

ENGLISH



ALEKSANDRA MIR

The Space Age

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Aleksandra Mir (° 1967) has a multifaceted oeuvre. Depending on her theme, she uses different media such as public events, film, photography, sculpture, performance, collage and publishing. The social processes underlying traditions, norms and categorization are the leitmotif throughout her work, all of which is suffused with a strong sense of curiosity and humour.

She often solicits the participation of friends, acquaintances and strangers in playful upheavals of social norms. For example, she unleashed wry critiques on tourism in works such as *Life is Sweet in Sweden* (1995) and advocated for an increase of female music bands among intoxicated festival-goers in *New Rock Feminism* (1996). In *Cinema for the Unemployed: Hollywood Disaster Movies 1970-1997* (1998), she screened disaster genre films during a nine to five working week.

The project *Daily News* (2002) consisted of Mir asking more than one hundred friends to contribute to an alternative newspaper in order to claim back the celebration of her birthday on 9/11. She proposed the creation of a life-sized replica of Stonehenge called *Stonehenge II* (2003) which was meant to be freely accessible to the public. In *The Big Umbrella* (2004) she invited strangers to accompany her under an enormous umbrella that offered sixteen people protection from the rain. The broken umbrella and the photos of her interventions are today part of the S.M.A.K. collection in Ghent. For the 53 Venice Biennial she printed one million postcards of waterways in landscapes such as the Sahara desert, the Manhattan skyline and the Sydney Opera House and overlaid with text declaring them to postcard to be of Venice (*Venezia, all places contain all others*, 2009). For her most recent work, *Satellite crashes down in Porto Alegre, Brazil*, (2013) she built a monumental outdoor sculpture and created a fictional media campaign.

One of her artist's books, *The How Not To Cook Book* (2009), provides one thousand tips on what not to do in the kitchen. In a world inundated with cookbooks and celebrity chefs, her's became a rebellious act against the culinary industry.

SPACE TRAVEL

This exhibition brings together for the very first time Mir's early films *First Woman on the Moon* (1999), *Gravity* (2006) and *The Seduction of Galileo Galilei* (2011) with the series of collages *The Dream and the Promise* (2008-09) and the more recent work *Satellite Crashes down in Porto Alegre, Brazil* (2013).

Space travel has been a recurring theme in Mir's work since the very beginning of her career. She considers global events in popular culture such as the moon landing, the development of a mass aviation culture and the progress of various space programmes to have a great influence on how we live and perceive ourselves in the world. Mir's fictional narratives are both a celebration of these events and a questioning of their historical and social trajectories.

RELIGION AND SCIENCE

Mir's films are autonomous epilogues to her public performances where each refers to an ambitious historical narrative. In her later film *The Seduction of Galileo Galilei* (2011) and in the series of collages *The Dream and The Promise* (2008-9), she underscores particular similarities between religion and science. Inspired by a quote by 16th century Italian scientist and philosopher Galileo Galilei, who conducted unprecedented scientific discoveries in physics, mathematics and astronomy, but who also declared 'to have learned more through divine grace than through telescopes' (Galileo Galilei, Letters).

Although Galileo was vilified by the Catholic Church for supporting a Copernican, heliocentric worldview that challenged the conception of the earth at the centre of the universe, he himself remained deeply religious. Mir's screenings engage this paradox by creating a situation evocative of both Hollywood and of a Cathedral, filling the exhibition space with bombastic soundtracks featuring original NASA astronaut communications and pop or baroque music.

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ROOM 15
FIRST WOMAN ON THE MOON (1999)

One of Aleksandra Mir’s best-known works is *First Woman on the Moon* (1999). The film documents a one day staged event recreating a moon landscape and featuring a ‘landing’ ceremony on the beach of Wijk aan Zee in the Netherlands. The work weaves together subjects such as space travel, feminism and imperialism in a playful manner. Following President Kennedy’s call to put a man on the moon before the end of the 1960s, Mir started her mission to get a woman to the moon before the end of the millennium. Despite her limited means, she successfully declared herself the first woman on the moon thirty years after the first moon landing. Assisted in this feat by the local population, dozens of volunteers and obliging sponsors, she was thus able to infiltrate the male-dominated history of space travel. Mir’s decision to work with Hasselblad, the Swedish camera manufacturer was not a random choice. Hasselblad had previously equipped the Apollo 11 team with their cameras to document the mission and now also provided Mir and her photographers the technical support to create a vital parallel in the mediated after-maths of both events. Hasselblad gifted her a panoramic camera to wear during the event which is now part of the collection of the Guggenheim Museum in New York together with other reference material and objects such as her dress, the flag and other ephemera from her mission to the moon.

MOON LANDSCAPE

With the help of bulldozers, Mir transformed the beach into a moon landscape. At sunset, she climbed the highest hill, planted an American flag, opened a bottle of champagne and invited the audience to celebrate with her.

Although the scope of the project is reminiscent of the ambitious Land Art undertakings in the 1960s, Mir’s space travel emphasised more the involvement of the local community and the global mass media. This event looks back at the space race as a chauvinistic power game and shows how the meaning of any event can be manipulated through its media representation. The video of this work mixes poor footage with clips aired by Dutch TV stations. The soundtrack features original NASA communications and excerpts from Kennedy’s 1961 speech where he rallies his nation to the mission.

As with all her works, Mir conducted extensive research for *First Woman on the Moon*. By looking for references in popular culture in order to map out

her territory and by combining them with her personal recollections and encounters, her investigation develops organically and allows her to make new discoveries. For example, she approached NASA to get the original photography from their geological field trips in the Icelandic interior in preparation for the moon missions. Furthermore, she pursued her line of inquiry by contacting Neil Armstrong, the first man to set foot on the moon in 1969, and Arthur C. Clarke, the author of the iconic film *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968). Both reacted positively and humorously to her film and maintained correspondence with her.

ROOM 16-17
THE DREAM AND THE PROMISE

Mir presents a series of collage that connect religious iconography with images of space travel. Science and religion are often juxtaposed as two contradictory extremes. However, Galileo Galilei, the father of modern science, was also a devout Catholic and thus his life work is evidence of the convergence between the two. In order to illustrate the relationship between science and faith, Mir reverts to images she found in two very different locations: The Kennedy Space Centre in Florida and The Baroque churches of Sicily. She discovered that the iconography used by NASA and the Catholic Church has a lot in common. Shared characteristics include the epic sky, astronaut’s helmets resembling the halos of Saints and the expression of awe at rocket launches which comes very close to that of believers engaged in religious rituals. The collages are framed with gold leaf, adopting the status of icons.

ROOM 18

Two films are screened back-to-back *Gravity* (07’18’’) and *The Seduction of Galileo Galilei* (16’33’’).

GRAVITY (2006)

In 2006, Mir launched the sequel to her 1999 moon landing and started a new ambitious space travel project, the construction of a 22-metre-high rocket. The rocket was built for The Roundhouse, an old industrial building in London that now serves as a performance art space. With the help of a number of technicians and engineers who collaborated on the project, the rocket was built from waste materials collected across England, such as steel, fibreglass, tractor tyres, industrial fans and an old toothpaste factory tank as the base. To complete the whole composition, Mir adopted theatrical lighting and smoke machines evoking the NASA hangar

at the Kennedy Space Centre. While the rigging crew built the rocket, Mir documented the proceedings. Just like many of her other projects, this was a temporary

exhibition that ran for only three days and when it closed, everything was dismantled and the materials were scrapped or reused elsewhere. Parts of the rocket are today integrated into the London Underground.

THE SEDUCTION OF GALILEO GALILEI (2011)

In this film, Mir was inspired by the story of Galileo throwing weights with different mass from the Tower of Pisa in order to provide evidence for the law of falling bodies. The video documents Mir’s own battle with gravity as together with her crew and several professional crane operators they stack car tyres as high as possible until the tower eventually tips over to a fall and they start over again. These repeated attempts were undertaken over the course of one day at Goodwood Kartways, Stouffville, Ontario, approximately 40km north of Toronto. For everyone involved these deliberate failed attempts fuelled a feverish satisfaction. Mir’s primary interest lies in the boundary between expected results and the limits of control. As the happening unfolds, it gradually becomes clear that the apparently simple action of stacking car tyres lies at the heart of a series of far more complex actions involving numerous people, massive pieces of equipment, wind and gravity. The event as a whole extends beyond the history of Galileo, science and religion, but also combines references to the history of art and other iconic narratives.

In particular, it is reminiscent of the Greek myth of Sisyphus, the king of Corinth who was doomed to spend the rest of his time pushing a boulder up a mountain. Mir’s work also makes associations with Land Art, with the serial, repetitive forms of Minimalism and with Marcel Duchamp’s ‘found objects’.

THE SPACE AGE

In *The Space Age*, the catalogue to this exhibition, Martin Herbert reflects how ‘Sizeable things, these always end up smaller than Mir’s art, which contains them plus the selfhoods, motivations, and unexamined biases of everyone who creates, encounters, or hears about them. You want to build something capacious enough to hold all of that—to encompass indeterminacy itself, art-as-proposition? Nothing is bigger than space.’

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Mir was born in Poland in 1967 and grew up in Sweden where she had moved with her family at a young age. In 1989 she arrived in New York City to study Media Arts at the School of Visual Arts and Cultural Anthropology at the New School for Social Research. Fifteen years later she moved again, this time to Palermo, Sicily where she would remain for five years. She currently lives in London but travels continuously with her work.