MY TRIP TO MARS

ADAM NORTON

The First Man on Mars

In 1948 German American rocket scientist Wernher von Braun published *Das Marsprojekt* (The Mars Project), a technical manual detailing a potential future manned mission to Mars described as being among the most influential and accomplished books on the subject in history. Von Braun, who was later called to account for his affiliation with Nazism, described in great detail how a fleet of ten spacecraft manned by seventy scientists and astronauts could journey to Mars, find a landing site and establish a base camp for further exploration. The launch date for this ambitious mission, von Braun speculated, could be as early as 1965.

Flash forward fifty years, and humanity is still inching closer to that speculative future. The Mars One project, established by a Dutch organisation and media company aiming to land the first humans on Mars by 2027, has been widely criticised as unrealistic and vastly under-resourced - NASA is aiming for a more modest target of the mid-2030s. Research on the effects of deep space travel on humans is ongoing, with a group of research scientists recently confined to a geodesic dome in Hawaii experiencing some of the isolation their future

astronaut counterparts will have to endure. Progress continues.

In *My Trip to Mars* Adam Norton invites us to imagine a scenario where a visit to the red planet is as simple as a nip down to the local hardware store. Taking on the persona of the mad inventor turned intrepid explorer he returns the narrative around space exploration from one deeply embedded with the military industrial complex, fed by billions in government and corporate dollars, to a human scale. By doing so he instills these endeavours with a sense of creative imagination, even hope.

Norton's adventures in the video work *Mars Project* belie the extreme conditions on the red planet – its average surface temperature colder than the coldest temperatures ever recorded in Antarctica, its raging dust storms and low gravity, its unforgiving terrain, its toxic air. Should our home planet ever finally expire, this freezing dusty rock could be humanity's life raft. Filmed in the landscape around the mining town of Broken Hill, it shows Norton picking his way though the scarred landscape, clambering over rocks and pausing to look out over the red expanse. Despite his apparent isolation, his demeanor is buoyant and curious. Norton's helmet, marked EARTH, is both a clue to the potential global effort behind such a mission, and a reminder of the rather more terrestrial context of these speculations. If Norton is our envoy to Mars, this mission is an exercise in quixotic optimism.

The surface of the Mars diorama painstakingly recreated in the gallery is littered with objects seemingly souvenired from such an adventure. But Norton's speculative Martian artefacts are constructed from simple, widely available materials: cardboard, tennis balls, bubble wrap. The Mars habitation unit, *Space Yurt*, is a humble abode based on the structures of nomadic societies; Norton's lightweight orange space suit is closer to that of a racing car driver than the bulky suits worn by real astronauts. In their modesty these objects defy the major technological and economic barriers befalling real manned Mars missions, and draw us in with their materiality.

Norton's constructions remind us that the senses of wonder and adventure have always been at the heart of our fascination with the universe. Scientists continue to probe our solar system with the hope that there might be someone or something else out there with the same curiosity. We just need to keep leaping out into the great unknown.

Eleanor Zeichner

List of works

Mars Utility Suit, 2009-2014, digital video animation, suit, helmet, shoes, rope, aluminium & acrylic, 204 cm x 50 cm x 50 cm

Space Yurt, 2012, mixed media, 208 cm x 302 cm x 306 cm

Space Bed, 2010, cardboard, tennis balls, 62 cm x 198 cm x 66 cm

Mars Gravity Simulator (Test 1 - Performance Space), 2011, video documentation, 5 min 15 sec.

Leg Brace (Mars Gravity Simulator), 2011, metal & plastic, 130 cm x 73 cm x 12 cm

Mars Relic, 2008 – 2013, printed flag, red earth, box frame, 126 cm x 182 cm

Mars Panorama (NASA), 2015, printed vinyl banner, 208 cm x 1400 cm. Image of Bonneville Crater courtesy of NASA.

The Mars Project, 2013, HD digital video, 28 mins, edition of three + 1 A/P

Adam Norton
My Trip to Mars
28 July - 28 August 2015

UTS GALLERY
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Image credits:
Cover and inside fold: Adam Norton, *The Mars Project*, digital still. Inside from left: Adam Norton, *Mars Utility Suit*, photo by Craig Bender; Adam Norton, *Space Yurt* (interior), photo by Craig Bender; Adam Norton, *Mars Gravity Simulator (Test 1 - Performance Space)*, photo by Lucy Parakhina.

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Adam Norton is represented by Gallery9, Sydney and Gallerysmith, Melbourne

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