

Adam Norton: Seeing Red

As the days go by, we face the increasing inevitability that we are alone in a Godless, uninhabited, hostile and meaningless universe. Still, you've got to laugh, haven't you?

Holly, *Red Dwarf*, BBC, 1988

Adam Norton grew up in the shadow of the Cold War—that strange, lengthy, paranoid period, pregnant with the very real threat that one half of the world could essentially destroy the other. The turbulent second half of the 20th Century was dominated by the threat of nuclear attack. It produced the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, the first broadcasting of the grisly reality of war in Vietnam, and the conquest of the Moon. It was a time when both the constructive and destructive possibilities of civilisation were drawn sharply into focus. While the hunt for ultimate power put the end of the world in a button, this same rapid technological expansion made exploration beyond our own planet feasible, and put the heavens within our reach. New age idealism envisioned a life beyond the confines of the earth's atmosphere—the frontier was high, establishing life in space was not just a technological landmark but a crucial outpost for the survival of mankind, stranded as we are on the only planet as yet discovered to be accommodating to human life. Outer space became a repository for both dreams and paranoia and these projected discoveries were, as with any colonising entity, most telling of the fantasies and fears of the coloniser. During the emergence of the sci-fi genre for instance, the concept of alien invasion was an allegory for the fear of foreign occupation.¹ The Space Race that preoccupied the hearts and minds of the era became not simply an intrepid mission to explore other planets and colonise space, but an achievement that would symbolise the military and ideological superiority of either the USSR or the USA.

This dramatic landscape finds its grounding in the artwork of Adam Norton. He is a self confessed astrophile with a distrust for the dissolution of science and invention, into the 'virtual void'. He has a long-standing affection for analogue technology, for the ideals of a generation that could visualise themselves beyond an earthbound existence using materials that were far more tangible than the digital realm. 'I like the can-do nature of science from this era. I've been reading about the people that went to work at Area 51, as more and more information becomes unclassified. Some were just ordinary people with physical, hands-on experience - for instance, one guy left school, became a TV repairman, and then began working on spy planes.'² Current scientific developments, data clouds and intelligent materials, seem otherworldly and intangible, 'science doesn't talk to people anymore.'

Many of Norton's projects are about the active reclamation of the digital world. His recent *Virtual Reality Simulator* quite literally invited visitors into a giant constructed three-

¹ *Epic Rivalry: The Inside Story of the Soviet and American Space Race*, Von Hardesty, Gene Eisman, National Geographic Press, 2007.

² Conversation with the artist, March 2012.

dimensional 'computer'. Referencing the green-frame precursor to virtual reality, the familiar scene in which flashing icons moving ominously towards their targets are stopped in their screen-bound tracks and forced—using gaffa-tape, UV and an inflatable decoy tank—into a three-dimensional space where we can look down the barrel ourselves. The work considers the dangerous effect of a world mediated by images, technology and the inevitable disconnection from violence as wars are played out from increasingly remote locations. Like much of Norton's work, it is both funny, and sobering. His memorable *Tank Project* was (in my view) one of the most refined public art projects I've witnessed on the streets of Sydney.³ Norton simply employed three decommissioned, 11-tonne, armoured personnel carriers, and three veteran tank operators and had them occupy the laneways flanking Sydney's city centre. The contours of oppression in the shape of a pock-marked metal army tank, so familiar from the flicker of TV sets and laptops, were suddenly and inexplicably, in your path. The photographs showing the momentary alarm or confusion on the faces of the suited corporate crowd marching through the city, are fascinating and bizarre. So far from the valiant 'Tank Man' of Tiananmen Square, these onlookers don't protest or question, there is an assumption that these advancing tanks must be here for a parade, a drill of some sort... we couldn't possibly be under attack, could we? The week-long 'occupation' deliberately provided no explanation, stirring a sense of alarm in many, while others remained seemingly indifferent to provocation. The work cut through first-world malaise, and heightened the remoteness of war to Australian shores and to our cultural experience.

Norton's eccentric and often absurd odes to militaristic surveillance and post-blast survival take many forms: from radiation-proof lead suits replete with playing cards, to suitcases that double as boats, or slideshows in a decoy jeep to re-enact the roadtrip once all the fossil fuel is gone. One of the tensions in Norton's work is the dual address of the aftermath and the future. The aesthetics and the accessibility of retro technology appeal to him as they represent a time when the layman was perhaps more empowered, but nostalgic ideology is also present; that unlikely mixture of paranoid anxiety, post-war black humour and absolute hope. Norton confides that 'the world has sort of run out of ideas... I'm disappointed we're not trying harder to seek or establish life elsewhere, it seems like a far more important thing to do than fire missiles at each other... This is about another plan.'⁴ Although the underfunded⁵ search for planets in the 'Goldilocks Zone'⁶ continues, Norton is optimistic about the

³ In a direct and sophisticated way it connected the Australian public with the momentary sensation of war. Other projects that have used site-specificity to heighten an awareness of issues surrounding conflict are Steve McQueen's unrealised Royal Mail project, *Queen and Country*, in which he proposed to commemorate deceased soldiers onto postage stamps http://www.artfund.org/queenandcountry/Queen_and_Country.html; and Tim Burns' filmic stunt which saw the explosion of a smoke bomb during an Anzac Day parade in *Against the Grain: More Meat Than Wheat* (1981) <http://aso.gov.au/titles/features/against-the-grain/clip2/> accessed 25 April 2012.

⁴ Conversation with the artist, March 2012.

⁵ NASA has been facing fiscal woes for some time. Many missions are currently on hold as political and public support for the space program has dwindled <http://www.newscientist.com/article/dn21711-nasa-requests-inspiration-for-new-mars-quests.html> accessed 23 April 2012.

⁶ The 'Goldilocks Zone' is the hospitable zone around a star in which temperatures can accommodate water and therefore life. The search for an exoplanet that mirrors Earth's conditions continues, but the galaxies discovered would take generations of pilots to reach. <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/03/science/space/scientists-are-hot-on-trail-of-exoplanets-suitable-for-life.html?pagewanted=3&ref=space> accessed 24 April 2012.

possibility of relocating humans in Space—Mars in particular—and has devoted an entire project to assisting Big Science with its mission in *Das Marsprojekt*.⁷

His Mars habitation unit, *Space Yurt* is a charming abode. Like a chill-out room from Warhol's 'Factory' studio, its glimmering silver insulation has handy portholes from which to observe Martian life. It is lightweight, flat-packs and would house a solitary star-sailor quite comfortably. Inside, Norton further lives out his nomadic Mars fantasy through a series of space holiday snaps of the artist, exploring various terrain in his '64' astronaut suit. The idea of a 'Space Yurt' is, in principle, funny: referencing as it does the alternative lifestyles of the 1960s and the nomadic practices of the Bedouin, on Mars. However, these habitation units (and I include Norton's *Generic Escape Capsule* in this observation, a project in which one can exist hidden in a wardrobe for two weeks) are small cocoons for an imagined outside world that is excessively hostile. They are also built for one man. Despite Norton's tongue in cheek but practical optimism about Mars, ('it's not pleasant there, but it's not that far away. It's just about terra forming: you aim a missile at the ice caps, essentially perform global warming, and soon you can be walking about in normal clothes, with an oxygen tank!'⁸) these spaces are heavily tinged with solitude. They could be read as a metaphor for the figure of the artist, chipping away at one's self-created frontier. But they also correspond with one of the fundamental fears of deep space; the realisation of a single human's insignificance and isolation faced with unending nothingness. The fragility of the individual both physically and psychologically is a well-explored trope in sci-fi mythology⁹, and Norton's art practice proposes a playful double-take on the power of humans on Earth, along with a homespun yearning for off-world colonisation.

One of the most heroic works in *Das Marsprojekt* is the *Mars Gravity Simulator*. This elaborate system of ropes and pulleys is based on the Apollo lunar gravity simulators of the 1960s and reproduces the experience of walking on Mars where gravity is three times weaker than Earth. The performance was a tremendous spectacle as a spacesuit-clad artist strode and bounded around an angled, circular stage, hanging sideways from rigging with assistance from his white-coated 'Mars or Bust' team. Aside from its scientific plausibility,¹⁰ the performance was exciting because we were seeing a would-be 'space man' taking active steps towards imagining landing and living on Mars—as such, it brought the idea of the Red Planet literally within our grasp.

⁷ Norton explains that '*Das Marsprojekt* is the title of a sci-fi novel Wernher Von Braun wrote whilst a 'guest' of the US government at Fort Bliss, Texas in 1949. In it he laid out his plans for Mars exploration. It makes his case that he was more interested in Space Exploration than missiles, so, I suppose I'm referencing the mixed path science has always followed.' Email correspondence, 28 April 2012.

⁸ Conversation with the artist, March 2012.

⁹ 'Space Madness' for example, is a common trope in the sci-fi genre, see Gary Westfahl (ed.), *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of Science Fiction and Fantasy: Themes, Works and Wonders*, Volume 2, Greenwood, 2005, pp.485–6.

¹⁰ NASA conducted 'Gait Analysis Systems' to assess the effects of differing gravitational environments on human motion. <http://spinoff.nasa.gov/spinoff/spinitem?title=Gait+Analysis+Laboratory>, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U1CUhz0U-Gc>>. The *Mars Gravity Simulator* has been presented to Dr. Robert Zubrin, the President of The Mars Society, who is interested in Norton sharing his findings at the Annual International Mars Society Convention in California <http://www.marssociety.org/> accessed 24 April 2012.

In researching the ways in which civilisation thinks outside of itself, and tries to make sense of each other's cultures, resources and philosophies, I have been struck by the uniqueness of Earth for all its contradictions and self destructive madness—it's the only place we have as yet, after half a century of searching for alternative accommodation or company. Norton on the other hand has high hopes for elsewhere... or perhaps the elsewhere of yesteryear. He admits that he hankers for 'the old times, when they used to write manifestos. I liked the futurists'. Perhaps the optimism of that 'old' future makes more sense to him than the secretive, commercialised arena that Space has become. But with every generation, the constellation of what we should be aiming for shifts as inevitably 'the future ends where it begins—or ends before it begins, pre-ends in anticipation of its eternal recommencement.'¹¹ Norton's work isn't really about nostalgia, surveillance, progress, camouflage or Mars, it is about what these ideas say about us.

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¹¹ International Necronautical Society, founded by Tom McCarthy, 'Declaration on the Notion of 'The Future'', *Frieze*, no.141, September 2011, p.139.