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Interview with Michael Najjar by Henrike von Spessardt

British billionaire Sir Richard Branson had actually planned on catapulting the first paying guests into orbit with his spaceships in 2010. The founder of the Virgin Group has already built a spaceport in the New Mexican desert designed by star architect [Sir Norman Foster](#) and comprising of a passenger terminal, spaceship hangar and control center. A single roundtrip costs \$ 200,000 and the first crewed flights with passengers are now scheduled for 2013. The maiden voyage into the great beyond is reserved for Branson himself and his two kids Sam and Holly, shortly to be followed by the "Pioneer Astronauts Group". The 45 year old Berlin artist [Michael Najjar](#) has secured his own seat with the pioneers of public space transport.

artnet: Michael Najjar, if all goes according to plan, in 2013 you'll be the first artist ever in space. What makes you want to go there?

Michael Najjar: The spaceflight is part of my new series "outer space" which I'm now working on. I'll be flying into suborbit with Virgin Galactic's "SpaceShipTwo" - a bold and break-the-mould exercise in completely new technology now in its test flight phase.

What's the "outer space" series all about?

For over 15 years now my work has been concerned with mining the interface between art and technology. I create photographic visions and utopias of future social structures that emerge under the impact of computer and information technologies. My "outer space" work series has a timeline of 3-4 years and is a highly complex venture that investigates the emergence of new technologies that they're going to have a radical impact that will change the face of space technologies. I'm convinced our society. Artistically speaking, my aim is to create future scenarios of humankind – on earth, in space and on distant planets. And what we're seeing at the moment is a clear acceleration in the pace of development of novel space technologies.

Even though there've been drastic cutbacks in the funding of government space programs?

That's right! With the notable exception of China, government space programs everywhere are being slashed as part of the squeeze. On the other hand, though, we're seeing the emergence of an innovative and very ambitious private space industry that's discovered space as a market with very rich pickings. Sir Richard Branson is certainly one of this movement's main pioneers and hands-on visionaries.

Is he covering the costs for your expedition or how are you financing it? After all, a single flight costs a cool \$ 200,000!

The spaceflight is being financed by three of my main collectors who have long supported and accompanied me in my work. They're naturally tremendously excited by the whole project and can't wait to see what new works I'll come up with! And my art dealers are no longer surprised by anything I do.

When are you starting preparations for your flight and what do they involve?

I'll begin preparations next year. They involve a flight through the stratosphere in a Russian fighter jet, a centrifugal training program, a parabolic flight for zero-gravity training and a couple of other punishing exercises as well. Taking photos under zero gravity conditions is something I really need to get the hang of beforehand. Then in the run-up to the actual Virgin Galactic flight, there's yet another few days of training at Spaceport America in New Mexico. If you don't pass the fitness tests, you're out - ticket or no ticket!

So what makes you cut out to be the first artist ever in space?

Well, I think that to get a project of this kind off the ground you don't just need a keen sense of adventure but also a certain amount of experience in dealing with the risks involved. And often enough my artwork has been related to extreme physical experiences. For my "netropolis" (2004-2006) work series, for instance, I scaled the highest towers of the world's main megacities. For "high altitude" (2008-2010) I climbed a 7,000 m high mountain in the Argentinean Andes and now the next level, my next port of call is outer space. My wonderful wife Sherin always supports me in my projects, by the way, and has gotten used to the fact that such adventures are all part and parcel of my work. Viewing our earth from outer space is certainly the most sublime thing imaginable. But naturally my first concern isn't to take pictures of the earth, the stars or the spaceship: what I'm really aiming at is to see how such a fundamental experience will affect my creative process.

Have you any idea what this effect might be?

Everything's still in the starting blocks, and obviously it's tremendously exciting and inspiring to be part of this great process as an artist. As soon as I've been in space, I'll start organizing my first exhibition on the moon. I probably won't be able to install my works personally but a little robot, a moon rover, can do it for me. And we can stream a live broadcast of the opening!

Grandiose plans indeed! How long is the space shuttle in flight?

The whole trip is expected to take about half a day. But unfortunately a space walk or what's known as "extra vehicular activity" isn't part of the deal because that's by far the most dangerous thing you can do in outer space and is best left to the real professionals. The spaceplane will be launched into space from its mothership about 110 km above the earth. After gliding in space with about six minutes of weightlessness, the spaceship will reenter the earth's atmosphere and come back to land.

And what's outer space got to do with the whole venture?

Outer space probably couldn't care less if an artist is floating about in it or not. But it is important for the future of humankind, because as Stephen Hawking says, "I don't think the human race will survive the next thousand years unless we spread into space." My little son Neo is now three months old; when he reaches my age, space flights will be as normal for him as a flight from Berlin to New York is for us now.