Maria Antelman

Mechanisms of Affection

**A conversation between
Maria Antelman and curator
Taylor Bradley**

Spacesaver III, 2016. Inkjet print on adhesive fabric. 40 × 60 in
(101.6 × 152.4 cm). Courtesy of the artist.

**For the last decade, computer
technology has been the subject and
object of Maria Antelman's expansive
and layered practice. Drawing from a
wide array of sources including science
fiction, Ancient Greek marbles, IBM ads,
satellite signals, and computer code,
Antelman asks how we sense machines
and how machines sense their users.
Thinking about the computer's
theater of invisibility and its systems
as living actors in a technocratic
society, Antelman explores the ways
in which digital technologies imitate
our emotions, gestures, voices, and
locations. In a recent conversation with
Antelman, I asked her to describe how
the themes of humanity and technology
became central to her work.**

Technology and humanity are the leads
in this drama story currently unfolding. Is
it just technology that is en-humanized—
by which I mean technology becoming
intelligent and acquiring human
behaviors—or are humans becoming
technological and sources of information?

**What kinds of images informed the
composition of the *Spacesaver* series
[2016]?**

Years ago, I found some old computer
magazines and IBM catalogues with
photographs of machines in office
interiors with female models. Women
were operating and caring for the
emotionless gray electronic equipment
with their female touch and soft hands.

In a history of the representation of women in information technology, these are the women who evolved into Siri and Alexa's compliant personalities. As tech design advances and personal computers turn into surfaces, bodies become voices. I thought, there must be a connection between the dehumanizing machine and the effect of women sentimentalizing it. Years later at the media room of Butler Library at Columbia University, I encountered an entire station with rectangular microfilm readers and microfilm archival units (built by Spacesaver). Since the reader machines looked like early computers, it was only natural to reference the early IBM imagery in the photographs.

The color in *Spacesaver I* [2016] is really warm—where did you photograph the microfilm terminal in that work? Did you light the space where you photographed, or was that effect created in post-production?

The *Spacesaver* series are photomontages, composed digitally by different layers. *Spacesaver I* is the only color piece in the entire show—everything else is black-and-white. I shot the images with a 35mm film camera using Portra 160 ASA color film and TMAX 400 black-and-white film. I just used a tripod and the light available in the Butler Library at Columbia University, so the color of the first layer with the larger terminal hasn't been digitally modified. The second smaller frame in the print is darker, simulating

Spacesaver I, 2016. Inkjet print on adhesive fabric. 40 × 60 in (101.6 × 152.4 cm). Courtesy of the artist.

the effect of seeing something through a screen, and the third and smaller screen is the lightest, brightening and opening up the whole composition. In terms of color preferences, a huge influence is the masterpiece film *Playtime* [1967] by Jacques Tati. *Playtime* was shot in color but feels like a cool, blue-ish black-and-white, and in every scene there is a strong red element, like a flower or a logo. There are some scenes with very warm, bright, neon-like lighting details, like the scene with the elevator in the offices.

Playtime, for me, is about adaptability and progress.

Speaking of film and how it influences your practice, you've mentioned before that Spanish cinema has had a big impact on you. What movies have stuck with you?

For me, film is the absolute artwork, a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, combining all art forms and expressions. I moved to Spain because of a film. After high school, I was studying photography and I wanted to leave Athens but no place felt interesting enough. Then, I watched Almodovar's film *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* [1988]. The aesthetic, the story, the characters, the place, it was a revelation. I knew this was where I needed to be. Madrid was the cultural capital of the Spanish-speaking world, as the former capital of an empire that ruled the globe for centuries, and the capital of Generalissimo Franco ruling the rest of Spain for decades. Under the imperialistic surface of the capital there was this extremely vibrant counterculture, which started with the notorious Movida Madrilena. When I arrived in the early '90s, Madrid wasn't as cosmopolitan—nobody spoke English, and the underground scene was dark and Goyaesque, intoxicated and intoxicating. We lived near the Filmoteca (the Spanish cinematheque), and during all my student years, I would spend most of my days there, watching films passionately. I still watch films all the time—they keep me inspired.

What did you study in school while living in Madrid?

I always wanted to be an artist, but I hadn't found my way yet, so I studied art history in Madrid. The academic program was very old-fashioned—it included three years of general studies in the field of history, and then two years specializing in art history. I remember how the Middle Ages were particularly haunting to me, and Medieval Spain was very interesting with the coexistence of Christians, Jews, and Muslims. During the summers of my student years, I was working as a guide for Greek tourists visiting Madrid and Andalucía. I was walking people through the Alhambra in Granada, the Cathedral in Sevilla and the Synagogue in Córdoba. It was a very rich time in terms of experiencing European history.

When did you decide to pursue an MFA in new media?

I was living in Palo Alto, California. I had my first child and was ready for the second. Instead of watching my career getting buried in some playground sandbox, I decided to reverse my fate and reinvent my practice.

What was your curriculum like as an MFA student, and who did you study with?

We met with mentors, had regular critiques, and did critical studies. I took extra classes in architecture and sculpture

(a sucker for art history), drawing, photography and more. At that time, I was still shooting photographs in old NASA sites and working on archival material my techno-archeologist friends had given me at NASA Ames [a major NASA research center in Silicon Valley]. I am still showing the work that I did during graduate school and before graduate school. I entered the program as an artist with a fully developed practice.

I worked closely with the artists Jon Kessler and John Miller, and with Gregory Amenof, Liam Gillick, Rirkrit Tiravanija, Kara Walker, Fia Backstrom, Janine Antoni, Liz Deschenes, and Shelly Silver.

Antelman's recent animated works are the culmination of a series of tight 35mm photographs the artist took of her son which she then printed, scanned, animated, and edited to video. The presentation of these disembodied hands and mouths in the gallery results in a bright, glowing display of silent, animated objects reaching out to their creator. Looking to affective computing in the twenty-first century, Antelman reflects on the production and consumption of smart technologies designed to sense their users. In our conversation, I asked her about her turn toward animating photographs and the relationship between this series and the themes of "smart" or affective technology found in her work.

Echo Code, 2019 (detail). Three-channel HD video. 2 min (loop). Courtesy of the artist.

I started animating my images gradually and incorporating them in my videos. At some point, these became more sculptural: single electronic images, animated or alive, inhabiting a monitor, moving ad infinitum in a closed loop. Conceptually, there is a linear progression to the work, and I made these electronic

Seer (Deep), 2019. HD video. 2 min (loop). Courtesy of the artist.

sculptures right after finishing a piece about automation. I am interested in how we are adjusting to our automated environment, and how this affects us in deeply transformative ways. New technologies, new relations and new dependencies constantly arise. Systems have learned to understand

our needs, decode our expressions, read our emotions and respond to us. Everything around us is a potentially smart thing, which is offering some information, some solution, some type of relief. The animated works reflect these conditions—their movement is a testament to the fluidity of the inanimate, technological world.

What was the automated piece you were working on before making this body of work?

Disassembler [2018], a video work about bodies and automation which brings together a voiceover with technical instructions from a wristband that Amazon recently patented. The wristband will monitor the hand movements and gestures of warehouse pickers to maximize their performance. This will merge the worker with the system. Visually the video is composed of images of natural elements, earth constructions, and people working the land. Disassembler is presenting a post-automated situation where people return to land and long for organic experiences.

In *Mechanisms of Affection*, you chose to incorporate stones from the Austin area into your installation. Do you see stone as a kind of technology, and digital media—whether that's the software you use to animate the photographs or the video monitors themselves—as part of an ancient culture of representation?

Stone's Instinct, 2019. HD video, sound. 27 sec (loop). Courtesy of the artist.

My work often brings together ideas of the past and the future, past technologies and future technologies. Stone historically is the noblest material, and antiquity has reached us because of stone's permanence. Also, companies mine essential elements to fabricate electronics from rocks and mountains. We start from the earth and we return to the earth; it's the beginning and the end, and since we are destroying the earth, rocks come in as a reminder of how detached we are from our source and how distracted we are from the decay in our environment. My work is about user relations with information technologies, and the transformative effect of informational objects on users. I think that the idea of animating stones with code or automating stones is as terrifying as an earthquake. In the works where ancient Greek marbles are involved, it is like shaking the archetypes of our culture, the foundations of all our western narratives. Aesthetically, I am juxtaposing the electronic media—which mediates every original experience—with the rocks—which take one closer to the only authentic experience: to nature.

Together, Antelman's series of photomontages, animated works, and sound installations open onto questions about the senses and the technological infrastructure we cannot see. Since the early 2000s, Antelman has borrowed material techno-archaeologists have recovered from outmoded forms of technology. In her sound installation *For Your Eyes Only* [2018], Antelman paired a stream of distant transmissions from the ISEE–3 / ICE satellite as isolated sounds with an actor reading computer code from an open-source camera vision program.[1] Since the ISEE–3/ ICE spacecraft fell out of orbit in 1982, scientists have attempted to record and interpret data transmitted over radio waves. In this process, the signals send information about the spacecraft itself and data recorded by the scientific instruments aboard the vessel. Taking advantage of this technical confusion, Antelman highlights the transformation of formal elements between one mode of documentation to another. Here, these technical languages that were designed to communicate with machines become an absurd poetry of arbitrary signals, unintelligible transmissions, and foreign commands. I asked Antelman about the process of making her sound installations *For Your Eyes Only* [2018] and *[sin-taks]* [2011], the texts and voices she used to create each piece, and the background sounds she mixed into the work.

To make *For Your Eyes Only*, I collected recordings of satellite communications and coding language. Since they are not meant to be spoken or heard, I thought it would be interesting to have a voice actor read computer commands designed for computer vision programming. In the background, I included a telemetry recording of failed attempts to reestablish contact with Satellite ISSE–3 / ICE—a silent satellite that has been in heliocentric orbit since 1978.

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[1] NASA, the European Space Research Organisation (ESRO), and the European Space Agency (ESA) first launched the International Sun-Earth Explorer–3 (ISEE–3) satellite in 1978 to measure how solar winds affect the Earth's magnetic field. After completing its first mission, the ISEE–3 was renamed the International Cometary Explorer (ICE) and programmed to study the plasma trailing behind comets Giacobini–Zinner and Halley.

Finally, samples of pendulum clocks from a clockmaker's shop signal the hour and measure time. *For Your Eyes Only* reflects on opaque systems and shows how remote the world feels through information technology.

[sin-taks] is about a void, a gap and a stoppage in a closed system of connections. It is an attempt to search for a new meaning in a time of uncertainty. I combined sounds of recording devices rewinding, stopping, and restarting with voices reading "stop" words and "non-words." Search engines filter "stop" [noise] words out—like "it," "the," "and," or "in"—to facilitate the search for information, and since they are so common, they can confuse search results. The non-words sound like words but have no meaning—researchers use them to help understand how people process information. With the voices in *[sin-taks]*, I combined different groups of words in an impossible syntax, that are highlighting unintelligible mechanisms of communication.

Your work, particularly your research with technology archeologists, has strong anachronistic elements. The textured layers in your work—digital collages of silver gelatin prints and animations that play on CRT monitors—bring to mind the illusions or representations of code with which we interface on a daily basis. I wonder how much this resonates with you, and if you feel like your photography and sound

works visualize or dramatize the inner workings of digital technology?

If not an artist, I would be an anthropologist studying the impact of technology on culture. As an artist, I create experiences that trigger people to reflect on the effects of technological applications.

Do you have any upcoming shows or works in process? Are those shows or projects also related to ideas about technology, the body, and information in your practice?

I am thinking more and more about bodies in relation to technology and how we are becoming informational objects, as our biological, physical and emotional information becomes part of the data economy. When I used to live in Northern California, I was thinking a lot about the distant future. Now I spend some time in Greece, and I am more interested in the distant past and ideas like primitive animism and techno-animism, as in devices and programs having consciousness. There is a new, autonomous, artificial consciousness starting to embody our surrounding things. This is designed by replicating human behaviors, and I am wondering how instinctively our coping mechanisms are mimicking this new artificial awareness, which is a simplistic copy of ourselves. These days, I am working on a two-person show with artist Jules Gimbrone at Melanie Flood Projects in Portland, Oregon in October 2019.

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