

Space in the Image

«L'immensité est en nous. (...) Dès que nous sommes immobiles, nous sommes ailleurs ; nous rêvons dans un monde immense. L'immensité est le mouvement de l'homme immobile.»

Gaston Bachelard, La poétique de l'espace, 1957

Between Yuri Gagarin's first space flight in 1961 and Neil Armstrong's walk on the moon in 1969, the 1960s were marked by an extraordinary series of efforts and events in the field of space travel that radically altered our perception of the horizons of the universe. Symptomatically, it was in the same period, more specifically in 1967, that Michel Foucault gave his celebrated and seminal lecture at the Cercles d'Études Architecturales in Paris, which he began by saying that 'the great obsession of the nineteenth century was, as we know, history' but 'the present epoch will perhaps be above all the epoch of space. We are in the epoch of simultaneity: we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed'. An epoch in which 'Our experience of the world is less that of a long life developing through time than that of a network that connects points and intersects with its own skein. One could perhaps say that certain ideological conflicts animating present-day polemics oppose the pious descendents of time and the determined inhabitants of space'.¹

In the same lecture, Foucault elaborates the concept of heterotopia to describe those other places that function as 'counter-sites' or 'realised utopias'. These are spaces of alterity, which are simultaneously physical and mental. The several paradigmatic examples given by Foucault include a mirror ('a placeless place'), a theatre ('a whole series of places... one after the other', a garden, the museum (a heterotopia intended to accumulate and pile up time), a train or a ship (a fluctuating space that 'is closed in on itself and at the same time is given over to the infinity of the sea'). For the philosopher, heterotopia is characterised by the overlapping in a

¹ [Foucault, Michel. "Of Other Spaces, Heterotopias." Architecture, Mouvement, Continuité 5 \(1984\): 46-49.](#)

single real space of several spaces or sites which, on their own, would be incompatible. These are therefore spaces that have more layers of meaning or that define or trigger relations with other places. As such, they require an intelligibility that cannot be restricted to the interpretation of a gaze.

It is among a certain imaginary associated with the conquest of space and the modern and contemporary changes that have shaped our understanding and experience of spaces that we can find a fertile and productive line of reflection from which to consider the images that make up Edgar Martins' most recent project, *The Rehearsal of Space and the Poetic Impossibility to Manage the Infinite*. This project was produced over eighteen months between 2012 and 2013, during which time Edgar Martins photographed various facilities belonging to the European Space Agency (ESA) situated in nine countries in Europe, Asia and South America. Edgar Martins is the first artist to whom ESA has granted access to all of its facilities, programs, databases and files.

Space-related themes have cropped up repeatedly in the work of Edgar Martins. In fact, his work could be framed within the context of an extended series of contemporary, image-related attitudes and practices that are distinguished by the fact that their starting point is an urge to work on specific places by exploring their different physical and material aspects and particularly their cultural, ideological and poetic resonances.

Since creating his earliest series, which were more obviously centred on the genre of landscape, Edgar Martins' photography has primarily focused on places that are real but also generic and symbolic. Such places include urban frontiers (Black Holes & Other Inconsistencies, 2002); beaches (*The Accidental Theorist*, 2007); airports (*When Light Casts No Shadow*, 2008); neighbourhoods or houses that were abandoned or left half-built in the wake of America's sub-prime crisis (*This is not a House*, 2008); places and buildings that reflect changes in the industrial landscape in a region of France (*Reluctant Monoliths*, 2009); an urban setting used for training the British police (*A Metaphysical Survey of British Dwellings*, 2010); and hydroelectric power stations (*The Time Machine*, 2011).

Like the heterotopias evoked by Foucault, the ESA facilities photographed by Martins are intrinsically heterogeneous, sites where multiple functions and spatial meanings converge. In them, we find characteristics that suggest a peculiar mixture

of the laboratory and the factory, the scientific centre and the military installation, the control centre and the training and simulation zone. In their multiplicity, all of these spatial configurations establish a chain of relations between them. However, we are in a space that has been arranged in a calculated manner, like an enormous machine in which every aspect, procedure, distance and instrument is subsumed to a concrete goal, fulfilling its specific task within a giant operational and functional system.

In looking at these images, we can identify the aesthetic and technical qualities that have characterised Edgar Martins' work. His is a form of photography that is rooted in documentary and maximises the descriptive, objective and realistic potential of photographic representation. In other words, his work is founded on the primacy of technical precision, the clear and lucid construction of the image, and the total rejection of any kind of atmospheric or pictorial expressionism. Edgar Martins thereby commits himself to the reproductive fidelity provided by the (large-scale) photographic camera in order to obtain an apparently impartial view from which all sentimental or mannerist traits are absent. These are images that re-centre the meaning of photography simply because they have no wish to be anything other than photographs; because they assume the camera and the image-handling device's extraordinary ability and aptitude for instigating and intensifying our (un)awareness of things.

This body of work is therefore configured on the basis of a dual appeal: at the same time as they document and analyse the meanings associated with these spaces and objects, the images also express an awareness, an attitude in relation to the nature and horizon of the duplicating effects of the photographic medium. It is within this dual appeal that Edgar Martins' creative process is materialised: he focuses on a subject and transposes it to a visual surface in order to highlight its aesthetic, material and discursive potential. In other words, his work takes the conventions of the objective image as a springboard from which to seek out a fuller and more productive subjectivity.

These images produced by Edgar Martins are also distinguished by the profound sense of silence that they evoke and their ability to suggest a feeling of emptiness. They are static planes from which actions are absent or reduced to a minimum. There is no narrative, no before and after. People are rarely seen and when they do appear they are distant and indistinct figures, like mere extras,

although they allow the spectator to make out distances, scales and the functional nature of the spaces and equipment. We are far from the anthropological space discussed by Marc Augé, the space that necessarily creates identities and enables interpersonal relations; the space which is 'a principle of meaning for the people who live in it, and also a principle of intelligibility for the person who observes it'.² In effect, in examining these spaces and these technological devices, we are faced with an aseptic, complex, calculated and cold world; a territory that is alien to the world that we are used to recognising every day (with the exception of certain objects and a drawing done by a child). But the truth is that anyone who is not a scientist, physicist or an astronomer does not need to know in detail what takes place in these spaces or with these instruments because our imaginings about the universe are a shadow that hovers fatally over these spaces. We know that the human fascination with the discovery of space and the immensity of the universe is proportional to its mystery, its unfamiliarity, its incomprehensibility. However, this scarcity of knowledge has the ability to stir the imagination since, as we know very well, spaces are never generic and abstract for the simple reason that fatally passive and empty spaces do not exist.

Spaces relate to physical concrete realities but we also know that they can refer to mental and virtual geographies or fantastic, mythical and moral territories. Such territories mobilise an immense multiplicity of affections, beliefs and narrative impulses, which, at a certain point, become simultaneously real because they get wrapped up in our experience and awareness of reality. On the other hand, an internal, more properly physiological and corporal dimension of our perception of space must also be considered. We are talking about a primary level of perception, a level on which a phenomenological relationship with physical coordinates is at play: we see that there is an above and a below, a left and a right, a foreground and a background, and that we are therefore experiencing and feeling an oscillating space. This is the feeling that is triggered when we look at the various photographs that Edgar Martins has taken inside training simulators for spacecraft modules. They resemble corridors awaiting a sudden change in the parameters of gravity and, in some shots, the terms floor, ceiling and wall are ambiguous and transitive.

Overall, the images are characterised by an absolute simplicity. It is as if the subjects were presenting themselves without any artistic mediation. However, these

² Marc Augé *Non-places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, Verso, translated by John Howe, 1995, p. 52

images can easily be seen to obey a rigorous and calculated formal architecture. In most cases, our perception is guided by orthogonal framings that suggest a form of plane geometry. The geometry is a guide, a formal structure. This is a kind of photography that does not aim to create a new, alternative or unusual appearance. Above all, it aims to create a more attentive and intense appearance via a compositional approach that is employed as a quality intended to facilitate precisely that level of attention and perceptive intensity. This tendency is particularly evident in the photographs of objects. A search is undertaken for a relationship with detail that was already evident in earlier series, such as the photographs of metal sheets (which resemble planets) in *Dwarf Exoplanets & Other Sophisms* (2007); the images of dust particles seen in *The Inequalities in the Motion of the Stars* (2008); and, in a more similar vein, the photographs of objects and instruments that made up the series *The Time-Machine* (2011). These are photographs in which Edgar Martins isolates and moves closer to his subjects so that they can be perceived and appreciated in detail, guiding our gaze towards forms, colours, textures, surface and tonality. Thus, the subject appears to be squeezed into the image, accentuating the way that our attention is drawn to its graphic and plastic qualities. At the same time, the sense of proximity grants the image a tactile quality.

All of this movement towards variables that are properly visual makes the relationship with the object potentially troubling and projective. Moreover, it is important not to forget that the way in which we look at these spaces and objects is strongly contaminated by images of science and by the endless plethora of references found in cinema, literature and art. In this context, the photographer's art also stems from an ability to mobilise the game of cross-referencing made possible by images; the ability to instigate unexpected and illogical links, like a perceptive epiphany intended to investigate a different understanding of reality. Consider, for example, the photograph depicting the housing of a waveguide circulator (nr. 49 url): there is no doubt that this is a component of something grander and more complex. But in its solitary state, in which it is decontextualised and defunctionalised, it is as if the object has been freed to participate in a game of unpredictable formal and symbolic associations: it looks like a sculpture, or could it be a relic or a strange religious artefact? The same is true of the image of a Micro-section of plated through-holes component (nr. 51 url): . It is not clear what is being shown here. It appears to be a small object (how small?) inside a sheet of resin but we could imagine it to be a minute detail of Marcel Duchamp's *Grand Verre* or a component of one of the delirious machines described by Raymond Roussel in the book *Locus Solus* (1914).

The focus on detail could be considered not only as a way of giving the object an artistic appearance but also as an opportunity to compose an image of a flat surface; a closed, opaque image lacking in any depth or horizon, the supreme example of which could be the photograph of a printed circuit board (nr. 41 url): , a sort of primordial image-object within Edgar Martins' overall project. We must bear in mind, however, that this focus on detail should not be seen only within the framework of a process of enlargement. The truth is that we can change the terms of this perceptive process in such a way as to extend the photograph's ability to reduce and miniaturise reality. Consider the images that document large-scale spaces and training modules (e.g. nr. 55 url): but whose scale is subjected to a spectacular and radical reducing effect that condenses everything into a two-dimensional rectangle. Through an automatic gesture, the immense and the miniscule, the near and the distant, and the most and the least relevant are placed on the same level of relevance and perceptibility.

Above and beyond being a work about ESA facilities and, correlatively, about the imaginary associated with space exploration, *The Rehearsal of Space & the Poetic Impossibility to Manage the Infinite* constitutes, significantly, a project about our relationships with technology and, by extension, about photography's ability to represent a reality shaped by technology. Just as Albert Renger-Patzsch (a major figure in the New Objectivity photography movement) represented the great spaces and machinery of Germany's flourishing industry in the 1920s and '30s, Edgar Martins finds in these ESA facilities a territory that is ripe for exploring a form of visuality in which the clarity, lucidity and legibility provided by photographic representation are in absolute harmony with the appearance, rationality and operationality of this technological world. In the first place, this congruence stems from photography's ability to emphasize certain formal and material characteristics, allowing the photographer to highlight aesthetic properties that are immanent in this predominantly technical and standardised domain. In this series in particular, we could single out *repetition* as a characteristic that relates in a twofold way to the sphere of the technical: on the one hand, it emphasises a mode of organisation that is characteristic of industry and science; on the other, it ensures that balanced, objective and also geometric images are obtained. In other words, the entire object/form that is repeated arranges, through its multiplying effect, a form of construction, a minimal order that can be attributed to the object itself, allowing the photographer to achieve a certain formal harmony without (allegedly) carrying out

any significant intervention. In parallel, the repetition can also be justified in that it is both an aesthetic category and an essential quality of this hyper-technological world. In these photographs by Edgar Martins, this dual meaning of repetition can be found in the different subjects photographed: in architectural elements found in certain spaces; in parts of modules and machines; or in small objects and details. All of these images could also be said to reveal the fact that repetition sets off a suggestive ambiguity between figuration and abstraction.

The oscillations that accompany our relationship with images allow us to perceive the extent to which it is necessary to differentiate the ontological and technical nature of photography from the aesthetic properties of its images. We know that an image is never a straightforward reality. Above all, the images produced by photography are operations, relations between the visible and the utterable, ways of playing with what can and cannot be identified, with similitude and dissimilitude, with the identity and alterity of things. This applies to the four 'dark images' included in this series, which are exceptions in a group of photographs in which a homogenous, neutral and all-embracing luminosity predominates. In these four photographs we can see an astronaut's glove (nr. 2 url): , the helmet of a protective SCAPE suit (nr. 4 url): , a training module for the Columbus ATV (nr. 42 url): , and a lunar rock within an acrylic pyramid (nr. 23 url): (which instinctively calls to mind the prism reproduced on the cover of Pink Floyd's album *The Dark Side of the Moon*). Due to a peculiar cinematic quality, these images seem to be imbued with an intriguing melancholic mood that grants them an introspective, impure and ambivalent presence. They seem to exist in a gap, in a space-time that is as real as it is virtual and mental. In this respect, they are profoundly dialectical images in that their value oscillates between that of representation and that of meta-representation; in other words, between the task of reproducing something specific in a descriptive and factual way and that of representing their projective and speculative potential, the possibility of recreating appearances and triggering the generative power of images. They are therefore images that are not settled in what they represent because each photographed instant is impregnated with a life that the eye and the mind always experience when provoked by fixity. The static quality visible in Edgar Martins' photographs can be understood as an exploration of the impermanence of images which, beyond their specific value, fulfil a heuristic function: that of searching for a different understanding of the nature of things (space, technology, the universe), a (non)-knowledge that privileges the sensitive and the subjective.

All of these paradoxes between the real and the virtual, the visible and the invisible, are essential elements in a body of work in which representations of spaces and objects are effectively starting points, like openings in the sense that they make all manner of frequentations possible. Because behind each image there are other images that invoke other concepts, perceptions, and affections. In this respect, in their suggestive ambiguity, they function like screen-images waiting for something to occur, like a space in which *something is about to happen*.

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