

Michael Najjar: *Outer Space* – An artist-pioneer in spatial unconscious

by Michael Ostheimer

The photographic and video artist Michael Najjar is an artist-pioneer in the spatial unconscious of humanity: outer space. The dualism of the psychic apparatus of conscious and unconscious finds its spatial counterpart in the universe outside of the human being in the interaction between Earth and outer space. In this sense outer space forms, so to speak, a spatial unconscious whose ‘contents’ are only accessible to the consciousness once certain resistances have been overcome. It is precisely the future of this cosmos that is the focal point of the work series *outer space* that Najjar began in 2011. He opens the spatial conscious of Earth for the aesthetic energy of the spatial unconscious of humanity.

Space art v. astrofuturistic art

Michael Najjar experiments with the manifold means of access offered by art to the imagery of the universe. Yet to term him an artist who creates space art would be over hasty or more accurately imprecise. Najjar’s artistic approach is worlds apart from that of astroculture dedicated to the exploration of the cultural history of the relationship between humanity and outer space¹, and its medium of aesthetic expression, space art. Inspired by the fascination of a potential future for humanity beyond planet Earth, for which the American literary scholar De Witt Douglas Kilgore coined the term astrofuturism², Najjar goes yet one decisive step further. He takes the idea of a renaissance of humanity through its colonisation of extra-terrestrial space and builds on it paradigms for an astrofuturistic art. And in doing so he opens up space as a place of innovation and for the establishment of a new branch of human history for an aesthetic of astrofuturism. In contrast to space art, which is defined merely by aesthetic

¹ For the concept of astroculture, comp. Alexander C. T. Geppert: *European Astrofuturism, Cosmic Provincialism: Historicizing the Space Age*, in: id. (eds.) *Imagining Outer Space. European Astroculture in the Twentieth Century*, Basingstoke 2012, pp. 3-24, here p. 8: “astroculture comprises a heterogeneous array of images and artifacts, media and practises that all aim to ascribe meaning to outer space while stirring both the individual and collective imagination.” – For the history of astroculture from the early New Age to the present, comp. the exhibition catalogue: *Kunst- und Ausstellungshalle der Bundesrepublik Deutschland* (ed.): *Outer Space. Faszination Weltraum* (3 October 2014 to 22 February 2015), Berlin 2014.

² Comp. De Witt Douglas Kilgore: *Astrofuturism: Science, Race and Visions of Utopia in Space*, Philadelphia 2003, p. 2: “Devoted to breaking the limits placed on humanity by the surface of this planet, astrofuturism forecasts an escape from terrestrial history. Its roots lie in the nineteenth-century Euro-American preoccupation with imperial expansion and utopian speculation, which it recasts in the elsewhere and *elsewhen* of outer space. Astrofuturism imagines the good or perfect society not simply spatially but in what might be called, to use Einstein’s term, ‘spacetime’.” – For the concept of astrofuturism as a specific subcategory of astroculture, comp. Alexander C. T. Geppert: *European Astrofuturism, Cosmic Provincialism: Historicizing the Space Age*, in: id. (ed.): *Imagining Outer Space. European Astroculture in the Twentieth Century*, Basingstoke 2012, pp. 3-24, here p. 14f.

preoccupation with the entity of space³, an astrofuturistic art exemplifies space as a potential new sphere of life.

Hybrid photography

Michael Najjar takes the interrelations between forms of medial representation, constitution of knowledge and ascription of cultural meaning in astroculture to a new level by using the possibilities of digital collage as a creative potential. He calls “pictures in which analogue and digital elements are fused together” “hybrid photographs”.⁴ Technically reproduced reality is digitally edited for the aesthetic concept by the compositional tool of the computer to produce amalgamations of nature, culture and art. His astrofuturist aesthetic is founded on the creative interplay of a field of experience that references technical scientific reality and a horizon of expectation that anticipates for those of us living now what we might probably see in the future. Thus the finite visible world is split open and extended with new visible worlds such as potential new living environments for humanity. Najjar transmutes the increase in astronomical knowledge and astronautical know-how into the aesthetic of astrofuturistic hybrid photography.

The fact that Najjar’s works from *outer space* are located on the extreme limits of what can be visualised or rather venture into areas way beyond what is conventionally visualised is not without consequences on the part of recipients. Astrofuturistic hybrid photography, which digitally fuses pictures that reach us from outer space with terrestrial photography displaces the parameters of the outer space imagination. The progressive discovery of outer space in concert with its fictionalisation through digital imagery is of enormous importance for the visual aspects of the outer space imagination. From the merging of forms of medialisation and modes of fictionalisation an astrofuturistic imaginary is born that enriches the human imagination, so to speak, with a laboratory of astrocultural and astrosocial fantasy.

³ For an historical overview of space art up to the end of the 1970s, see: Ron Miller: *Space Art – Weltraumkunst*, Urnäsch 1980. For more recent developments in space art, see, for instance, the two exhibition catalogues, Christoph Heinrich, Markus Heinzelmann (eds.): *Rückkehr ins All* (exhibition at the Hamburger Kunsthalle, 23 September 2005 to 12 February 2006), Ostfildern-Ruit 2005; Kunsthalle Wien, Gerald A. Matt, Cathérine Hug (eds.): *Weltraum. Die Kunst und ein Traum – Space. About a Dream* (1 April to 15 August 2011), Nuremberg 2011.

⁴ “A Chronicler of Future Time – A Conversation with Michael Najjar”, in: Michael Najjar, *outer space*, Berlin 2014, pp. 40-43, here p. 43.

Astrofuturistic Aesthetics: life, technology and landscape

All of Michael Najjar's works in the *outer space* series are conceptual; as an aesthetic visionary of astronautics Najjar does not ask side-questions, only fundamental ones. Each single one of his works is the outcome of a long process of reflection and discovery. In aggregate – similar to basic research – they constitute the pictorial foundations of an astrofuturistic aesthetics which mirrors humanity's quest for knowledge, what humans can do, but also what humans can endure. If we look at the typography of Najjar's *outer space* series, in line with those key themes at its heart we find a triangulation of the astrofuturistic aesthetic into life, technology and landscape.

Astrofuturistic hybrid landscapes

Taking a lead from Michael Najjar's use of the term "hybrid photography" to accentuate his production aesthetics, we could refer to his aesthetically distorted artificial landscapes as "hybrid landscapes". In particular, considering the background of our European understanding of landscape, the poetry of the extra-terrestrial landscape represents a terrain that is still largely unknown. Najjar's astrofuturistic hybrid landscapes that digitally edit terrestrial landscapes or rather digitally combine sections of terrestrial and extra-terrestrial landscape do not merely shift the material basis of a conventional understanding of landscape as rooted on the earth's surface; they also extend the understanding of landscape with an enormous spectrum of phenomena, perspectives and possibilities for projection.

The pessimism about the prospects of humanity's long-term survival on Earth, a pessimism well founded in view of such processes as climate change, environmental degradation and population growth, is the "existential reference frame" (Michael Najjar) through which to view extra-terrestrial habitats. The space-conquering vertical movement starts from the home planet, proceeds through space and targets remote celestial bodies that might provide a potential habitat for the future of humanity. The triad of Earth, near-Earth space and foreign worlds also corresponds to the spatial structure of Najjar's astrofuturistic hybrid landscapes. Firstly, his visual presentations of the history of the Earth and the future of outer space exude a cosmological pathos. Secondly, his direct observation of settings in outer space evoke an appetite for space. And thirdly, his extra-terrestrial landscapes or combinations of terrestrial and extra-terrestrial landscape stimulate the imagination of an astrofuturistic utopia.

Cosmological pathos

Each in its own different way, Michael Najjar's works *volcanic resublimation*, *planetary overview* and *gravitation entanglement* recast space as time. In other words, all of them stage historicising or futurising representations of a particular segment of space.

The visual impact of *volcanic resublimation* (2018), which is based on a crater landscape in the Whakaari White Island volcano in New Zealand, shimmers between first morning of creation and impending inferno. The volcanic activity that brings sulphuric gas to crystallise on the surface of the earth appears as a blend of floating lightness and rock-solid hardness. These antipodes are exemplary of the history of the Earth and its recurring cycles of destruction and rejuvenation: in eons-long cycles, erosion, sedimentation and eruption are the driving forces responsible for the creation, destruction and recreation of the Earth. If we look at volcanos, as Najjar does, from the time horizon of a geological perspective, on the one hand their activity enriches the surface of the earth with new nutrients while on the other ripping it apart and smothering it in a poisonous cloud of dust and soot particles.

planetary overview (2017) combines pictures from a crevasse in the Breidamerkurjökull glacier with satellite photos of the same glacier taken from an orbital position in space. Given the rise in global air and water temperatures, the humps, creases, splintered edges and grotesque peaks of the ice surface seem to be fighting a losing battle. As the work unequivocally suggests, the ecological balance between ice and sea so necessary for the Earth is now being put out of joint by the ubiquitous threat of glacier melt-down. After humanity in the late 20th century was declared the main factor driving the bio-physical transformation of planet Earth, in the new Anthropocene age we are now confronted with the consequences of our struggle for planetary domination. Yet in tackling these challenges we are now also aided by satellite-supported photography which unites the momentariness of aerial photography with the Olympian overview perspective in a novel mapping of the geo-spatial panorama. Through the fusion of extreme close-up views and satellite-supported long-distance views, Najjar shows that, faced as we now are with changes in the basic material conditions of the planet that are causing climate change, we also need to set new technological and aesthetic perspectives that will inspire us to a new vision of ourselves as humanity, one that will assist us in our combat against such an impending fatality.

gravitation entanglement (2014) takes viewers' imaginations on a journey through space and time of truly cosmogonic dimensions. Drawing on data from the Hubble telescope, the work

anticipates the collision between our own Milky Way and the Andromeda galaxy which is expected to happen in some 4.5 billion years. The two galaxies will merge to form a new one and the Milky Way will die in the conflagration. Before they merge they will circle one another in a dance of death until the black holes at their centres finally collide and become one single black hole from which a new gigantic galaxy will emerge. Rebirth as part of the cosmic cycle offers, *pars pro toto*, an understanding of the life cycle of the universe. “The sterile void of space terrifies us”⁵ writes the Swedish Nobel laureate Harry Martinson in his outer space epic *Aniara*. In contrast to Martinson, Najjar, drawing on the cosmogonic constants of the expansion and contraction of the universe, presents the flip side of outer space, the aesthetic productivity of its ductility.

Appetite for space

Living firmly on the surface of the earth yet longing to escape from it, propelled by a desire for new frontiers, this yearning to penetrate the far distant reaches of outer space is what Michael Najjar's works *f.a.s.t.*, *spaceport*, *serious anomaly* and *orbital ascent* show us. They mediate between the surface of the earth and the space voyage by enriching landscape scenarios with the imaginative potential of space travel.

f.a.s.t. (2017) shows the world's biggest astronomical radio telescope with a diameter of 500 metres located in a natural depression in Pingtang County, southwest China. The monumental parabolic antenna installed on the site to pick up and filter out signals from the noise that reaches us from the depths of interstellar space on the one hand illustrates that humanity in all its ingenuity is a species with an unquenchable thirst for knowledge. Yet on the other Najjar's work creates a counterpart landscape to the harmony of the spheres, a philosophical concept that has seen many iterations since first being proposed by Pythagoras. Similar to the way in which ‘celestial music’ might be detected in a cosmos composed as a system of numbers and harmony (for which the radio telescope stands as a material proxy) the spatial structure of stars against a black heaven, the transparent curtain of curls and wafts of mist, the cone-shaped karst hills, and the reflector looking like an over-dimensional golden-glazed bowl compose a harmonious landscape of astronomical high-tech and natural environment.

spaceport (2012) presents the world's first private space port, Spaceport America, against the background of an imaginary conflation of day and night. The building designed by Sir Norman Foster is so superbly integrated in the New Mexican desert that it could be mistaken for architecture grown by nature while the vertical extension of the asphalt road leading to the

⁵ Harry Martinson: *Aniara*, Munich 1961, p. 19.

entrance points eloquently straight to the figure of the moon in the night sky. Space travel shines as the symbol of a freedom that from time immemorial has been driven by the desire not to be bound to the earth. Now on the threshold of the era of commercial astronautics, the techno-cultural yearning for crossing frontiers in the depths of space will be placed on a new footing. What was and still is valid for government-financed space research loses none of its validity when it comes to the hub for future private space travel: as a space traveller a person is first and foremost a being of his or her own **self-assessment**. For Michael Najjar this has a very personal meaning since Spaceport America will be his own point of departure for space. The human being as an ambivalent creature of soaring powers of imagination yet limited means of realisation is shown by *serious anomaly* (2015) which takes the crash of SpaceShipTwo owned by the British company Virgin Galactic on 31 October 2014 as a case in point. Najjar takes photos of the crash site in California's Mojave desert and, drawing on Caspar David Friedrich's 1823/1824 painting *Das Eismeer* (The Sea of Ice), rearranges them as a jagged, towering heap of wreckage against a chain of hills banked in fog. Ever since the Greek tragedian Sophocles in the first choral song in *Antigone* praised man as that 'wondrous being' capable of venturing into unknown domains on water, land and in the air, and who is only forbidden to cross the frontier of death, human curiosity has been paired with a dialectic of risk and (uncertain) success. That the charged and conflictual field between nature, culture and technology still retains its validity even for space travel is visualised by Najjar as a cross-fade between a catastrophic individual accident and a landscape of desolation that evokes the Romantic school of painting.

orbital ascent (2016) which shows the launch of an Ariane 5 rocket from the Guiana Space Centre near Kouru bears exemplary witness to the coupling of direction of movement and formal expression. The horizontal movement is epic, narrative; the vertical is ecstatic, expressive and must first be recast as discourse. In contrast to the middle ground with its landscape of forest and hills, and a sombre background that segues into a grey cloudy sky, the foreground is focussed on the three part space vehicle enthroned on a gigantic column on a cloud of smoke billowing from its engines. In its visual dynamics this composition of the surface of the earth and the rocket overcoming the Earth's atmosphere appears not as an act of wild recklessness which might evoke the mythological figure of Icarus but rather as that of a controlled flight as is customary, for instance, when establishing the space technology of a satellite-supported Earth monitoring system.

Astrofuturistic utopias

For the ever larger crew of spaceship Earth sailing through space with limited resources of energy, food and drinking water, Michael Najjar creates the imaginary landscapes of an astrofuturistic utopia. His extra-terrestrial landscapes or rather his amalgams of terrestrial and extra-terrestrial landscapes *lunar explorers*, *interplanetary landscape*, *waves of mars*, *sands of mars* and *europa* all leave the individuality of the telluric far behind and use the toolbox of photographic digital aesthetics to evoke potentially habitable worlds for a possible human migration from Earth.

Marking the 50th anniversary of the first landing on the moon on 21 July 1969, the triptych *lunar explorers* (2019) unfolds a force field of compositional form and visual evocation to fire up the imagination: the surface of the moon with its restrained grey tones whose rock formations dominant in the foreground give way to wave-like hill formations in the middle ground; a multitude of astronauts engaged in various tasks like collecting rock samples, taking photos and carrying out experiments; a deep black sky whose impenetrability is only broken by the front side of the Apollo spacecraft and the face of the blue planet Earth. The triptych form accentuates the middle panel with the two side panels offering a historical framework or commentary. The left side panel shows the first two men on the moon, Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin, the right side panel the two last men, Harrison Schmitt and Eugene Cernan while in the middle panel the eight other astronauts who have so far landed on the moon are gathered. Based on the raw data of the thousands of photographs taken by the astronauts of the six NASA missions from 1969 to 1972 with their Hasselblad cameras, Najjar compacts these successful return journeys to the moon both formally and content-wise into what the American writer Norman Mailer in his book on the Apollo Mission once called “the greatest adventure of man”.⁶ Since the Renaissance the triptych has sacralised worldly themes in the service of representation. For the viewer, the rhythmic composition of the three panels raises the discovery of the moon to the level of a concise programmatic statement: only in team work can the capabilities of each individual astronaut come fully into play. For life in space, which Wernher von Braun once called “the key to our future on Earth”⁷, *lunar explorers* evokes a pathos formula: in order to assure its survival the deficient being man requires not merely a tremendous arsenal of ancillary aides – the symbiosis of science and technology on

⁶ Norman Mailer: *Moonfire. Die legendäre Reise der Apollo 11*, Cologne 2016, p. 40.

⁷ Wernher von Braun, quoted in: Norman Mailer: *Moonfire. Die legendäre Reise der Apollo 11*, Cologne 2016, p. 230.

an unprecedented level - but even more critically a collective new beginning, a cosmic collectivity inspired by the idea of discovering new worlds in interstellar space.

interplanetary landscape (2014) merges photos taken in Chile's Atacama desert with those taken by the Mars rover Curiosity, demonstrating the similarity between the surfaces of Mars and Earth. Its geological composition makes Mars the prime candidate for a new chapter in the history of humanity that would make *homo sapiens* the first species to be at home on more than one planet. In this venture we should not be discouraged by empty landscapes of rolling red desert, majestic mountains and deep gorges. It is entirely possible that the expansion of life and rationality throughout the universe could be enacted in such unfamiliar landscapes as those shown by *interplanetary landscape*, in jagged rock formations and scarred and pitted heaps of sand which, however inhospitable they might appear at first sight, have nothing to say about the possible implications for new forms of life.

waves of mars (2016) is based on a photograph taken by the rover Curiosity on the surface of Mars in January 2016 to which a wheel of the rover and its tyre tracks have been added in the lower part of the picture. The overwhelming power of these blackened and scorched 'Mars waves' is a compelling visual reminder that the discovery of possible life on Mars or the search for a potential new human habitat on the same planet is a nigh-impossible enterprise. Nevertheless, it remains a challenge that we still have to set ourselves if the life that we know and the place where we live it is not to become an insignificant dot in space. As the palaeontologist in Thomas Mann's novel *Felix Krull* so pithily remarked, "The time we can live on a star is limited."⁸

sands of mars (2014) shows domes in a landscape shot in the Atacama desert which is strikingly similar to the surface of Mars. With their formal architectural language, these habitats reminiscent of Richard Buckminster Fuller's geodesic spheres blend in perfectly with the natural landscape; yet equally the contrast between exterior and interior that these dwellings establish is a vital precondition for any form of settlement on Mars. In a similar way to director Ridley Scott in his film *The Martian* (2015), Najjar's compositions of architecture and landscape reach far ahead to the three stage astrofuturistic process of changes in human need, capability for cosmic migration and extra-terrestrial expansion of life.

In terms of its production aesthetics, the landscape composition *europa* (2016) consists of landscapes of ice and mountains some of which were photographed in Iceland, and some of

⁸ Thomas Mann: *Bekenntnisse des Hochstaplers Felix Krull*, in: id.: *Collected Works in Thirteen Volumes*, Vol. VII: *Der Erwählte, Bekenntnisse des Hochstaplers Felix Krull*, Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, Frankfurt am Main 1990, p. 538.

which are based on photos of the Jupiter moon Europa shot by the space probe Galileo. With a nearly 100 km deep ocean hidden under a shell of frozen surface ice, this satellite of Jupiter is considered a potential place for forms of life beyond planet Earth. In the lower middle of the left half of this extra-terrestrial space fantasy, Najjar projects a tiny figure clad in a space suit and standing with its back to us. Its insertion creates a variant of the astrofuturistic landscape aesthetic in which two iconographic traditions cross: on the one hand that tradition of science fiction that director Sebastián Cordero drew on in his 2013 film *Europa Report* when he used digitally mastered photographs of the surface of the Jupiter moon to make it accessible for astronauts. And on the other that tradition of Romantic landscape painting of which perhaps Caspar David Friedrich's 1818 painting *Der Wanderer über dem Nebelmeer* (Wanderer above the Sea of Fog) is the supreme example. However, while Friedrich's wanderer is plunged in deep contemplation of nature, Najjar's space traveller as a pioneer of the expansion of life into space, strides out intrepidly into *terra incognita*. Like an Odysseus removed from the realm of mythology and reset in the space age, this figure symbolises the adventure now awaiting humanity – the exploration of worlds yet undiscovered on far distant celestial bodies.