



The New Normal, Ian Cion 2020



Ian Cion

Artist, Writer, Aspiring Astronaut, and Founding Director, Space for Art Foundation

Lee Anderson (LA) *I think it would be a good place to start to hear from you, with the spacesuit project, how did that bring together some of the different pieces of your background and we can start there.*

Ian Cion (IC) For a long time I have been interested in body and performance, and the evolution of the body over the course of one's lifetime. And I've watched my own physical evolution and been interested in how, not only has that been informed by exercise, nutrition, education and my areas of interest, a shape-shifting has manifested as a result of those interests, but also really in response, in relationship to nature and to context and culture. And so I thought a lot about how we could play a role, actively, in being healthy, in carrying life forward no matter the context.

And as an artist, I was always having to travel and hustle for exhibition opportunities and gigs and other artists to work with. I was the type of artist that had paintings on rolls that I would travel and carry with me from place to place. It was kind of a mendicant Zen monk lifestyle, my early 20s. And in that, I started thinking about packing stuff, and being mobile. And so all of those things culminated, in a way, where the spacesuit became a perfect metaphor for me. It became this object that can

represent a self contained system for survival in extreme environments.

I'm thinking a lot about that in terms of environmental mitigation on Earth, and really performance enhancement and optimization. And I got more deeply invested in that exploration through my work in Arts in Medicine. In that role, I pursued a path of direct engagement with people and how connectivity and community could also play a role in health.

These two things started to overlap for me, and I started to think about proactive health, and preventative health and dealing with medical crises before they happened; getting interested in that and really seeing a need for that first hand because through my role in Arts in Medicine

me to ILC Dover who have been making suits with NASA since the Apollo era, and they were game to work on the project with me. So that started this collaboration with ILC Dover. And, and then a couple weeks later I was introduced to astronaut Nicole Stott.

Nicole and I were able to travel around the world to hospitals in all of the headquarter cities for the space station. We worked with astronauts in all of those hospitals, bringing astronauts and cosmonauts to those local hospitals with artists from those regions with the care teams from those local hospitals.

That really grew, and we started to build this really interesting network. That's when we started the Space for Art Foundation, and I ultimately left

"Mars will come to us before we go to Mars"

I'm watching children really suffering through a disease that in many cases is environmentally correlated. I could see that we need to do better.

And so this project, I went to NASA because they were interested in the work that I was doing at MD Anderson. I met with the Office of Communication for the International Space Station, and they introduced

MD Anderson, worked for a couple years helping launch the fabulous and interdisciplinary Moody Center for the Arts at Rice University in Houston, and then I moved to California.

I'm in Berkeley now, starting up Thunderbird Astronautics. I'm really interested in this intersection of aerospace, health, mind-body

medicine, venture philanthropy, landscape infrastructure, the arts, health equity, Earth justice, how they all interconnect. And so I'm trying to kind of strategically build these things into something together. The object I have that I can work all of those things around, and all those ideas, I use the Earthsuit.

I think about this in relation to the space program—my catchphrase that I keep coming back to is that Mars will come to us before we go to Mars, meaning our conditions are going to be Mars-like, before we know it. And so my hope is that in a real serious way we can consider: Do we need to mitigate against that in a much

metaphor of the spacesuit or space travel and the possibilities as a metaphor for how we can start to feel that joint or shared mission.

IC Certainly, I personally draw a lot of motivation thinking about this. I've watched some great videos with some of the kids that I've sat next to making that spacesuit, showing them current visualizations of our planet moving through space. And there's some incredible visual mock ups of us spiraling in concert with the other planets, chasing after the sun. It's such a dramatic and different view of who we are than when you just look at a map. We have this incredible vantage point of the Laniakea supercluster;

Some of them are super space literate. There are kids who know way more about space than most adults. It's like dinosaurs: you have kids who are practically paleontologists, they're so up on it, and their parents can name three dinosaurs. So it's amazing to see the intelligence and the natural gravitation. And space is one of those fields that does that, because it's so inspiring.

And I think that for me, as a person who works with young people and in Community Arts, having something that people can innately get how cool it is, it's really an easy starting point. So it matters where you start on those projects.

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more comprehensive way than we're thinking we do? And if so, how can we maximize access to that safety net that we may need. And if we don't need it, that's great.

LA *You started out by describing the spacesuit a metaphor, and something you describe with children that you've worked with, too, is that working on that project kind of gives them a mission outside of their own personal battle, their mission to recover, and that it's really inspiring for you, but it's also an inspiring thing for them. And I want to look at that on two levels: the impact that can have on the individual, but also using that*

it's this crazy vision of space and where we are. And we think of it as alive now; we think about the Earth as alive.

And so when we talk about looking at space and thinking about a space program and what that space program is, and who it is. Space travel to me consists of the moment you realize you're traveling in space. You don't need a ship, you don't need a space program, you just need to be aware that you're flying at this insane velocity and that you're part of this living spaceship.

Kids are fun to talk about that with.

It's also something that's universal and, metaphorically, the space program has always been a global, participatory effort. Now we see the language kind of swirling around and changing around that, with the pressures and the geopolitics, and I feel an important effort needs to go into making sure that we don't get myopic in our view of what space is.

That being said, the work with the kids and the idea of space itself was inspiring, but then the spacesuit distinctly, or as a separate layer to that, brought a certain quality of vulnerability that we all experience. Certainly when you're in a health



critical situation, or in a health crisis of some kind, you're in a place of vulnerability.

There's two things that happen, I think, in a clinical setting that are how you right the ship. One is, you have to diagnose the problems. You have to look and see what you can do to mitigate those challenges. And that's deficit mapping. And this applies to looking at communities and understanding how to make a healthy community—it applies both on the individual and the community scale.

The other side of it is asset mapping. So you're seeing what the resources are. And then, if you see that resources exist, even if they're very small, the understanding that a

person can participate in their own survival is worth exploring more deeply from an early age.

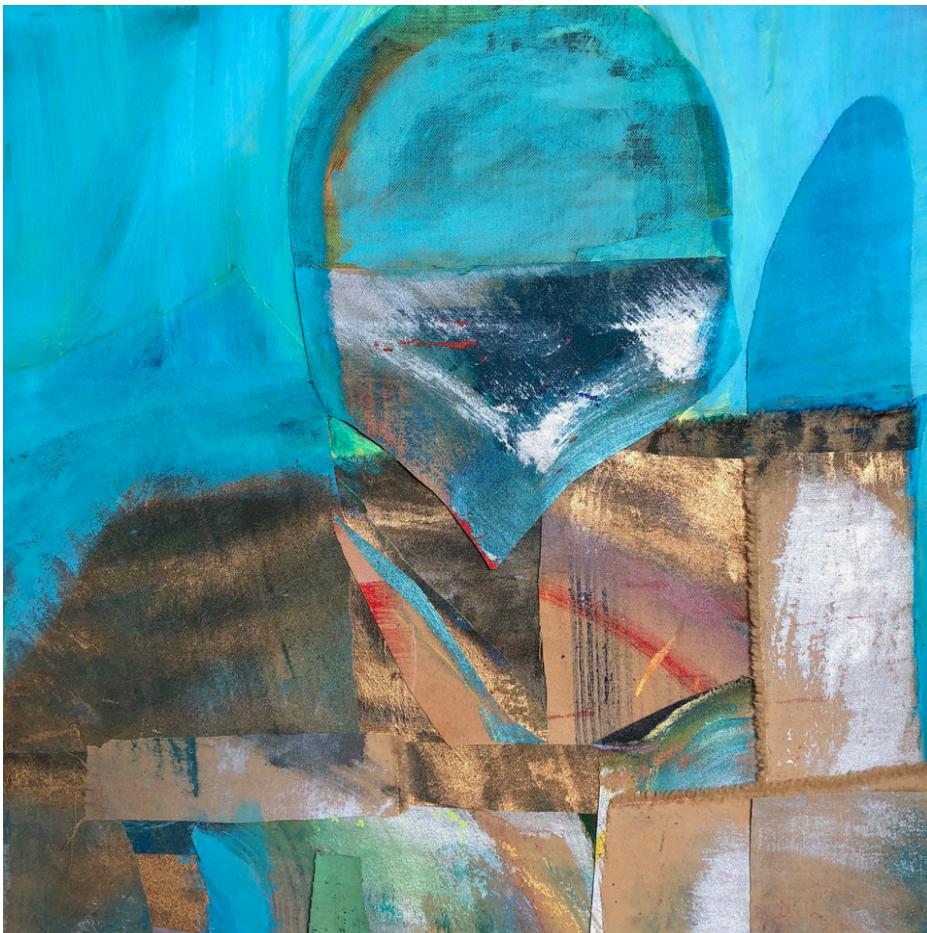
Just to represent that, when you walk in, that there are other people who are at danger's edge, and that they're—through a combination of ingenuity, fearlessness, hustle, creativity—they're surviving and the environment is so unforgiving.

I felt that the spacesuit project functioned like a spacesuit, in that it created an impenetrable, protective layer around the moment in which the onrushing of the danger and the unknown, you were protected from it, like a spacesuit, by the shared moment of making something together and building something.

LA *That makes me think of the spacesuit, yes, as a metaphor, but also as a tangible thing. You can send it to the ISS and an astronaut can put it on; it can travel to the different places where children who contributed can see where they played a role. And, in terms of the Earthsuit, I'm curious how that physical artifact can help communicate some of these complex issues that you're talking about. Maybe this is a "fashion on a broader scale, communicating non-verbally" question, or maybe it's about the suit specifically.*

IC If you're going to try to introduce something that's totally different than clothing, and if all of a sudden I don't need air conditioning and heating to cool myself, then I certainly don't need it for these huge volumes. So then it integrates into the concept of housing as much as it does the concept of clothing. It interweaves with this idea of economics and economies of scale, and how you could actually protect a lot more people and have a lot more people in something that was safe and secure than if you think about doing it through a house. I'm not saying replace housing, but there's something there that's in between.

LA *On this relationship between ourselves and the environment, and mediating that environment, whether it is a move to a place because the environment is going to be beneficial to you for your health, or you live in a place, just by circumstance that is actually bad for your health. And how we might be able to go from the scale of our home, or these massive rooms, when we're out in the world in an office or a restaurant, versus carrying that controlled environment with us. I would love*



World Traveler Earthsuit, Ian Cion 2020



California Earthsuit, Ian Cion 2020

to hear some of the questions that you've worked through?

IC I can really appreciate, in a recent chapter in my life, the environmental difference of a place. But also, when I've thought about access to these things—I've thought about health equity, and I've worked for 15 years in pediatric oncology—it was obvious that economics plays a huge role in health disparity. So when I think about those threats and I think about a family that is living next to an oil refinery, like my own family, it's harder for me to say, well, that's just how it is.

And yet, I know that it's going to require a massive policy shift,

and a massive transformation, to change the world in such a way that those lives are more protected by environmental regulation or change in that industry.

The earth suit is an exercise in trying to see if it's possible to make something that is beneficial for a huge number of people, and that it can be made in such a way that it doesn't make things worse. When you look at the history of objects that have been mass produced, this becomes a truly complicated thing to achieve.

But certainly, if I can imagine it in its ideal form, it means that there can be a person who lives on the street

in India where it's 110 degrees and, all of a sudden, they're not on the street anymore; they're in a climate controlled environment, and they don't have to try and find a bathroom because their suit filters their waste in some useful and meaningful way that allows them to have dignity wherever they are. There's a way to do it, and I'm looking at a lot of things that already exist.

And so, playing with scales and playing with the edge of the biological and the technological, or the integration of those things—I've considered even is it not a 'thing' at all but some kind of adaptation? You have to compete with nudity in that it has to disappear on you. You have



to forget it exists; it has to be that functional.

And there are examples of things that I've seen, in terms of actual spacesuits, where that level of precision and functionality is such a thing of beauty. I'll give you one example, which is the neck ring, where the helmet connects to the suit.

The first time I saw a helmet click on I couldn't believe how cool and precise and sexy it was. And it was just that one simple locking mechanism, but it was done so beautifully. With the spacesuits there's a lot of concern about the joints and rotation and protection from overextension. And then you're thinking about this pertaining to aging and performance mitigation. For example, the shoulder: astronauts get a lot of shoulder injuries because you're not using your legs to walk, you're using your arms to pull. So that ring that goes around there has to be really adaptable, flexible, movable, and to do that is a challenge.

LA *It sounds like you're going to have to make kind of a universal fit situation here too.*

IC Yeah, like the joints I mentioned, I'm thinking a lot about something I'm calling a "ring system." It's

inspired by the interlocking of the joints and by the folds and pleating of some of the spacesuits. I'm also interested in how things sheathe and pull out and cinch—like those collapsible camping cups—and how fabric folds and holds. I want to address universal scaling in that way.

The other thing is, if you're going to have one object, you want not only universal sizing but adaptable styling so that it can fit and change and be customized, and you can play with it and make it suit you and define you, like fashion does.

When I think about losing that aspect of fashion for something that's just singular, the fashionista side of me is like, "that will not do." So of course people will still have fashion, and the idea of replacing fashion, maybe it's a hubristic notion, but I do think that maybe it's replacing the vulnerability of not having that layer.

...

Another thing I want to touch on really quickly because it ties into some of the new stuff that we're going to be doing with the Space for Art Foundation, which is, whose vision of futurism has the space program followed? Whose vision of space is our version of what space is, and should we stick with that? And why?

And so when we talk about spacefaring, it's tied to this idea of Manifest Destiny and tied to this kind of expansionist narrative. And that expansionist narrative is also problematically tied to viewing the earth, the water, every other planet, and ultimately people as resources to be mined. And I'm watching the space program, I'm watching how people talk about what we should be doing in space, why we should be going to space.

And of course, I think resources are important, but that sort of expansionist narrative is worth calling into question. And then if we do that, we start to look at the defining aesthetic of the space program. We start to think of the conquering hero, the knight, the influences that came from Samurai armor...I've talked to the guys from ILC and studied the history of spacesuit design: there's a lot of militaristic code and "heroic" narrative embedded in the narrative of the aesthetic, of the fashion of the space industry.

So, I've talked to my friend, Ernesto Neto, who's an artist in Brazil. I was talking with him at a wedding, Ernesto Neto, another amazing artist Thomás Saraceno and me, we were standing in a forest in Woodstock,

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Mountaineer Earthsuit, Ian Cion 2020



New York. At the time, I was working on a spacesuit with this project, and Thomás Saraceno was working on these spider web inspired weightless architectures, and then Ernesto does these really organic forms that people can crawl through with rope and saffron and all these biological materials, so we were talking about space and space architecture and space design.

Ernesto spent a lot of time in the rainforest with the Brazilian shamans, he's been doing a lot of work with them, so he was talking about the shamanic space program and the ability to astral travel. And I could have that same conversation at NASA, like we were talking about, what we don't know about the potential for the mind—you would have the same conversation with somebody in a scientific, technical way, but we were talking about kind of the Spirit path of this.

And it's this idea of, who are the spacefarers? And all of a sudden if you recognize that there is a shaman in the Amazon who can map celestial bodies with his mind? What are we doing? And then, what's he dressed like? Well, that guy's wearing feathers. He's wearing birds on his body; it's a flight suit. It's literally a flight suit. So, in those moments when I'm marveling at the myriad ways we explore the cosmos, I am intrigued by, well, should it have feathers? Those kinds of questions. And a lot of it is about storytelling.



LINKS
Space For Art Foundation
Thunderbird Astronautics