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# Time capsule to orbit Earth for 50,000 years

NEW YORK (Reuters) -- A group headed by a French artist is putting together a time capsule that will orbit Earth for 50,000 years before returning with its cargo of messages and other treasures -- and you can take part.



The awe-inspiring project dubbed KEO (<http://www.keo.org>) offers an abundance of information on its Web site and the chance to write one of the messages for future beings that will be carried by the winged satellite.

Clicking on "Your Message" at the bottom of the page, which is available in English and French versions, gives you a blank space in which you can write up to 6,000 characters -- about four pages -- in any language and about anything you want.

In 2001, if all goes according to plan, the messages now being collected will be launched into orbit, stored on special, glass-tempered CD-ROMs designed to protect them from the ravages of time and space.

"KEO is like an impressionist painting where each individual's message is one small dot of paint that he or she leaves before standing back to contemplate and find meaning in the rich canvas of human colors," its creator, Paris artist Jean-Marc Philippe, said in a news release on the project. "It challenges us to probe the question of who we really are and what we want of ourselves."

## Visible with a telescope

The satellite's wings, made of so-called shape memory alloys, are designed to beat as the sun's rays and Earth's shadow cause temperature changes. It will be visible in the sky with a simple optic telescope.

When it returns to Earth, its specially designed thermal shield will react with the atmosphere, signaling the orbiter's landing with a Northern Lights-like phenomenon.

The orbiter will also carry a contemporary "Library of Alexandria," named for the legendary library of ancient times, with content selected by a "multicultural, multidisciplinary and multid denominational 'think tank,'" the Web site says.

Also aboard will be an image of present-day Earth; a diamond containing samples of seawater, air, soil and a drop of human blood; and pictures of men, women and children.

The satellite will have information to help those who discover it 50,000 years hence: a "user manual" on how to read the messages on the CD-ROMs -- the technology presumably will be obsolete by then -- and an "astronomical clock" showing the current position and rotational speed of radio pulsars, which will enable the orbiter's discoverers to determine its age.

Why 50,000 years? "50,000 years is the mirror date to a fantastic moment in the evolution of mankind: the appearance of Art, which outwardly revealed our capacity for abstract thought," the

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site says.

"It is also a distance in time that is so vertiginous and mind-boggling that it compels us to abandon our normal points of reference and puts us all on equal footing, forcing us to reach down into our imaginations or deep convictions. And it is a time span that will give our treasures a true archeological value, because most, if not all, traces of our existence today will have disappeared by then."

KEO's name comes from the most frequently used phonemes, or phonetically similar sounds, in the most widely spoken languages. The project is backed mainly by French companies and institutions including government-owned Aerospatiale aerospace and defense company; the Ecole des Mines de Paris; Radio France Internationale; the Strasbourg-based International Space University, and Europe's Arianespace launch company.

The help is coming solely through voluntary contributions in kind, be it time, skills, materials or services, according to project member Veronica Quinn.

**'Free of commercial, political influence'**

"This policy was deliberately adopted so that KEO could remain free of any commercial or political influence, and to avoid diverting funds unintentionally from more urgent, humanitarian causes," Quinn said in an e-mail response to questions.

The site gives those who want to help a chance to offer their services. Four people work on the KEO project team and there are more than 100 voluntary contributors, Quinn said.

A link on the site labeled "KEO extras" gives you a chance to send KEO-themed e-mail "postcards" or download a KEO screen background for your personal computer, among other things. If you have your own Web site you can download an animated link to KEO's site.

Not wired? No problem. You can send your KEO message via regular mail to KEO, 65bis, Boulevard Brune, 75014 Paris, France. The project is also looking into ways to collect messages from people who cannot read or write.

"We have received thousands of messages so far representing around 53 countries," from people ranging in age from 7 to 86, Quinn said.

"Nice surprises in the last week or so were a bunch of messages from a high school class in Illinois (via Internet) and 30 individual envelopes from a school in Reunion in the Indian Ocean," she said. "I got a message from a father two weeks ago in Colombia who wanted answers to questions for his son's homework."

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