

NEST

History is
His Story_

Text (ENG)

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History is His Story_

Dean Bowen

Crystal Z Campbell

Em'kal Eyongakpa

Charl Landvreugd

Arna Mačkić

Sulaiman Majali

Pieter Paul Pothoven

Pamela Phatsimo Sunstrum

Jaro Varga

Exhibition design: Studio L A

"History is His Story" is a group exhibition that expands on the mythical world as described by the musician, poet and visionair, Sun Ra. At a young age, he became fascinated by the scientific research of Cheikh Anta Diop: one of the founders of Pan-Africanism, scientist, linguist and politician, who believed he could prove that the Egyptians were black. That there were black thinkers and rulers at the fundament of civilization encouraged Sun Ra - who was born Herman Blount but legally changed his name to Le Sony'r Ra in 1952 - thus naming himself after the Egyptian sun god Ra - to explore cultural heritage. Within the domain of art, performance and music - Sun Ra created a means for people to take possession of a more fair narrative in history and subsequently a future in society. For Sun Ra, history, as it was commonly portrayed in Western cultures, was a lie, an illusion used to exert power over other cultures. He wanted to offer an alternative conception of history and therefore focused on myth. He argued that the Afro-American community needed a 'mythocracy' rather than a democracy, that an alternative historical narrative for Afro-Americans might be found in myth. He employed myth to escape western rational thought offering instead a more holistic, magical world view. 'History is His Story' reacts to social and political phenomena and allows for mythical knowledge to add nuance to history or visualize a more egalitarian future. In 'History is His Story' artists seek an in-between-space: a place of visual language without beginning and end. The ancient past and the distant future unite in a temporary new world. The artists have a shared interest in making new mythologies and reinterpreting those that already exist. More than looking into the future, they orient themselves on the methodology of Sun Ra - the questioning of heritage and its reinterpretation.

About Sun Ra (United States, 1914-1993)

Text: Heske ten Cate en Arna Mačkicić

It was in the age of the Black Power Movement and the Space Race that Sun Ra created his cosmic, afro-futuristic philosophy, which simultaneously relied heavily on both archaic Egyptian symbols, and on futuristic and cosmological visions. For him, the only way to escape the sadness and sickness of black oppression consisted in developing an imaginary of black people as part of cosmological narratives that transcended human and earthly history. With strong elements from African and African American theatre, theosophy and free mason afro futurism, he developed his own cosmic philosophy and lyrical poetry that, above all, preached enlightenment and peace. By using myth which he celebrated in music, text and film, Sun Ra could pass on stories of history. He gave people a way to experience their identity from a different perspective and to detach it from the often traumatic history of imposed story lines. Myth is being used as a tool to create new possibilities for a radically new future. This also opened the possibility for a new language: on the one hand a visual language in which Sun Ra refers to ancient symbols and signs from Ancient Egypt combined with futuristic and cosmic elements; and, on the other an exploration of etymology and grammar. His analysis of words was meticulous. He sought out their meaning and origin in order to return depth to words and challenge existing power structures. It made it possible for him to attempt to express the inexpressible.

'How do you know I'm real? I'm not real, I'm just like you. You don't exist in this society. If you did, your people wouldn't be seeking equal rights. You're not real. If you were, you would have some status among the nations of the world. So we are both myths. I do not come to you as a reality. I come to you as the myth, because that's what black people are. Myths. I came from a dream that the black man dreamt long ago. I'm actually a present sent to you by your ancestors.'

(Sun Ra spoke these words to a group of black teens in the film 'Space is the Place').

Sun Ra is well known as the founder of afro futurism and many artists and young musicians were inspired by his repertoire of over 100 music albums. Next to his unconventional and radically atypical sound, his oeuvre also contains poetry, books, films, the graphic design of his album covers; set design of his films and the extravagant clothing in which he appeared. He considered his theater shows and performances as rituals during which he summoned irrational, spiritual forces and would place himself, his band and the audience in a different dimension.

*Those of the reality have lost their way
Now they must listen to what myth has to say.
Those of the reality have been bruised and beaten by the truths
Those of the reality have been slaves of a bad truth
so there's nothing left now but the myth
The myth is neither bad nor good
It's potentials are unlimited*

Dean Bowen

.echo

Dean Bowen is a poet, performer and psychonaut living in Rotterdam who seeks the sanctity of the quotidian. He doesn't write, but rather channels a language that drifts in the ether. As a writer, he investigates the dynamism of composed identity and how this relates to its positioning both politically and socially. For this he utilizes the poem, as both a tool and a democratic space, capturing a multitude of voices.

In "echo." Bowen investigates the multi dimensionality of language as material: sonic and visual. With Sun Ra's quote "History is only His Story" as a departure point, Bowen also seeks new lingual possibilities that appear after exposing language from various different directions. By weaving homophonic and semantic translation methods, the quote is stripped of its meaning and deployed as a sound palette in order to "topple" it from English to other languages. From this, the written out result is woven into abstract lines that disrupt the language from its visual symbolism. The result is a concentrated language that is used to demand a new space where a reformulation of ourselves is allowed to be uncovered. An autonomous manipulation to democratize language anew.

Crystal Z Campbell

On the Way to the Moon, We Discovered the Earth
Searcher

Campbell's artwork often includes archival material and historic remnants and presents counter narratives to shift how history is told. "On the Way to the Moon, We Discovered the Earth" is a well-known statement made by astronaut William Anders who, in Apollo 8,

experienced the first American moon landing. Sometimes something elementary is discovered while looking for something else: a fitting title for a video work shows a historical remix of the New York Times newspaper printed during the famous New York City Blackout in 1977. During the Blackout of 1977, DJ equipment was stolen from Brooklyn shops that were no longer protected by electric alarms because of the power outage. The 1977 Blackout is unofficially credited with the formal birth of hip-hop, a movement that was already well underway but advanced with equipment looted during the riots.

Historically, searchlights were used in war to signal allies or enemies by creating 'artificial moonlight.' Subverting this function, Crystal Z Campbell initially conceived of *Searcher* as a public light meditation bridging two historical events: The Tulsa Race Massacre of 1921 and Juneteenth on June 19th, 1865.

The Tulsa Race Massacre – one of many race massacres around the United States in the same period, resulted in the destruction of a wealthy, segregated, black community in Tulsa, Oklahoma called Greenwood. *Searcher* was presented by Crystal Z Campbell in 2016-2017 on the former grounds of the Tulsa Race Massacre after dusk – a symbolic search for persons who were never accounted for after the massacre. Meanwhile, Juneteenth celebrates the delayed news of freedom from slavery in the United States. Officially, slaves were emancipated with the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863, yet word did not reach all parties until June 19th, 1865.

While Sun Ra dodged military service, he often ruminated on reaching an utopia guided by light, be it a North Star, sun, or another branch of the cosmos. In this installation, light functions like a portal through both space and time. *Searcher* considers the role of light as a defense tactic, ephemeral monument, portal, and replica of one of our greatest sources of light: the moon.

Em'kal Eyongakpa

Tahjèsè: #3 (sǒ bàtú): where angels/ferries chant

audio recordings from +/- 7kms around Tahjèsè are used to compose fragments that form the base for the sound set up.

"sǒ" translates as to bathe, to cleanse.

"sǒ bàtú" would be 'to bath one's ears' or to 'ear bath'

Kɛnyaŋ is a language widely spoken in the Cross River basin of Manyu, in Cameroon. It's metaphorically a sonic bath.

"sǒ bàtú" is an ongoing series of installations by Eyongakpa existing of multiple chapters, live sonic sketches, audiovisual sets, interventions and writings. 'sǒ bàtú' focuses on the role of water, both literally and metaphorically, in several movements of resistance concerning the mainly around natural gas and oil rich Gulf of Guinea.

Some messages could evoke a potential future, or a cosmology of a desirable future based on unimplemented ideas by mainly creative figures, shamans or prophets in neo-colonial struggles. In line with the ideas around 'sǒ bàtú' water is the principal medium together with other ultrasonic recordings.

In an immersive environment, sounding like an underground industrial cave or a giant cyborg, interwoven symbols create an illusion of a three-dimensional animated script to a portal.

Tahjèsè is the location where many of the audio recordings by the artist derive from. It's located approximately 7 kilometers from the confluence of the river Manyu in Cameroon and the Cross River in Nigeria. Personal recounts and family stories have it that Tahjèsè has a portal from where ancient spirits ("barem") emerge to sing for brave workers of the earth and lure the curious into long journeys or abductions. One portal leads to Bondoukou in North East Cote d'Ivoire, which is known by alternative historians to be an old city where ancients used rituals prevent outsiders from bringing in violence.

A second portal being evoked here by Eyongakpa is Bakossi, wherein

echoes of the last century resonate. These technologies are imagined together with ancient sacred methods from the Manyu area.

Eyongakpa plays with these portals and ideas of cross fertilization, either between indigenous knowledge systems or techniques. The knowledge concerning these ancient techniques is currently masked and shelved among secret societies in Cameroon.

Electronic interfaces with midi-controlled LED lights and random automation simulate heartbeats and breathing, through which pulse movements interact with the weave. Eyongakpa creates with these landscapes an alternative to the seemingly dead objects. The filaments and networks function as molecules and bond the artwork of organic and inorganic materials that can be brought to life.

Charl Landvreugd

movt. nr 9: Fitting a circle into a square

Justice piety trust – I will maintain – stronger through struggle

This text is the motto of his country of birth (Justice piety trust/ Surinam/ ethnicity), from where he grew up (I will maintain/ The Netherlands /culture) and the city he lives in (stronger through struggle/ Rotterdam/ social.) Based on these assumptions he invites you to search for your motto.

Charl Landvreugd's personal mythology takes hybridity as point of departure and places questions by the notion of ethnicity as an anchor for culture. In stead of defining where one comes from, Landvreugd chooses to focus on where one finds oneself at this moment. A current home. "*movt. nr 9: Fitting a circle into a square*" is a continuation of work that Landvreugd made in which earlier visual material is placed into a different context and merges with new images. The work departs from the notion that one world can simultaneously accommodate different realities and perspectives. The protagonist, Atlantic Transformer, can manifest simultaneously

at different locations. Landvreugd actively searches for the “in-between space” – a reality that accepts a holistic understanding where the spiritual and tangible world are not the only entities to play a role but where there are several mental layers in-between. It is a notion and necessity to give room to multiple dimensions that define how a world view is created. With the assumption that migration is the central issue of the 21st Century, he projects in his work the current understanding of a social-cultural unity toward the future.

Arna Mačkić

Dive into the future

The quotes from the books and films by Sun Ra on the wall lead the viewer into Sun Ra’s way of thinking. The wall forms the foundation for Mačkić’s *Dive into the future*, a two hour performance lecture during which she passes through seven stages - the escape, the adaptation, the memory, the promise, the leap, the confrontation, and the hope - and steps into a dialogue about this with Sun Ra. The transition from one phase to the other, that is where we constantly find ourselves and where we can position ourselves relative to the other in society. With Sun Ra as a mentor, methods are proposed which delve into the future while keeping in mind a new version of the past.

Sulaiman Majali

This garden

The practice of Sulaiman Majali negotiates between constructs of belonging and divergence, between the collective and the individual. He works on the crossroads between sculpture, film and performance and uses a poetic way of combining fiction with reality, and the familiar with what is alien. An important role is played here by Majali’s background, partly British and partly Jordanian. With critical scrutiny he explores the dominant frameworks that determine our definition of ‘the other’. Balancing simultaneously complex and subtle dialogues through the poetic and often theatrical allusion to the future and past; a simultaneous Utopian/Dystopian reflection of societies and their constructs. His works strive to question the relationships between the sculptural object, photographic image and film. Whilst working towards a critical space of integrated references, where he plays in the mythologies of our imagined communities.

In his video work, Sulaiman Majali puts forward different locations such as: the internet as a modern colonized landscape; the green screen as a no man’s land; and the mythical reference to “The Garden of Eden.” He researches a new visual language, in his case referring to ancient Arabic symbolism, and combines this with futuristic and cosmic elements. The different stones in his practice can be interpreted as metaphoric bodies. On the one hand originating from the cosmos and thereby belonging to no-one, on the other hand used to build walls and borders in order to delineate territory and exclude people. In the work of Majali a body can have many forms and implications. In a similar way to Sun Ra, Majali attempts to use mythology to reflect on a society that is out of balance and he questions ideological constructs such as “the West” and “the East” with its assumptions and ascribed connotations.

Pieter Paul Pothoven

Limen

2013 - ongoing, installation with Egyptian bronze mirror (New Kingdom 1570 - 1070 BCE, handle broken and repaired in antiquity, polished May 7, 2013 - April 18, 2016, total labor: 49 hours), bronze casted wall mounting, wall text. Private collection

A limen is a sensory threshold below which a stimulus cannot be perceived. This ancient Egyptian mirror, covered in a thick layer of corrosion, no longer reflected the image of its beholder. Isolated in this way from its viewer, the mirror's meaning was instead rendered through the cultural contextualization inherent in the distribution, conservation and display of ancient artifacts. By removing the corroded surface, the liminal threshold, the mirror's exchange value as an ancient artifact is destroyed; yet through labor, the function of the object and experience of intimacy and engagement with it is reclaimed.

The work of Pothoven is made up of installations, craftsmanlike sculptures, photography and diverse forms of writing and research. Through the study of historical locations, artifacts and sources, he negotiates new relationships between the past and the present, often basing this on the potential usefulness in the present.

Pamela Phatsimo Sunstrum

Sun + Moon

Driven by a fascination for old mythologies and scientific theories, the Botswana born Sunstrum investigates the origin of time, geological concepts and ideas about the universe. Her works on paper, large scale installations and stop-motion films are autobiographical and show the dilemmas of a migrant. After living in Africa, Southeast Asia and the United States Sunstrum developed the alter-ego "Asme" to give shape to her unfixed, evolving independence. Asme tells about transnational identities, human connections and cross-border rituals. Sunstrum's work also expand

into themes around timelessness. Many of the landscapes in her work are rich fantasy reconstructions that she has seen during her travels or has imagined based on her favorite literary references. For *Sun+Moon* she read "Symbols of Power: Adinkras and the Nature of Reality" by James Sylvester Gates Jr. in which he suggests a link between ancient Ghanaian symbols and methods that theoretical physicists use to investigate natural laws. Symmetry plays an important role in this, something that is also expressed in the work of Sunstrum wherein Asme, moves through a geographical interplay of lines. "Asme enables me to investigate the experience of versatility and hybridity so common for people from the African diaspora - we often find ourselves between worlds, between cultures, between histories. As a result of this we develop a 'multiple self.' Asme symbolizes this multiple self image and she functions 'as me' in old rituals and futuristic time travel adventures. She exists in several times and in multiple spaces simultaneously."

Jaroslav (Jaro) Varga

Endism

When there is regime change, it usually comes paired with a typical method of operation: the burning of books; the destruction of information; the removal of "false" evidence and objects. The end of a period is marked and the focus is on the future. In literature these movements are clearly observable and therefore also in every library: a depository for books that are typical of the zeitgeist in relation to the dominant ideology. The books Jaro Varga selected for his work "Endism" originate from one library in Prague and were found after a long search on different shelves and in different sections. One of the books you will encounter is the work by Francis Fukuyama, "The End of History and the Last Man" in which liberal democracy is described as the best possible system to live under. After the 2009 crisis we have come to understand that Fukuyama's hypothesis and prognosis have completely failed. The perspective of "Endism" places the titles in a new context and show how their value

and meaning can change. The many books that herald the end of the world illustrate the speculative character within which history can be interpreted. The artist says about the work, "I separate the cover of the book from its content. Together all these titles form an independent body to be read as a poem or song."

Jaro Varga looks for different ways to reveal the mechanisms through which history is constructed. He often uses stories from Balkan history which he transforms into new narratives.

Studio L A

The exhibition architecture of 'History is His Story' is designed by architects Lorian Beijaert and Arna Mackić who together form Studio L A. Studio L A is devoted to an inclusive society and the role that architecture can play in this. The architects are well acquainted with the oeuvre of Sun Ra and they incorporated his body of thought into the exhibition's design. The golden, mirroring plane is raised and offers new reflections and possibilities. This "solar plane" is inspired by the mythical description of the planet Saturn by Sun Ra. Sun Ra sought another reality because the society he found himself in didn't allow him his place in it. The only way to take his place was to do so outside of the restrictions of planet earth. By taking this distance, he floated, as it were, above the society. Now especially, in a time of a hardened political climate and a battle for space, news and stories, it is important to take a step back, to reflect and to look at alternative stories. Similarly to the space created by Sun Ra, the sun plane offers a space inbetween.

Nest TV

Episode #35 was made by artist and musician Bouba Dola.

Program

An extensive fringe program has been developed for this exhibition. All pertaining information can be found on the website and our social media.

Colophon

History is His Story is a production of Nest Artists: Dean Bowen, Crystal Z Campbell, Em'kal Eyongakpa, Charl Landvreugd, Arna Mačkić, Sulaïman Majali, Pieter Paul Pothoven, Pamela Phatsimo Sunstrum, Jaro Varga
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Image front: Sun Ra
Design: Janneke Hendriks
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they say that history repeats itself
but history is only his story
you haven't heard my story yet
my story is different from his story
my story is not part of history
because history repeats itself
but my story is endless it never repeats itself
why should it?
- Sun Ra

