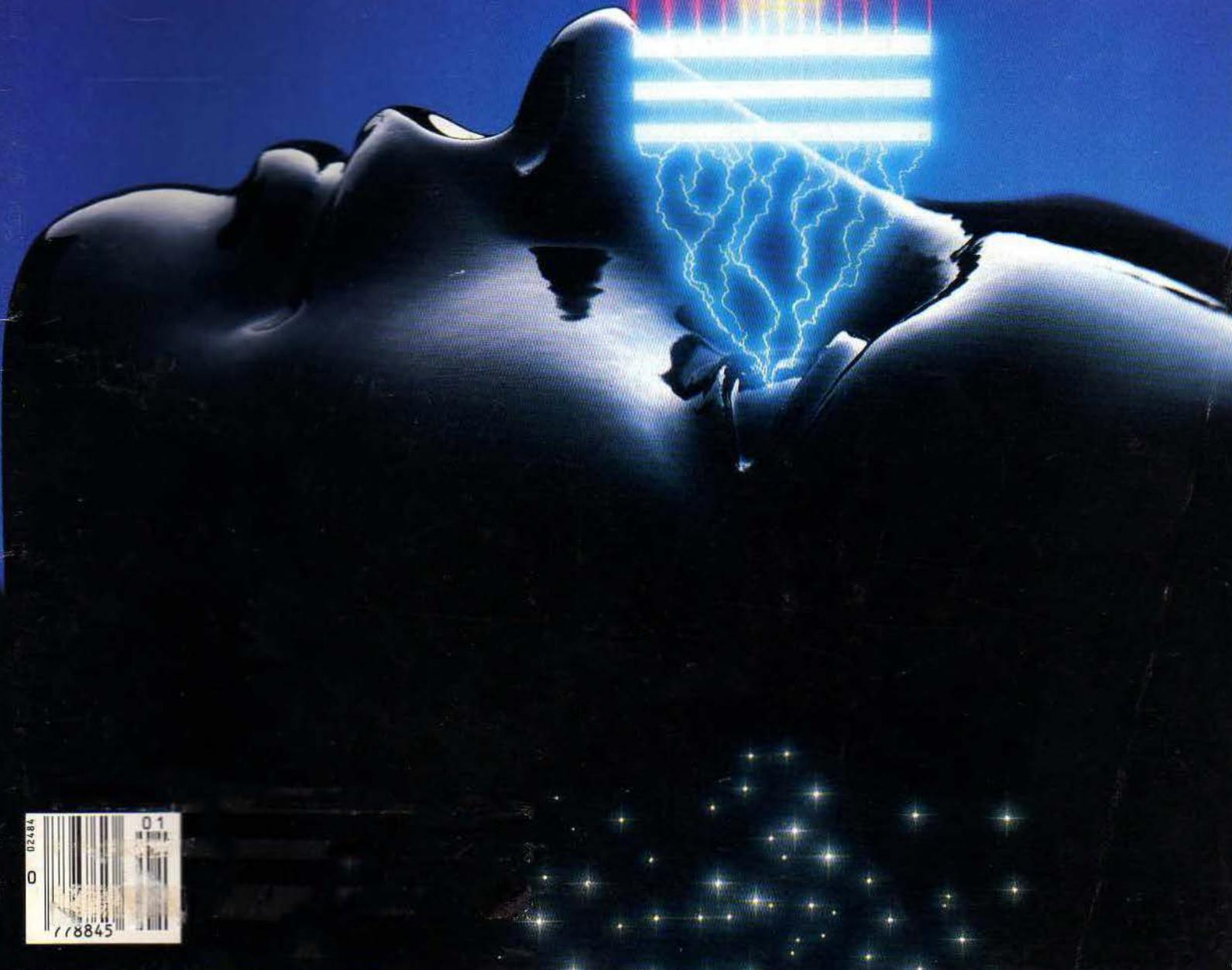


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SPACE:
NASA'S NEXT STEPS
TOWARD THE STARS



Tracking
down unexplained aerial
phenomena is
official business in France.

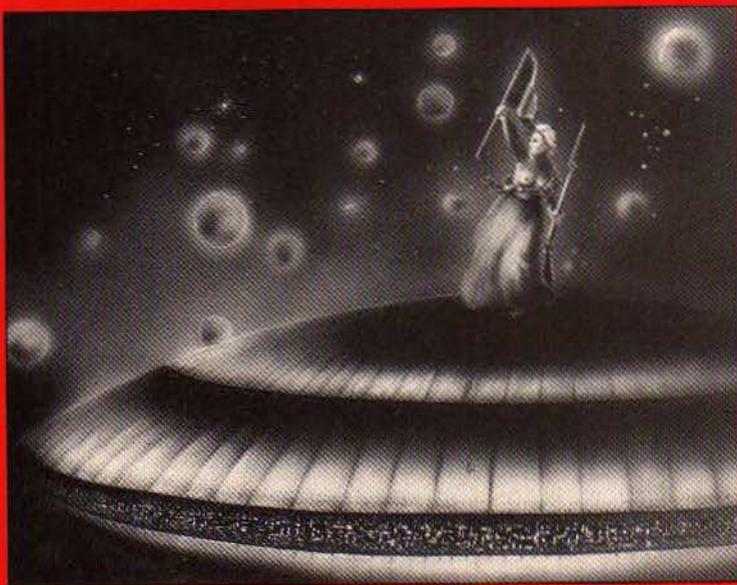
ANTI MATTER

When an unidentified flying object is reported in the United States, local authorities frequently dismiss the alleged sighting as a hoax or mistake. If the incident is investigated at all, it is usually done so by a private group of unpaid volunteer UFO researchers operating on a shoestring budget. But in France, it's a different story. There, tracking down unexplained aerial phenomena has become serious government business.

It all began in 1977, when the *Centre National D'Etudes Spatiales* (CNES), which is roughly equivalent to NASA, established *Group D'Etudes Phenomenes Aérospatiaux Non Identifiés* (GEPAN). GEPAN, French officials declared, would not only investigate UFO reports but would also direct studies of any physical evidence related to the sightings. "The agency grew out of a public demand following testimonies of UFO sightings from distinguished French citizens," GEPAN's chief, Jean-Jacques Velasco, relates. "The French military had also sighted unexplained aerial phenomena and wanted some official explanation."

Following its mandate, GEPAN has worked closely with French police to log some 1,600 UFO reports over the past 11 years. "The majority," Velasco emphasizes, "have been explained as natural phenomena or aircraft. But thirty-eight percent are still question marks."

Spurred by those question marks, CNES recently sponsored meetings in Paris and Toulouse to discuss GEPAN's research and to exchange information with foreign UFO researchers. Among the topics covered were examples of



UFO UPDATE

French countryside where a "flying saucer" reportedly landed and then zoomed away. French police collected the damaged plants, and GEPAN asked scientists to examine the vegetation. Their findings? The plants had lost 50 percent of their chlorophyll. Researchers were unable to explain this deficit or to reproduce it in normal plants.

"We exchanged databases containing details of these cases and hundreds of others," Hynek comments. "And we've agreed that when the French have a hot case, they'll transmit it to us, and we'll do the same with them. UFOs are a global phenomenon, and this kind of cooperation is enormously important if we are to understand what is going on."

Why haven't other governments followed France's lead and established official channels for UFO investigations? "There are reports that the USSR has a program similar to GEPAN's," Velasco answers. "But in general, UFOs are not considered the domain of governments because they aren't seen as military or security threats." —SHERRY BAKER