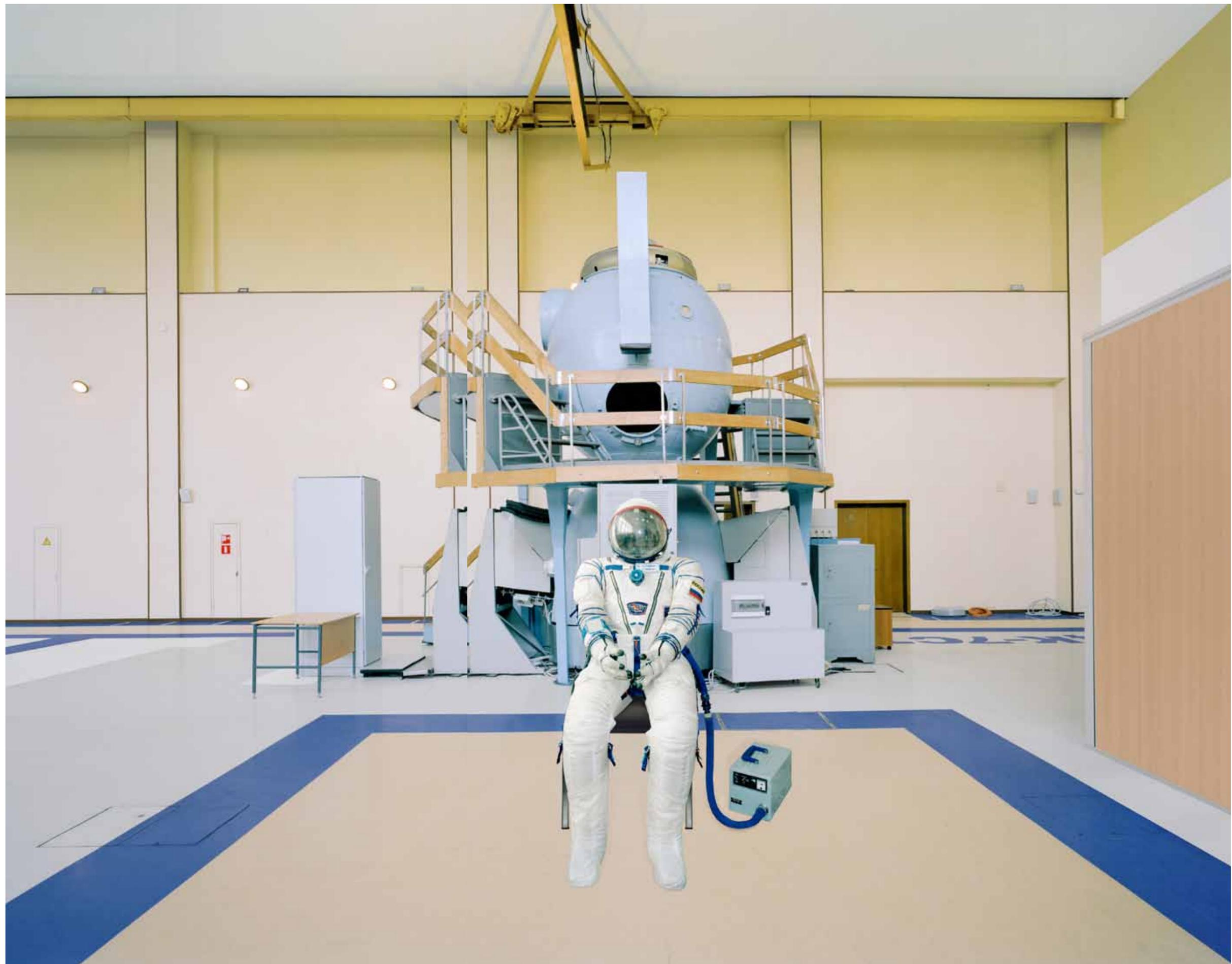


THE ACE OF SPACE

EDGAR MARTINS
ON A MISSION

ANNA SANSOM

PRESSURISED SUIT AND
SOYUZ TRAINING MODULE
Yuri Gagarin Cosmonaut Training
Centre, Star City, Russia



Herein lies the true story of a boy's childhood wishes coming true – or, very nearly true. Edgar Martins has had the good fortune of being allowed to explore outer space from the safety of the land-based facilities and assorted paraphernalia that make it possible for astronauts to venture out there. In his capacity as an artist, Martins has studied this vast behind-the-scenes technical network and duly interpreted the experience, resulting in a comprehensive work, recently completed. Expressing glee every step of the way, he uncovered spacesuits and simulators, not to mention many surprises, that previously he could only have imagined.



1

permanent butterflies in my stomach. I was finally able to witness and engage in something that I've always held in high esteem and have had a huge curiosity about.”

Martins wrote a letter to ESA in which he explained that he wanted to produce the most comprehensive survey ever assembled about a leading scientific and space exploration organisation and its programmes. The proposal included reflecting on the new politics of space exploration, post Cold War, and how this impacts on our cultural and social consciousness and man's quest to understand the unknown. Martins, 36, singled out ESA rather than NASA or CERN (European Organisation for Nuclear Research) because it represented virgin territory – the other two entities had artist residency programmes, meaning that other artists were already working on projects there, whereas ESA did not. “Needless to say, I was very taken aback when ESA responded and showed an unflinching desire to help me”, he says.

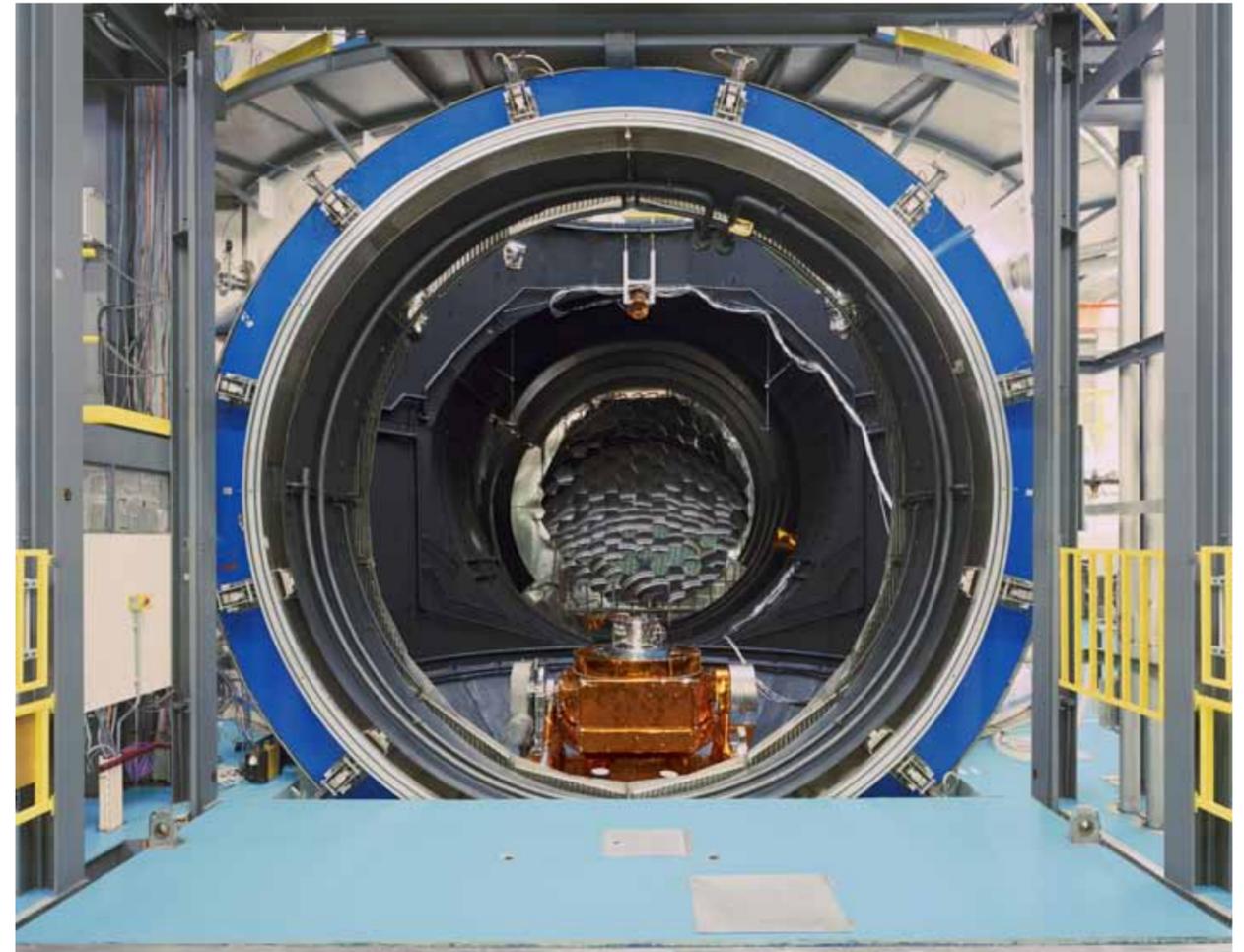


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As a young boy, Edgar Martins was fascinated by space. “I had a funny obsession about what happens to spacesuits when they are not being used in space”, he recalls. “I remember asking myself: Where and how are they stored?” Three decades later, Martins has just completed an extensive body of work about the European Space Agency entitled *The Rehearsal of Space & The Poetic Impossibility to Manage the Infinite*. It is the culmination of a two-year project that entailed him, as an artist, gaining unprecedented, exclusive access to 15 facilities belonging to ESA or its partners. “For me, it was absolutely amazing”, Martin enthuses. “I had

ERGOLIER HELMET (1)
CSG Europe's Spaceport,
Kourou, French Guiana

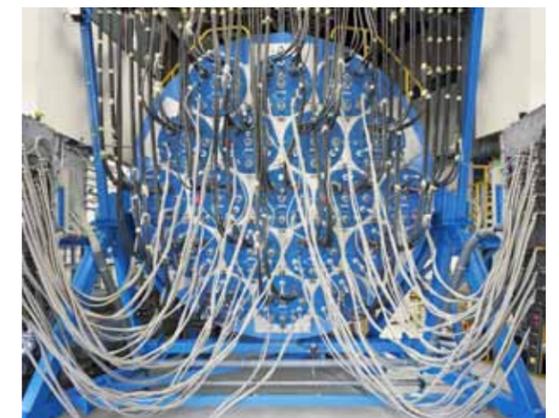
SPACE GLOVE (2)
Yuri Gagarin Cosmonaut Training
Centre, Star City, Russia



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2



3

LARGE SPACE SIMULATOR -
5M DOOR (1/2)
ESA-ESTEC, Noordwijk,
The Netherlands

LARGE SPACE SIMULATOR -
SUN BASEMENT (3)
ESA-ESTEC, Noordwijk,
The Netherlands



SPACECRAFT FUELLING HALL
CSG Europe's Spaceport,
Kourou, French Guiana

EXPLORING NEW WORLDS

It transpired that ESA was quick to recognise the project's potential in helping the multinational organisation establish a dialogue with the arts and reach a wider audience. But Martins was clear that his intention was not to simply make a portfolio of aesthetic images, but to take an interrogative stance. "I was very conscious from the start that this couldn't be a PR exercise for ESA, and they completely welcomed the idea that I might bring a critical and artistic perspective", he explains. Unlike most space agencies, ESA outsources many of its projects to 'partner organisations'. After Martins provided an itinerary of the facilities he wished to visit, ESA agreed to contact each of them on his behalf. This led him to embark on an intensive project that involved going to 15 locations in Europe, Russia, Kazakhstan, and French Guyana. The likes of astronaut training centres, robotics departments, jet propulsion laboratories, space simulators, satellites, launch platforms, and assembly rooms – Martins photographed them all.

Born in Évora, Portugal, Martins grew up in Macau, relocating to London to do an MA in Photography and Fine Art at the Royal College of Art. In 2011, he represented Macau at the Venice Biennale, and partly attributes his critical eye to his upbringing in Macau, where he became trilingual in Portuguese, English, and Cantonese. "Macau exposed me to a unique multicultural society, where interactions between the different communities were complex, and those between the people and government even more-so", he explains. "I think it's this sense of not knowing exactly where you belong and constantly seeking out new experiences that has provided the critical distance and aroused the necessary curiosity to engage in complex themes and topics."

An interest in topographical sites, industry, and travel has guided much of his career. Earlier projects had taken him to hydroelectric generating stations, to the Loire Valley (to survey the decline of its traditional industries), and to the US (to look at repossessed properties during the subprime mortgage crisis). Martins sees himself as being like a topog-

rapher or visual archaeologist, his chosen terrain the hard-to-access environments; he is interested in the dialogue that these environments can provoke. His photography reveals hitherto-unseen places in broad, compelling ways that extend beyond a mere documentary approach. Facilities that are renowned for their technical complexity appear abstracted and encapsulate a sense of awe. One such example is his image of a Large Space Simulator (a device for creating the conditions of space so that extreme heat and extreme cold can be tested on spacecraft) in Noordwijk, The Netherlands. Martins photographed the simulator on three separate occasions, using an hour-long exposure in order to achieve the image. "It feels as though you are walking through a porthole into a different dimension", he says. "The only lighting I had was from my hand-held flashgun, so I had to fire it about 200 times, trying to push the photographic boundaries and find-out what the film is capable of registering with very little light." He counts visiting the simulator as one of his most cherished experiences, along with holding a mass of moon rock in his hand.

ABSTRACTING THE REAL

Martins brings the same sensitivity to shooting industrial objects that other photographers might bring to a still-life shoot. Thermal insulation appears as disassembled artefacts when shot against the golden backdrop that Martins found on location;



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the colour reminded him of the multilayer insulation material used in most spacecraft. Another group of images captures the vetted objects that astronauts take into space with them. Besides being allowed to take three personal objects on board the spacecraft, such as a folded-up drawing or a trinket, they can take up to 20 objects that fit into a small bag called the Personal Preference Kit (PPK), which is stored in a hold-all. "The astronauts can't access these things during the mission, but the items still have the value of being space-flown objects", he says. "I pho-

STAINLESS STEEL REFLECTOR (1)

ALUMINIUM HONEYCOMB ASSEMBLY (2)

MLI (MULTI-LAYER INSULATION) (3)
Thermal insulation used on spacecraft

SADM (SOLAR ARRAY DEPLOYMENT MECHANISM) ROTOR
The device that opens the solar panels when in orbit

M & C Laboratory ESA-ESTEC,
Noordwijk, The Netherlands



tographed all sorts of weird and wonderful things, ranging from a Rubik's Cube to a Christmas hat.”

One of the most intriguing places that Martins visited was the Yuri Gagarin Cosmonaut Training Centre in Star City, Russia. “Star City is a self-contained area on the outskirts of Moscow which houses all the Russian astronauts and cosmonauts that have ever been to space, and their families”, says Martins. “It's absolutely fantastic – a complete throwback to modernist, Soviet Russia, in the sense that it has changed very little over time.” After initially being shown around the kinds of locations that the international media would tour, Martins managed to gain access to the backrooms where the spacesuits are kept. He convinced his guides to pressurise one of them for him to photograph, and placed it on a chair in front of a Soyuz training module. In the resulting image, the suit looks as if it is about to be launched into space. Martins spent considerable time with the astronauts, too, in order to gain insight into their experiences, and he learnt that what we see in the movies isn't always as farfetched as we might think. “I was keen to hear what they felt

about Gravity [the 2013 film starring Sandra Bullock and George Clooney]”, he mentions. “ESA astronaut Jean François Clervoy said: 'That movie's really great. I went to see it five times.' Before, I used to tell people that if they wanted to know what it's like in space they needed to see a certain documentary; now I tell them to go and see Gravity.”

Unsurprisingly, given Martins' boyhood fascination with spacesuits, one of his favourite images is the one of the Russian spacesuits with their integrated helmets laid out on the shelves together with the gloves. “When I came across this astronaut's dressing room, for me it was a revelation”, he says. “It was really interesting to feel and photograph the glove. I guess it's the closest I'll ever get to space without ever physically being there.” <

The Rehearsal of Space & The Poetic Impossibility to Manage the Infinite is being published by la Fabrika/The Moth House in 2014. A touring exhibition is taking place at several public galleries and museums between 2014 and 2018, including galerie melanieRio, Nantes (France).

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Courtesy of the European Space Agency and galerie melanieRio

ASTRONAUT'S DRESSING ROOM)
Yuri Gagarin Cosmonaut Training
Centre, Star City, Russia