. It is a

painting by Ted Seth Jacobs, made under close instruction by Strieber, and is now considered to be the classic “gray” alien. Strieber was able to remember his alien encounters through hypnosis sessions conducted in SoHo, at the time an artists enclave in New York City. *Communion*’s cultural effect expanded greatly with the release of the Hollywood movie starring Christopher Walken as Strieber.



Communion, first edition book cover
featuring painting by Ted Seth Jacobs

By chance, I met Ionel Talpazan in 1999 at a subway entrance in SoHo where he was selling his paintings in the open air under the stars. Dozens of brightly colored canvases and drawings, all depicting variations on the same flying saucer theme, surrounded him. I struck up a conversation, asked him if he had been inside one of these machines, knowing the answer before the words came out of my mouth. As Jung had pointed out, mechanical facts are beside the point, they are overshadowed by Talpazan’s urgent creative process. The art is transformative. He had arranged the canvases in such a way to catch the streetlight, lending them an inner glow. I was stunned by the spectacular obsession of his work which seemed to convert the dirty streets of New York City into a museum of the cosmos. We struck a deal and I bought a few canvases keeping one for myself and gifting others to friends and relatives including Mike Kelley and Jim Shaw. Talpazan’s work reminds us of our ancient, forever-evolving relationship with the sky and all the possibilities beyond. His creations and relationship to the heavens serves as an inspirational model for us in search for intelligent life here on earth.



Untitled Painting, Ionel Talpazan, 1999

As this exhibition took shape, I had been collecting photos, drawings, books and ephemera from the Ukraine region's UFO investigators and enthusiasts. As tanks, troops and drones entered Ukrainian territory I, like many of us, felt as though I was experiencing an historical loop. Drones and satellites offer the world a god-like visual perspective on the battlefield's carnage. Some of the earliest supposed messages from the highly intelligent extraterrestrial creatures were anti-war and warned of nuclear dangers. During the invasion, the radiation monitors at Chernobyl went offline and news media around the world warned of the possible use of nuclear weapons. UFO sightings are often associated with reactors. For now my UFO friends are still safe in Ukraine. Miraculously the last group of images were mailed from there in late April, arriving in NYC over a month later, and are included in this installation.



Ukrainian UFO Photographs, Oursler Archive