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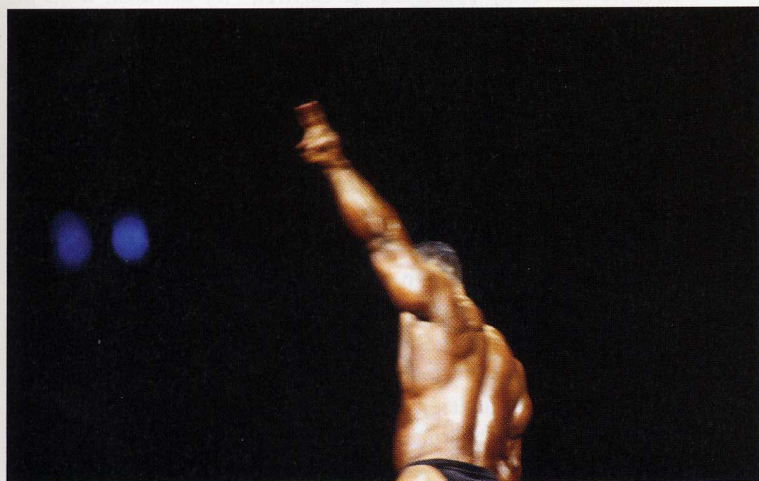
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Maria Antelman: Space Cowgirl, Humanist Scientist & Errant Explorer

TEXT / STEPHANIE BAILEY



Maria Antelman harbors such an intense fascination for life that she can barely contain her enthusiasm when discussing the themes behind her latest exhibition, *Superstars are Fading*, at the Apartment Gallery in her hometown of Athens, Greece [January 4–February 6, 2010]. Antelman is something of a madcap scientist; her highly conceptual work has consistently explored themes such as resurrection, death, and life. She uses her observations of reality to generate fictional worlds and “raise questions about the sanity of our society.”

In many ways, Antelman is an artist with a hunger to learn. Having graduated in 1996, she returned to Athens from Spain to become co-founder of the first free magazine in Greece, *Ozon*, alongside her brother. A groundbreaking venture, *Ozon* paved the way for a new generation to define contemporary Greek culture on its own terms. Antelman was at the forefront of this development as an arts writer and photographer. Unwilling to rest on her laurels, Antelman moved to New York to become an artist in 2001. She is still based there today. “It was really a question of now or never,” Antelman admits with a soft chuckle. “I had to give it a chance. And to be honest, I’ve been very lucky.”¹

Her self-defined breakthrough work, *New Horizons*, 2002, eloquently expresses her fluid approach to her artistic practice, which she believes provides more questions than answers. As would a writer and photographer, Antelman is an artist who constantly responds to her surroundings. “When I made *New Horizons*, it was the first time I spent so much time in Northern California. I was reading an article in *Wallpaper* about Cryogenics and was totally taken by it. It was kind of a myth—

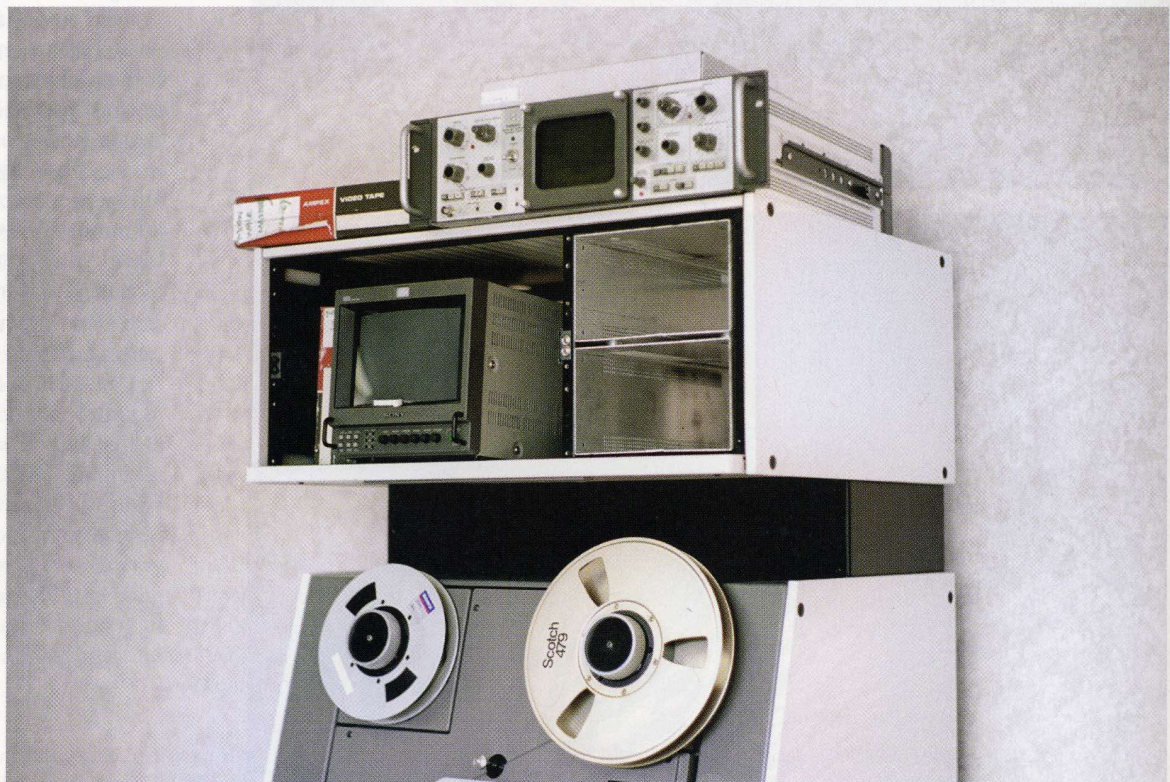
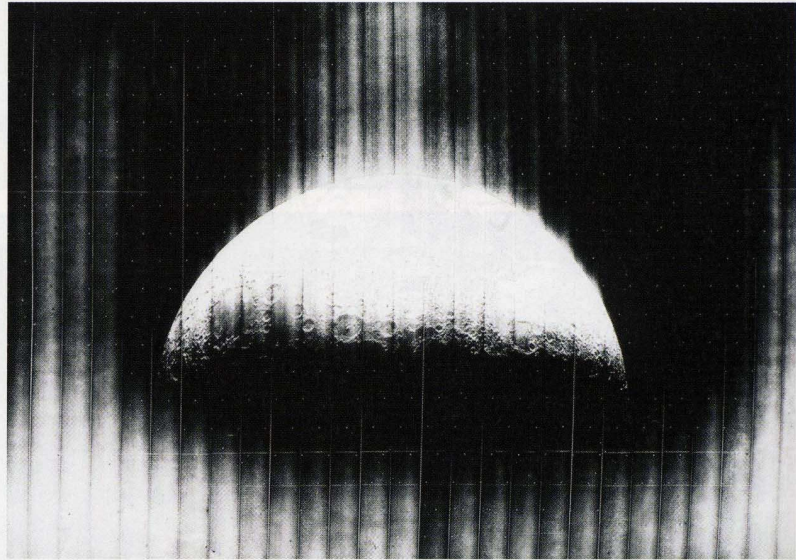
PAGE 1: Maria Antelman, *McMoon #2*, 2009, c-print on aluminum, 25.75 x 40 inches, ed. of 3 / ABOVE, TOP TO BOTTOM: *New Horizons (Miss Grand National II)*, 2002, c-print, 21 x 32 inches, ed. of 3; *The Gift*, 2004, c-print, 21 x 32 inches, ed. of 3 / OPPOSITE, TOP TO BOTTOM: detail of *Moonscape*, 2010, framed c-print, photographic installation, 27.5 x 31 inches, ed. of 3; *McMoon #3*, 2009, c-print on aluminum, 25.75 x 40 inches, ed. of 3 [all images courtesy of the artist and The Apartment, Athens]

this incomprehensible theory that blurs reality and fiction," she recalls.

With the questions raised by the article in mind, Antelman explored San Francisco. "I was looking at what's going on in the city—in reality researching—and came across this rodeo. I thought it was brilliant. If you look at California, it seems so disconnected with its past and is always looking ahead to the future. Then I see this rodeo and I'm trying to understand where it fits amidst the future, the new technologies, and this new life that people are promising here." These observations and musings resulted in a six-minute video colliding the human desire to be immortal with the crude reality of humankind's mortality through the juxtaposition of footage and sounds taken from a rodeo with a woman answering a man's queries about being frozen as voiceover.

"It's kind of funny and tragic at the same time because you are trying to follow, though you don't know exactly where you are," Antelman laughs. In a sense, this reflects two things about this artist. First, every moment in her life has the potential to lead to her next piece—*The Gift*, 2004, for example, which focuses on the physical and emotional effects of training and competing as a professional athlete, was conceived after a conversation between Antelman and a blind bodybuilder. Second, Antelman's artistic practice gives her the tools to discern and distil complex themes out of the mass of information she deconstructs daily.

Antelman is a modern-day explorer of the human experience whose approach could be described as scientific. "I like science and technology in a humanistic way," she notes. "It's always about the human drama or the human factor within this technological, existential situation we are experiencing."

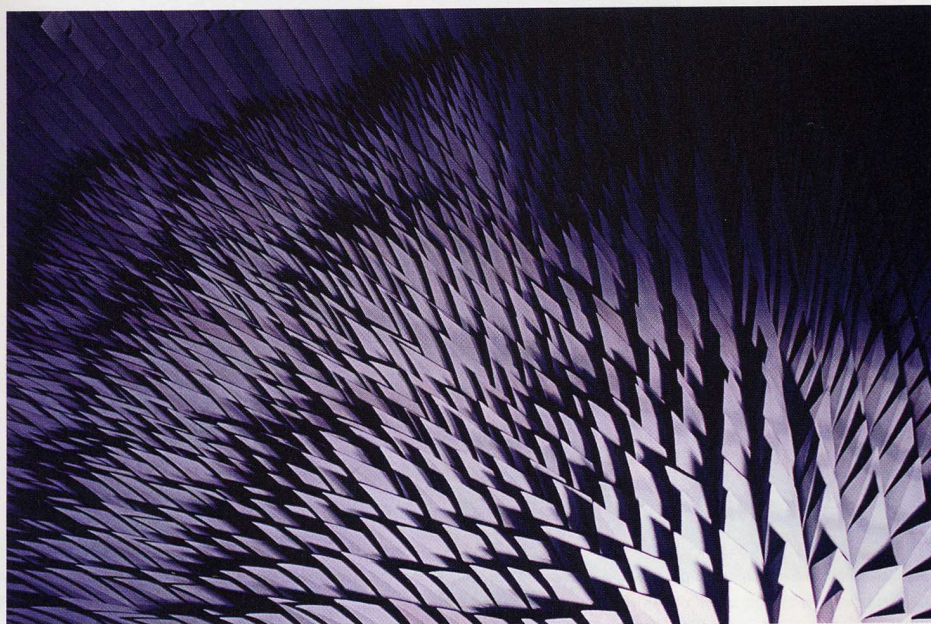
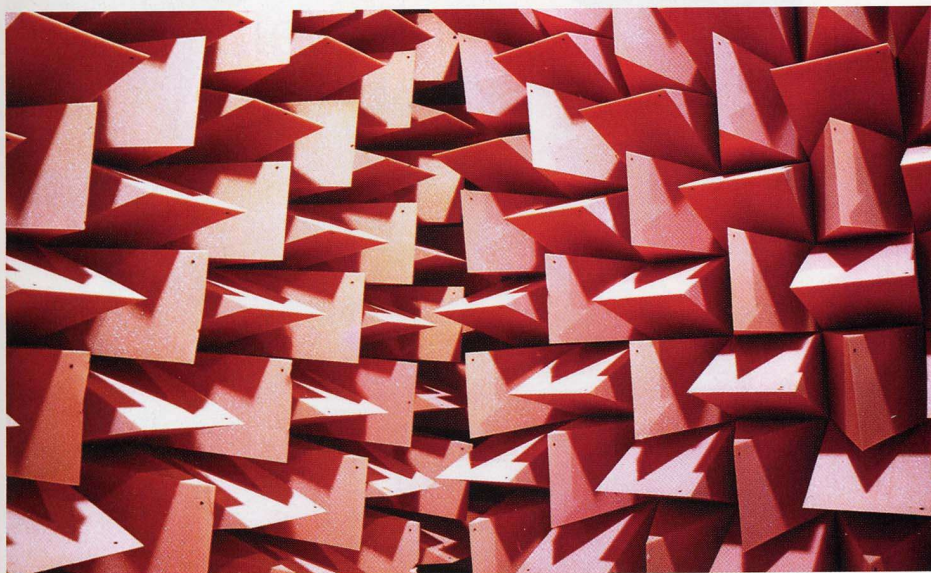


Antelman's latest show *Superstars are Fading* examines this human dimension through photographs, and is greatly influenced by Robert Smithson's canonical essay *A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic*, which *Artforum* published in 1967.² With camera in hand, Smithson traveled to Passaic, New Jersey, with the intent to document its industrial landscape like "a post-industrial romanticist trying to make us see the industrial structures with his own eyes. Describing pipes as sexual organs and cranes as dinosaurs, he said he was interested in unthinking a place and talks a lot about entropy, the concept of decline and deterioration of society and culture and how everything is broken and cannot be put back together," ideas Antelman was "thinking about a lot when putting this exhibition together."

Essentially continuing Smithson's photographic and theoretical investigation into manmade structures, the subject of *Superstars are Fading*, a project begun in 2006, is NASA space exploration centers from the 1960s and 1970s. "I like the aesthetic of that period, which has this kind of melancholy. We are talking about spaces that are immense in size, which I see as monuments to collective dreams, aspirations, and hopes as well as science, the unknown, space, the universe, and a knowledge that never came," not to mention an optimism that has, in a sense, expired. "This also connects to the emptiness of the spaces and the way I try to portray them as places that take you to nowhere."

Technology's effect on the human psyche is another of Antelman's concerns, which connects the theme of space exploration to current times. "Space exploration made the mediated world of communication networks we live in possible and has been instrumental in globalization. When you think of all the satellites that surround us, the images of ourselves that are sent into space and deflected back to us, and how we are more isolated in the universe than before space exploration, it's crazy," Antelman says with genuine disbelief. Like the vacant factories of the post-industrial era, the space hangars are the abandoned discards of a progress that we no longer celebrate.

When Smithson photographed the bridge leading into the town of Passaic, he documented a feeling of photographing a photograph. "It was as though I was walking on an enormous photograph made of wood and steel, and underneath the river existed as an enormous movie film that showed nothing but a continuous blank,"³ he wrote. In an elegant parallel, Antelman has also included images from broadcasting technology in her exhibition; "big magnetic tapes that—like the structures—are empty of content with nothing to communicate." A one-time screening of the video *Moonlight Serenade*, 2009—grainy, black-and-white archival images of the first mapping of the

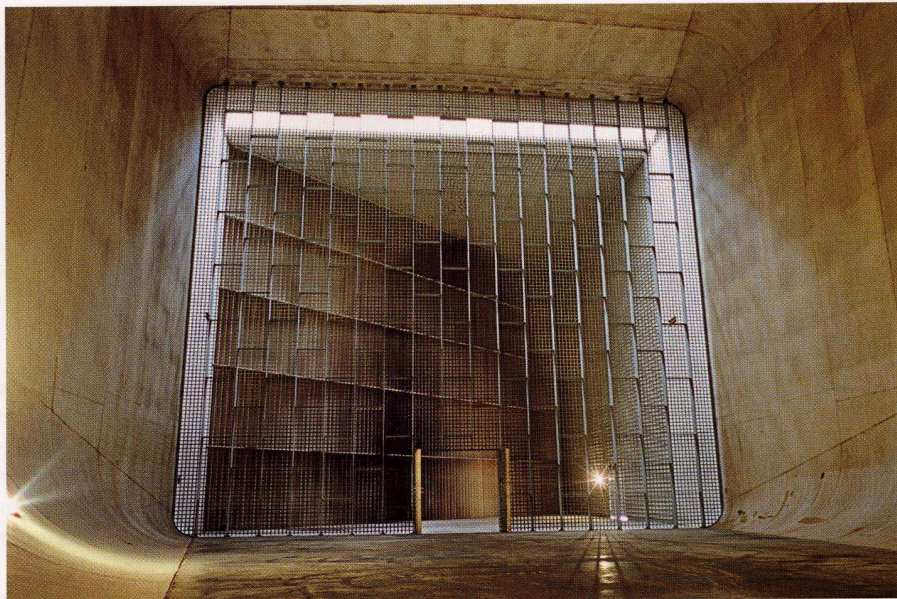


moon with a soundtrack of Morse code, numbers, letters, words, and tunes taken from shortwave recordings that Antelman collected from the Internet—adds another parallel. “It’s interesting because I’m showing the space center pictures, but behind the pictures there is always another piece.”

Moonlight Serenade adds a new dimension to her latest study. Encrypted with a technique popular in the Cold War, shortwave recordings travel great distances very quickly and are difficult to decipher. Transmitted from “numbers stations” all over the world and without any clear, discernable origin, it is believed that these messages are from spies and intelligence offices connected to governments and the military.

“I find the randomness interesting when you hear them,” Antelman enthuses. “The idea of looking into patterns and trying to make order out of randomness interests me. Also, things that happen under the surface or things we are not aware of—like these recordings—remind us of how little we know about ourselves or what is going on. I was thinking a lot about human nature and spying; what it would be like to have a double identity—or how one could have a double life. At the same time, I thought about nature—or real nature and of course about geo-politics in the sense of mapping things, trying to gain control, the constant battle of who is going to be first, who is going to have access, who is going to the moon first, who will build a colony on the moon first, who will take control of natural resources—the race. It’s immense.”

The layers of thought that go into Antelman’s work are often too much even for the artist herself, as she apologizes modestly for getting carried away and making her exhibition sound more dramatic than it is. However, she concedes that her projects are experiences that build up—like her experience in the space centers. “You spend days in these places and you start thinking and it gets you.” But in her view, it’s all in a day’s work for an artist. “I’m very interested in what people see through my work, though I’m more interested in what people think about it because it opens up my own thinking. That’s what makes art so interesting—it gives you so many possibilities to think your own thoughts. That’s what it’s all about,” she concludes. “What do you think?”



NOTES

1. All quotes taken from an interview with the artist at the Apartment Gallery, Athens, Greece, December 21, 2009.
2. Robert Smithson, “The Monuments of Passaic,” *Artforum*, December 1967, 48.
3. *Ibid.*

Originally from Hong Kong, Stephanie Bailey has been living in Athens for three years. She is a lecturer in Art History and Theory and the Arts Editor of *Athens Insider*. She also contributes to *Odyssey*. In addition, her texts have been published in *Athens News*, *Foto8.com*, *Adbusters*, *Another Late Night*, and *Mercy*.

OPPOSITE, TOP TO BOTTOM: *Untitled (Abstract Red)*, 2009, c-print on aluminum, 31.75 x 50 inches, ed. of 3; *Untitled (Abstract Blue)*, 2009, c-print on aluminum, 31.75 x 50 inches, ed. of 3 / ABOVE, TOP TO BOTTOM: *Untitled (Station)*, 2009, c-print on aluminum, 31.75 x 50 inches, ed. of 3; *Untitled (Table)*, 2009, c-print on aluminum, 31.75 x 47.25 inches, ed. of 3