

Moon Museum. Curating Outer Space (Vienna, 28-29 May 26)

TU Wien, Vienna, May 28–29, 2026

Deadline: Dec 15, 2025

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As omnipresent as the universe is in the public imaginary, it constitutes a representational paradox: distorted space, warped time, twisted logic. Time and again, scientists, exhibition makers, and artists have grappled with the challenge of mediating the alterity of the cosmos our planet is embedded in. From space art to science fiction cinema, from documentaries to pulp fiction, from planetarium displays to museum dioramas, outer space—its landscapes, denizens, and infrastructures—has been invented and re-invented in myriad ways. This symposium turns to the medium of display and considers outer space as a curatorial problem: we approach this field of inquiry from two angles, examining both how outer space was historically exhibited on earth, and how outer space itself has been conceived of as a site of exhibition.

Early efforts to mediate the cosmos through exhibits include the immersive projections of the Hayden Planetarium in New York (opened 1935), which heralded an era of technocratic optimism. In the aftermath of WWII, Munich's Deutsches Museum navigated complicated tensions between postwar disillusionment with aviation technology and space-age techno-utopianism in its permanent exhibition on space travel ("Weltraumfahrt", opened 1961). During the Cold War, world's fairs such as Expo 58 in Brussels ("Man in Space") or Expo 67 in Montreal ("Man the Explorer" and "Man and Space") staged space travel as both scientific achievement and ideological spectacle. Similarly, decidedly artistic projects like NASA's "Eyewitness to Space" exhibition series (1965–1969), Tom Sachs's "Space Program" (since 2007), or the "Painting Apollo" exhibition (National Air and Space Museum, 2009)—which combined Alan Bean's painted recollections of the Apollo missions with related objects from the museum's collection—have continued to probe the aesthetic and curatorial possibilities of representing outer space. At the same time, outer space itself served as a breeding ground for both realised and speculative curatorial endeavors—ranging from Forest Myers's "Moon Museum" (1969) and NASA's iconic "Golden Record" (1977) to Tavares Strachan's "Enoch" satellite (2018) and the various digital "Lunar Codex" archives (2023–) currently travelling aboard lunar landers.

Exhibits of outer space raise questions about how the cosmos was staged at various moments in time, how it mobilized colonial and imperial attitudes, how it served as a geopolitical arena, and how it projected different futures. Conversely, exhibitions in outer space compel us to rethink fundamental curatorial assumptions and categories: what is the meaning of 'art' in an extraterrestrial environment? What is a museum, an exhibit, a display without an audience? What might it mean to curate for a non-human or extraterrestrial audience? In bringing these two perspectives together, we seek to offer opportunities for critical reflection and speculative re-imagination of

inquiries at the intersections of the cultural history of outer space and curatorial and museum studies.

Topics include, but are not limited to:

- Curating the cosmos: museum and planetarium practices; natural-history and science-museum dioramas; exhibition design for space.
- Art in/for space: "Moon museums," orbital artworks, performance and installation across micro-gravity, speculative or unrealized projects.
- Programs and collections: state and agency initiatives (e.g. art-in-space programs), exhibition series and catalogues; "Eyewitness" and other documentary paradigms.
- Coloniality, Cold War, and geopolitics: imperial scripts in cosmic displays; diplomatic exhibitions; soft power and spectacle.
- Technologies of display: simulation, immersion, data-visualization/sonification, AI and robotics in curating outer space.
- Audiences and agencies: non-human/extraterrestrial spectators; machine publics; curation without publics.
- Architecture, landscape, and design: planetary infrastructures, space habitats, gardens and geology on display; the white cube, the black box, and the vacuum.

Contributions from diverse disciplinary perspectives such as art history, visual studies, museum studies, history of sciences, gender studies, STS, etc. are very much welcome in order to facilitate an explicitly transdisciplinary discourse. Following the conference, the contributions will be published.

Please send a single-page abstract for a 20-minute talk, along with a brief CV, to gruener@usc.edu and thomas.moser@tuwien.ac.at by December 15, 2025. Draft papers will be circulated among participants in advance of the symposium. Limited funds may be available to support travel and accommodation for participants without institutional or external funding.

Organized by Magdalena Grüner (USC) and Thomas Moser (TU Wien)

Reference:

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