This transcript is from ISPA's Podcast: Meditations On

Season 1 Episode 1 – *Meditation on Art in Outer Space*

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CREDITS

Hosted by Ilter Ibrahimof (Artistic Director of Fall for Dance North, Canada)
Featuring guest provocateur Nahum (Artist at Nahum Studios & KOSMICA Institute)
Production, sound design, and composition by Johnny Spence
Special thanks to Nahum and Orchestra Elastique for providing us with additional music

EPISODE DESCRIPTION

In this episode, hear from Berlin-based artist-musician Nahum as he guides you into an unsettling journey and engages in a critical dialogue about the politics of existence, diversity, and space exploration. Navigating between the real and the imaginary, Nahum's work focuses on creating unconventional perspectives of human experience by using outer space technology, illusionism, and hypnosis.

TRANSCRIPT BEGINS

[theme music]

0:06
Ilter Ibrahimof
You are listening to *Meditations On*, the new podcast from ISPA. I'm your host, Ilter Ibrahimof.

0:15
Nahum
"To be holy. To lose gravity and to ascend. Everything that loses gravity is divine."

0:25
Ilter Ibrahimof
That was the voice of Nahum. Born in Mexico City, Nahum is an artist and musician who lives in Berlin. Navigating between the real and the imaginary, his work focuses on creating unconventional perspectives of human experience by using outer space technology, illusionism, and hypnosis. He was recognized as one of the young space leaders by the international astronomical federation for his contribution to outer space activities and was the first artist to launch an interactive artwork into outer space in 2018. Today, he guides us into an unsettling journey and engages in a critical dialogue about the politics of existence, diversity, and space exploration.

1:21
Nahum

[typewriter in background]
February 26, 1962. Dear Miss Kelly, this is in response to your letter of February 20, 1962. Your offer to go on the space mission is commendable, and we are very grateful. This is to advise that we have no existing program concerning women astronauts, nor do we contemplate any such plan. We appreciate your interest and support of the nation's space program. Sincerely, O. B. Lloyd Jr., Director of Public Information, NASA.

2:04
Letters like this were sent to a few women that were interested in participating in the moon landings. At the end of the day, we saw a group of men visiting the moon. Perhaps it's no coincidence that Armstrong famously said

2:24
[historical recording of Armstrong quote]
"That's one small step for man. One giant leap for mankind."

2:30
Talking about men. But for a second, what if we could go back in time and change the events that happened. So, for a second, I want you now to close your eyes.

2:48
[ambient music]
Close your eyes. Stop wherever you are. And find yourself listening to the sound of my voice. And you will start feeling more and more relaxed. You will visualize a sphere of relaxation covering your body from you head spreading down to your shoulders, to your belly, to your legs. Down to your feet. And as you are inside this sphere and this sensation of being entirely relaxed, soon you will start drifting away. And soon you will remember something that happened and that you have forgotten. Soon, also, you will find yourself traveling far away from earth into a new place where you have been, but you don't remember. But today, this memory of walking on the moon will come back to you and you will remember something extraordinary that happened to you.

4:14
Okay, everyone, open your eyes. I am not going to do the full hypnosis to you right now. Countless of people have been hypnotized through this routine and when they open their eyes, they remember things like this.

4:30
[various voices overlapping each other]
"I remember flying to the moon and I remember how I landed. Once I got on the moon I started to drift and the boundaries between dream and memory are very fuzzy to me."

"I felt lonely but also connected. It was a deep nostalgia but also a warm feeling."

"Gravity wanted to pull me back to earth."

"Rainbows are everywhere."

“I was existing more like a ghost.”

“I would have liked to stay longer.”

4:54
[ambient music]
I think I have hypnotized over a thousand people already with this performance. After each session when I hear the stories and how people get so emotional, and I see tears, and excitement, they felt it, they saw it, they sensed it. They had an experience. And that’s the point.

5:19
Around 11 years ago, I was working an underground theater in London. It was huge. It was under London Bridge Station. And we were crafting experiences and doing experiments with live arts, and performances, and it was a wild place. One day, some people that were already engaged in the space exploration field, some curators that were already participating in some of these discussions, as well as some engineers and scientists. They loved what we were doing there. Afterwards, I was invited to go to the Space Federation in Paris and see how we could start doing something for artists in space.

6:07
We started working on creating this department for arts and culture in outer space. I would say that the first five years it was just learning how this field of exploring the universe and the cosmos has actually really strong links with arts, culture, and the humanities. I would say that the beginning I was just fascinated by everything that was happening. But, later, I started to see some opportunities for improvement. Meaning, in the in the arts we're having all these conversations about queer culture, and feminism, and decolonizing our minds, and our social systems. We're talking about social justice and the climate emergency being an artist, and also being in museums and festivals talking about these events. Then afterwards, I would go to the Space Federation, or would engage with some working space agencies. And then I'll be like all right no one is really discussing these topics. And then I'm sitting here watching a panel of heads of space agencies and I see white man, white man, white man, white man, white man, white man, white man, white man, and then they're talking about colonizing the moon, and having a moon colony over here, and extracting resources and business models for new private companies to profit and create their own rockets and their own technology. And I'm like wow, okay, there's something that an artist can do here. And that is: why don't we talk about those things that we are discussing in our field? And that's how we started.

8:06
[ambient music]

8:11
Something really basic that happens after an astronaut goes into orbit and then comes back to earth is that they say I saw no borders from space. This thing that we give for granted, these maps that we had in our schools with different colors and lines. It's not what the planet is. That's a fantasy. That we invented, I think, for the sake of simplicity and making sense of the world and the universe. We like to divide things and we like to say humans and non-humans. We like to say Western and non-Western. And, we have a very clear division between earth and outer space. But space gives us that perspective. I praise the work of Frank White. He's a good

colleague, and he coined this term which is the Overview Effect. However, how many people have had that perspective? More than 90% of them were men. It's a privileged perspective. And it would be great if everyone can have it. But, certainly, we don't want to have millions of rockets taking every human to space and then change the way they think. So, as an artist, and trying to see things always from the other side, sometimes, I think what we really need is to find a Ground View Effect you know. How we can actually sense that we belong to this cosmos by just standing on the ground? And this is what many Indigenous cultures and First Nations they knew. And they did. So, it's time to reconnect to the planet. And how it is part of the Universe.

10:22
[upbeat ambient soundscape]
Often people ask me: would you like to go to space? I was like, well, I am already, and it happens that I'm in a wonderful place in space. And I am already here. If I want to go to another celestial body, well, that's a different question. But we are in space. We are in space. But I, we, have earth that keeps us from falling eternally you know. The earth, every day, is telling us come to me, come to my center, and, thanks to that, we can walk. But, also, we fight against that right. The act of growing up physically. It's an act that defies gravity. This force that is pulling us to the center of the planet. It's in our culture. In a lot of religious thoughts. Especially in Christianity. You'll see that everything that falls is devilish or is the evil. The fallen angel, or the snake that is on the ground. And, on the other hand, we aspire for the opposite. To be holy. To lose gravity and to ascend. Everything that loses gravity is divine. What is this force we're fighting in our stories but also when you wake up in the morning? This is something I wanted to explore. To explore gravity by its absence. By not experiencing it. And, to add some drama, the only way that you can do that is by organizing a zero-gravity mission. So, I started negotiating with every space agency that I could. That's what you do. Like, okay, I have this idea. I'm going to call that Gagarin cosmonaut training center in Moscow and see if we can arrange a space mission. And, of course, things are a little bit more complicated than that. But the beauty of the artist's mind is like, yeah, why not. And after 2 years of very intense negotiations, we did it. We went to Moscow. To Star City which is this complex for cosmonauts and astronauts outside of Moscow. We boarded the spaceship. And then we were flying. And then we started to accelerate, and we were lying on the floor. And then we heard the announcement from the pilot saying: “it's going to happen now.”

13:40
[outer worldly soundscape]
And in an instant gravity was gone. And we entered into this realm of existence that I didn't know before. I was floating for the first time in my life. And I'm there, suspended. And in that moment, every point of my body, every single cell, was weightless. Me, and nothingness, and the void. We were the same thing. I thought I had stopped existing. My physical existence was gone. I felt terrified. The only thing that I remember doing was extending my arms and trying to find something to hold onto. And that's when I saw another body floating next to me. And I just embraced this body. And when I did that, I started to feel myself again. I felt my body through feeling another body. And I realized that, yeah, this is a message. We can only exist if we are together.

15:23
Ilter Ibrahimof
[theme music]

Meditations On is presented by ISPA. This episode was produced by Johnny Spence and hosted by me, Ilter Ibrahimof. Our theme song, sound design, and original score is by Johnny Spence. The Executive Producer is David Baile. Special thanks to Nahum and Orchestra Elastique for providing us with additional music for this episode. This episode was sponsored by Theatre Projects. They know how to create performance spaces that come alive. Learn more about their work at theatreprojects.com

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