

## AD ASTRA

by Sophie Lovell for Uncube Magazine

A small mail interview about your astronaut preparation, being a space tourist and our obsession with space...

1. The first and most obvious question is why? What started you on this Outer Space project, how long have you been working on it and how long do you intend to keep working on it?

*Since I was a little boy I was always fascinated by space and by travelling in spaceships to distant new worlds. Now space travel comes within the reach for me, that's quite exciting. New technologies are being developed allowing us to explore space on much broader level. This development will transform dramatically the way we live and work in the future. As an artist I am interested in how this transformations will shape our future social structures. I started to work on the „outer space“ series in 2011, photographing the last launch into space of an American space shuttle, the Atlantis, at Cape Canaveral. This was an unforgettable event and the kick-off for the series. I certainly will continue to work on the series for the next 2-3 years.*

2. Was the idea right from the beginning to become an actual astronaut yourself?

*In my artistic work I am always very much involved myself into physical challenges and experiences. When I started working on the series it became very soon clear that I need to fly into space myself to have a very personal experience of what it means to leave our home planet and to contemplate it from space. Also I was very keen on learning how to prepare body and mind for an actual spaceflight.*

3. Who did you have to persuade to get on the programme and how?

*I approached Virgin Galactic, because they are the most advanced company in building new spaceships for commercial space travel and they showed great interest in what I am doing. In October 2012 I meet Richard Branson at the "Spaceport America" in the desert of New Mexico. The organisation of the Cosmonaut training in Star City in Russia was a quite complicated and time consuming process. The specialized German agency "Space Affairs" and it's space addicted owner Andreas Bergweiler helped me to organize and make this mission possible. Training in a Soyuz Capsule, spacewalk training in a Hydrolab, Zero-g floating during a parabolic flight and a ride into the stratosphere in a Russian MIG-29 fighter - what an incredible experience! Most of the training sessions were documented in photo and film by renowned German photographer Thomas Rusch.*

4. You are actually going to space next year aren't you? When and where?

*Yes I will, but the date is not confirmed yet, it should be in 2015. I will get on board of Virgin Galactic's SpaceShipTwo and launch from "Spaceport America" in New Mexico. It's a fascinating piece of architecture designed by Lord Norman Foster.*

5. How many different countries have you trained in for this and how much more training is there to go?

*Most of the training I have done in Russia plus some training sessions at the DLR in Cologne. In June this year I will perform a Halo Jump in the USA, means parachuting*

*from 10,000 meters altitude. Previous to the actual flight I will do a training at Spaceport America itself.*

6. One of the most interesting and special aspects of space travel in our era is the apparent intense international collaborative nature of the whole thing between so many different agencies and companies. Is this how you experienced it as well? Are the practicalities of collaborative space travel really as open and friendly as they are portrayed?

*I think international collaborations are more based on economic aspects rather than on cultural or technological exchange. Space travel is a highly competitive sector and as far as I learned everybody tries to keep his secrets the best he can.*

7. You are about to become an astronaut! Does that bring with it feelings of responsibility? If so what kind?

*Well the most important feeling of responsibility I have is towards my family, my wife and my 2 1/2 year old son. Therefore I try to prepare for the spaceflight as best as I can to reduced the risks to a minimum.*

8. You will be the first artist in space if I understand correctly. Are you travelling as a tourist or as an investigative professional with a job to do like everyone else? Or a bit of both?

*I am travelling as an artist! The spaceflight is of course a key element of the "outer space" series which aims to elucidate the cultural dimension implicit in such technological developments as human spaceflight and transpose it into a process of artistic transformation. The performative aspect of my spaceflight is of course very important.*

9. As part of your outer space project you have visited number of terrestrial locations such as the Alma telescope in the Atacama desert in Chile, the Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena, the Virgin Galactic building in the Mojave and the Eden Project in Cornwall. Architect Nicholas Grimshaw's Eden Project, based on the biospheres in the cult film Silent Running (1972) stands out from these – what was the purpose of visiting this particular location?

*The result of my visit at Eden Project is the work "space garden" which visualizes the idea of future greenhouses in space. Eden Project itself is giant multidome greenhouse based on Buckminster Fuller's geodesic structure houses over 100,000 plants collected from all around the world. "space garden" explores the idea how the experiences at Eden could help one day installing a biome on a spaceship, a space station or even creating an autonomous eco system, a habitat for plants on the moon or on mars. It also questions how zero gravity or micro gravity is affecting the growth of plants.*

10. The spacesuit an astronaut wears is a highly complex piece of equipment – it is almost a built environment in its own right, it could be seen as a highly individualised and abstracted piece of architecture in a way. What is it like to wear one? How does it make you feel and move and what effect does it have on your ability to perceive and experience your environment?

*The spacesuit is like a spaceship itself. It weighs 150 kilograms and is in fact an abstract piece of architecture. When I did my first briefing with the suit I was a bit anxious of getting claustrophobic inside to be honest. On my actual first spacewalk training day I was put into the suit, lifted by a crane over the water surface of the Hydrolab and then safety divers led me down to 12m depth. Once all life supporting systems activated I felt great and much more comfortable than I imagined. An important experience was the fact that in such a spacesuit you are locked in a closed system and this deprives you from any real relationship to the environment. You do not feel the weight of the suit or your body, all of your senses – except the visual one – are cut off from the world surrounding you. This made me clear that such simple and wonderful experiences on Earth like walking barefoot on the grass you will never have on the Moon or on Mars.*

11. What next? Where do you go from here? Are you worried that visiting space, probably for the first and only time, might affect you negatively afterwards emotionally and intellectually – in that anything you do after that will never match the experience?

*I don't think that it will be the last time! Space travel will become routine one day for many people and I am sure that will have the possibility to repeat this experience more often in my lifetime. For my little son Neo it will be quite normal to travel into space when he will be in his twenties and my greatest dream would be to travel one day into space together with him.*