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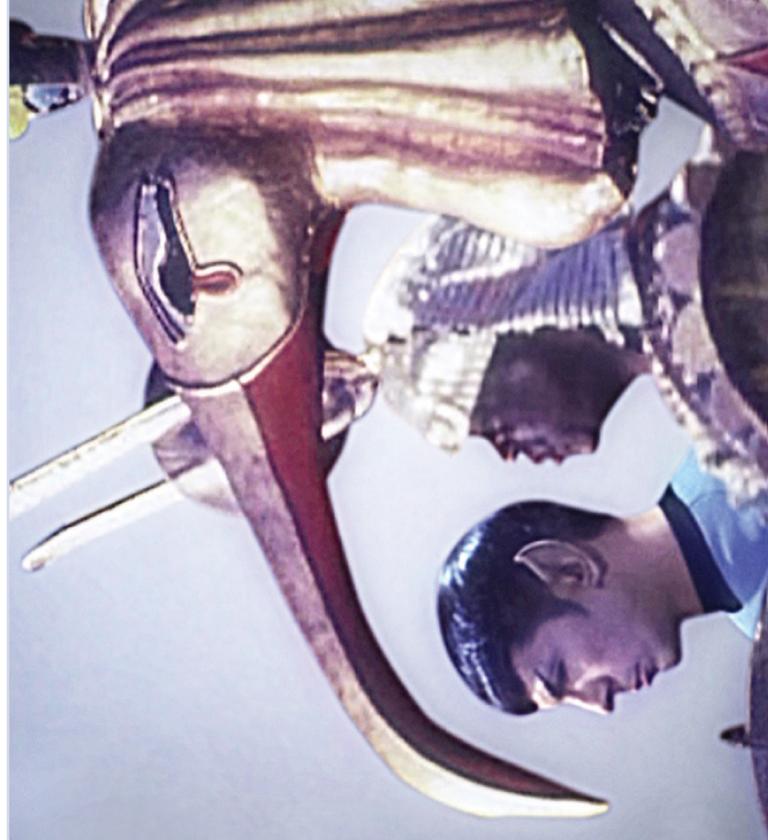
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cover image: Soda_Jerk, *Astro Black: We are the Robots*, 2010, 2-channel video installation with four episodes, 25:24 minutes (still)



Fellow Travelers

organized by Katherine Rochester

September 7 - October 21, 2017

Halil Altindere

Lou Cantor

Amen Feizabadi

Azin Feizabadi

Soda_Jerk

Sun Ra

lonel Talpazan

apexart nyc

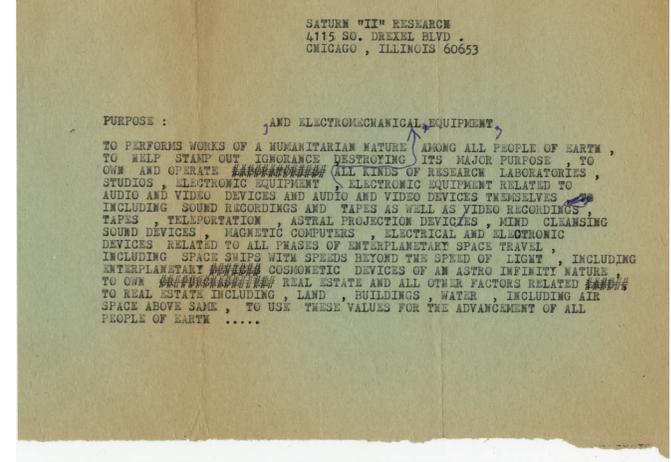


Halil Altindere, *Muhammed Ahmed Faris with Friends #1*, 2016, Oil and acrylic on canvas with LED frame, 15 15/16 x 21 7/16 x 2 3/8 inches

Fellow Travelers

A musician from Saturn. A Syrian Cosmonaut. A Romanian refugee who experienced the supernatural and spent the rest of his life diagramming the event. These are some of the real-life characters in *Fellow Travelers*, an exhibition that initiates an encounter between people displaced by the deterioration of neo-liberal policies around the world. At their most optimistic, these policies generated a vision of scientific progress symbolized by the race for space. While both NASA and the Soviet Space Program considered space a terrain ripe for ideological expansion, artists such as musician-prophet Sun Ra reimagined these paradigms to create utopian solutions for oppressed communities.

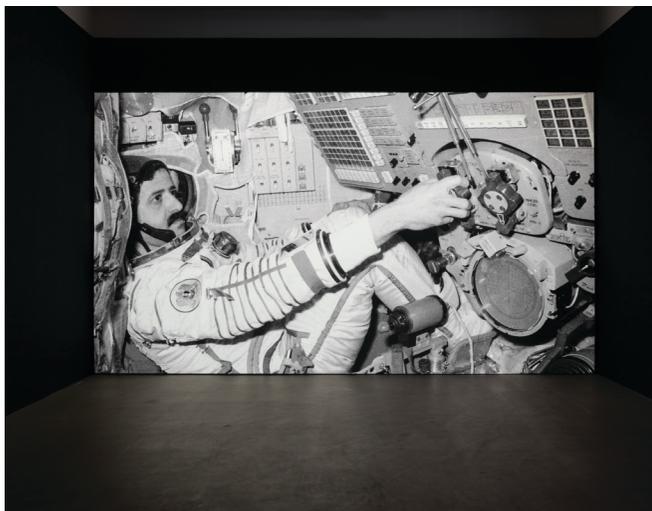
Sun Ra developed his free-wheeling philosophy (later associated with Afrofuturism) traveling from Louisiana to Chicago during the Great Migration in 1947. Adopting the persona of an alien sent from Saturn to resettle black earthlings on a better planet, Sun Ra crafted a mythology that was as deeply engaged with black liberation as it was with galactic travel. This vision took the form of prose, poetry, film, and, of course, pioneering free jazz compositions performed with his band, The Arkestra. Sun Ra believed that music could heal through spiritual vibrations tuned to extraterrestrial frequencies. Impossible to contain and futile to summarize, Sun Ra beams into



Sun Ra, *Saturn Research*, 1957, Paper, 6 1/4 x 9 inches, Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library

the gallery here via a mission statement written in 1957 for his production company, El Saturn Records: "Purpose: To perform works of a humanitarian nature among all people of earth, to help stamp out ignorance destroying its major purpose." These goals would be achieved through the operation of "teleportation, astral projection devices, mind cleansing sound devices, magnetic computers, electrical and electronic devices related to all phases of interplanetary space travel, including space ships with speeds beyond the speed of light, including interplanetary cosmonetic devices of an astro infinity nature," and on and on. This mission is at once an organizational tract and an early entry in a life-long log of creative activity sprung from the experience of being a migrant in his own country. Now, in another moment of mass migration, artists have once again turned to outer space to mitigate earthly catastrophes.

Turkish artist Halil Altindere's *Space Refugee* (2016) revolves around Muhammed Ahmed Faris, who began his career as a cosmonaut in the Syrian-Russian space program. Faris became an opponent of Bashar al-Assad's regime during the Syrian civil war (which began in 2011) and is now a refugee in Turkey. Weaving new layers of science fiction around an already legendary character, Altindere harnesses socialist realism, virtual reality, and expert testimonials to cast Faris as the hero of a new space program whose mission is to resettle unwanted refugees on Mars. The installation offers historical touchstones laced with wildly speculative futurities. An LED-framed painting of Faris beside fellow cosmonauts invokes the Soviet space age while a pseudo-documentary video asks scientists to address the question of the hour: Is there a scientific solution to mass migration? Audiences are invited to explore their resultant proposals



Haili Altindere, *Space Refugee*, 2016, HD color video with sound, 19:59 minutes (installation view from Neuer Berliner Kunstverein, 2016)

through a set of virtual reality goggles that transport viewers to a refugee colony on Mars. As in Sun Ra's equations, the act of imagining space as an outsider's utopia betrays bitter skepticism about ever finding a sense of belonging on earth.

Conversely, German-Iranian filmmaker **Azin Feizabadi** explores just such a possibility. Re-envisioning an ancient Saudi Arabian poem of love and exile as a space odyssey, his feature film, *UCHRONIA* (2017), tells the story of two dark matter aliens who transmute themselves into human bodies in a quest to consummate their love. But the bodies they have chosen are freighted with their own physical, social, and philosophical baggage, deferring their union and entangling them in a series of terrestrial problems that they struggle to understand. For *Fellow Travelers*, Azin Feizabadi performed a film reading that staged *UCHRONIA*



Azin Feizabadi, *UCHRONIA*, 2017, film, approx. 90 minutes (still)

as an intimate lecture-performance. This one-time event was connected back to the gallery via a sound installation adapted from the film's original score.

Arranged by Iranian-born composer **Amen Feizabadi**, *UCHRONIA*'s music functions both narratively and conceptually, scaling the distance of intergalactic travel onto the no less daunting vicissitudes of human relations. The music is composed entirely for strings. Throughout, the reedy lament of the Iranian *kamâncheh* (a bowed stringed instrument) is occasionally joined by a classical string quartet, drawing eastern and western musical traditions into an encounter echoed in the plot of the film. But the binary never holds for long. Ripples of alien sound trouble national traditions and a new sonic body emerges from a palette of acoustic improvisation. This haptic intimacy is extended to the visitor in the form of three vinyl records which may be



Lou Cantor, *Join the Journey*, 2017, Digital rendering

played at will on a console in the gallery. Each record features a sonic character profile from the film. Retaining its original function as a connective agent, *UCHRONIA*'s music acts as a relay between spectator and filmic image.

While these projects posit travel as a gesture of resistance, Polish-German collective **Lou Cantor** explores movement as a lucrative commodity. A traffic barrier topped with a human-sized athlete printed on mirrored glass dissects the



Ionel Talpazan, *Diagram of a UFO #1*, 1996-2013, Oil stick, colored pencil, and marker on paper, 36 x 72 inches

gallery. Taken alone, the traffic blocker might pass as an ambiguous object – a mechanism for control whose very presence indicates the advent of healthy protest. But the figure atop (a generic model from an ad) conforms to, rather than disrupts, the flow of capital that protestors often seek to challenge. With this gesture, Lou Cantor interrogates the cynical tactics of sportswear advertising, which often exploits the strictures of urban life to sell products that promise limitless mobility. Whether selling a “Supernova” boost (Adidas) or “Lunarlon” mesh (Nike), the biggest sportswear retailers market movement in the language of science fiction. “Torsion Systems” and “Alphabounce” technology suggest that shoes are engineered like spaceships. Analogizing an after-work jog to a lunar mission, such campaigns assure us that attaining freedom is simply a matter of investing in the right gear.

But journeys to freedom are rarely accompanied by special equipment. When Romanian-born, New York-based artist **Ionel Talpazan** fled Nicolae Ceausescu's Romania in 1987, he swam across the Danube river to the Ukraine with only the memory of a childhood UFO encounter that had become the source of a vital creative practice. Sandwiched between the trauma of an abusive childhood in a totalitarian state and his eventual internment in a Ukrainian refugee camp, the encounter stood out as an extraordinary moment of peace amid unusual hardship. With no formal training, Talpazan began creating diagrams of flying saucers. The two included here are brightly colored and thickly traced. A legend, handwritten in Romanian, offers a high-tech annotation. Indeed, the further away Talpazan's UFO encounter receded, the richer his understanding of the experience became. What he had described as a diffuse light came back to him later in sharply focused dreams. Every new drawing seemed to clarify information disseminated

long ago in a time-bending feat of creative displacement. In his own way, Ionel Talpazan seems to have shared a revelation that Sun Ra preached in the opening minutes of his film, *Space is the Place* (1974): “The first thing to do is to consider time as officially ended. We work on the other side of time.”

The other side of time is precisely where Australian collective **Soda Jerk** drops us. Shown here in four parts, their video cycle, *Astro Black*, pays tribute to Sun Ra's radical impact on music while modelling sampling as a form of time travel. It all begins normally enough (if you've seen *Space is the Place*). It's Chicago, 1945. Sun Ra plays the piano in a smoky club. Defying convention (and audience requests), Sun Ra rips open the space-time continuum with a thundering barrage of finger work. From here, he coasts around time with Spock, making consciousness-altering appearances at important moments in history: the moon landing in 1968; a Kraftwerk concert in Düsseldorf in 1977; a protest march with Public Enemy at the end of the world (in 1988). This is revisionist history at its finest, putting the major players in place with a splice of the film strip (or a clip of the digital scissors) and inserting the presence of radical instigators into a riot of sci-fi civil rights. The resulting anthem is a blend of jazz, funk, electro, and hip hop. As in *UCHRONIA*, music is narratively, thematically, and structurally crucial to *Astro Black*. The cycle plays on a two-channel feed arranged to resemble a pair of turntables, with one monitor spinning the image of a record while the other channel plays. The flipping and switching on the monitors mirrors the mixing and sampling in the videos. Together, they spin a speculative history that, in Sun Ra's words, “is all part of another tomorrow.”

As rivals that have lain dormant since the Cold War enter a proxy battle in Syria and climate change accelerates, mass migration has become the humanitarian crisis of our times. The allure of other galaxies when our own planet seems stretched to capacity is undeniable. But outer space may be more viable as a metaphor than an exit plan. As these artists attest, it can provide us with just enough alienation to view our actions on earth from a critical distance. From Afonauts to Cosmonauts, *Fellow Travelers* affirms that art is a tool for testing limits, crossing boundaries, and providing a platform for voices of dissent.

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