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*Something like a dream, 2011*  
Kostas Roussakis

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## kaput. art magazine

Editors: Christopher Marinos, Thanos Stathopoulos  
Address: 22, Romvis str., Athens, 105 62 | [info@kaput.gr](mailto:info@kaput.gr)  
Website: Petros Moris | Title logo: Andreas Kassapis

### Newsletter

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## Capsule Spaces

A discussion between Haris Kanellopoulou and Maria Antelman

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“Capsule Spaces” is Maria Antelman’s recent solo exhibition held at Eugenides Foundation (Athens, Greece) from November 1 to 22, 2011. The curator of the exhibition, Charis Kanellopoulou, discusses with the Greek artist, who currently lives and works in New York and Palo Alto, California, about the artworks presented at the exhibition and the subjects concerning this particular body of work. At the show “Capsule Spaces”, Maria Antelman presented a new series of photographic works from NASA space centers, along with her video *Moonlight Serenade* (2009) and her new sound piece *Mnemotopia* (2011), focusing her interest on the way, in which we handle knowledge, history and memory through technology.

**Charis Kanellopoulou:** Maria, the presentation of your new series of photographic works from NASA space centers coincides with the last cycle of your visits, with the most recent at Ames Research Center in Northern California. At the same time, timewise randomly and conceptually interestingly, the exhibition “Capsule Spaces” was organized just a few months after the last take off of the space shuttle, which closed a circle of 40 years from the first effort of man to travel and explore the Universe. As you experience these spaces through your work and as a simple viewer of the travels of men into space, what is the impression you have of the human approach towards the “unknown”?

**Maria Antelman:** During one of my visits to NASA, I met an astrophysicist who worked on the discovery of new types of life forms. He spoke of “unknown” forms of life as something difficult to imagine. Our knowledge limits our imagination, making it hard to conceive of anything that is not known to us. In this sense, when we think about outer space, the space that faces us, it can only exist in relation to our world, to what we project into it. Outer space can become a strange reflection of our own expectations.

My photographs of the huge buildings and machines at NASA show these objects as techno-scientific monuments to the exploration of the “unknown”, a quest that ended up becoming something other than what was originally envisioned. Instead of inhabiting faraway planets and conquering new frontiers, spaceflight applications have created a technosphere surrounding earth, buzzing with artificial satellites, that gives us an information economy. In this world, we are increasingly engaged with ourselves, ignoring everything beyond our own stratosphere. Rather than trying to break through the barriers of our knowledge and expectations and look for something we don’t know yet, we bounce off the limits of outer space to see ourselves.

**CK:** Personally, I understand the environments you document in your work as “capsules”, which contain the collective imagination and the conception of the contemporary man about his future. There is a feeling of faith for the constantly developing technology, which can open new ways of exploration

and understanding of the world we live in and of the world which remains unmapped. “Capsules” of space and time, real and virtual, are determining our lives daily: the search engines, the web’s labyrinth, the satellite networks of communications, all seem to restrict and broaden at the same time the limits of our world. Marshall McLuhan, in this new world of technology, describes us as primitive, Palaeolithic people, who as new nomads of the world, instead of food, we collect information<sup>1</sup>. How do we administer the constant flow of information? How much of it becomes experience or knowledge?

**MA:** Things are changing very fast. The constant flow of information is being administered automatically. Information is personalized, directed straight to us; it seems to concern us, and is recommended for us. It becomes a sign of who we are, what we “talk” about, what digital spaces and physical places we visit. It seems like our experiences are directed to us by the traces of information we leave behind. There is a strong feedback relationship, where we exchange roles all the time, as receivers, transmitters, producers and consumers. Social media transport us into virtual settings where we become actors of our own actions. We are approaching the limit of reality and the edge of science fiction. It is scary and exciting at the same time. I wonder what McLuhan would write about now. I think that our concepts of experience and knowledge have changed and we are still catching up with this. As our knowledge becomes technical and extremely specialized, our narratives flatten, while our experiences become sharper.

**CK:** Similar concerns appear in your sound piece *Mnemotopia* (2011), which talks about the way we administer our memory. In this piece we are listening to two separate narrations: one is a memory athlete who lists meaningless chunks of data, and the other one is a woman who talks about her Memory Palace, a mental construct, which is storing her personal memories and now is being slowly destroyed. Borges in his story «Funes the memorious» is talking about the hero’s memorization of senseless information, as a process which “is lacking in sense, but reveals a certain stammering greatness.”<sup>2</sup> In the contemporary times of information, we experience the illusion that information and knowledge are easily and quickly accessible by all of us. Where is this accumulation of data taking us? Are we consuming information without reason instead of assimilating knowledge?

**MA:** I started working on this piece after I read a story about memory sports. I became fascinated by the amount of data the memory champions memorize, without any purpose or use other than the competition itself. It reminded me of “Funes the memorious,” where the character accumulates so much information that he loses the ability to think in an abstract way. I was already interested in our relationship with the flow of information, which is always with us, everywhere we look; right in front of us, in our pocket, on every screen, on our fingertip. We are used to living with our electronic devices, which are also our memory prosthetics, where we access and store our own information, our own memories. Memories are codified into data and become the proof of our existence. Our data has a “social” life somewhere; it inhabits some place and we must have 24/7 access to it. Remembering has become painless, effortless and reliable. The data memory, the new place for memory in our electronic devices, replaces traditional memory and the increasingly obsolete human capacity for remembering. Memory becomes something like a sport, a hobby, a pastime. I think our knowledge base is starting to give up trying to make sense of what is concrete and what is technical and abstract.

**CK:** In your videos, the primary source of your moving image is a result of your photographs, which later is superimposed with selective soundtracks. Could you speak about this selection, about giving the

“privilege” of narration to static images, instead of serving the concept of your work through a script flow?

**MA:** I shoot photographs on site and I compose them in animated sequences. A soundtrack created from texts narrated by actors and found sounds is superimposed on the visual material. The result is a montage of multi-layered narratives and visual terrains, trans-real formations of images and words. I am looking for a connection between the retrospective effect of still images, which make the viewer wonder what happened, and the anticipatory sense evoked by moving images, which make the viewer wonder what will happen. If «life is a movie [and] death is a photograph» (Susan Sontag) my videos are somewhere in between.

**CK:** In your video *Moonlight Serenade* (2009), you use archival images from the first mapping of the moon in the late '60s, which are then superimposed by random codes, letters and numbers from short wave radio transmissions. This material, which you pulled from the Web, has been interpreted as an encrypted language, a Cold War invention for the transmission of military spy information. In this piece we see the dynamic of an ambitious “conquest” of an unexplored world compared with the secrecy of a code, with elements transmitted under the surface of things. Why do you choose to transport this opposition in your piece? Is there a point where these two “worlds” come together?

**MA:** These two worlds come together and, at the same time, are pulled apart. My desire is to create tension. Both sources, visual and auditory, suggest geopolitical interests and, as you mentioned, what happens under the surface of things. The images show a naked planet, while the shortwave radio transmissions suggest danger and the presence of an enemy. The arid moonscapes function as visual interpretations of the encoded (unintelligible) messages. The somewhat abstracted form of the moonscapes together with the implicit randomness of the numbers forces the viewer to try and find patterns out of randomness. As we are predisposed to create patterns in order to read, to understand, and to keep chaos in order, the disjointed narration in my work keeps the reader off balance and forces him to think and question.

**CK:** We live in times of global recession, financial and social and mostly of our values. Personally I have a feeling that we stand still, unable to understand, the purpose and the vision of many human accomplishments, which were defined important since the middle of the 20th century and on. On the other hand, technology and science are advancing inevitably, offering provisions for the opening of new fields of knowledge. How do you think they can contribute positively in the crisis we are experiencing today?

**MA:** This information platform becomes an active political discursive space, where new democratic forces arise. By feeding the web with our ideas, our perspectives and our voices, we create a liberating space that brings some type of transparency to the process of searching for some truth.

1. M. McLuhan, D. Carson, *The Book of Probes*, Gingko Press, Berkeley 2003. [↗]

2. J. L. Borges, *Funes the memorius*. Retrieved on July 6th, 2011 from “<http://www.srs-pr.com/literature/borges-funes.pdf> [↗]