

apexart

2017-18 Unsolicited Exhibition Proposal by
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Fellow Travelers

A musician from Saturn; A Syrian Cosmonaut; A woman named Napuli Paul Langa, who crossed an ocean to seek asylum and now refuses to take another step. 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 utopic solutions for oppressed communities.

Sun Ra developed his free-wheeling philosophy (later associated with Afrofuturism) while 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 galactic travel. Now, in another moment of mass migration, artists have once again turned to outer space in order to mitigate earthly catastrophes.

Turkish artist Halil Altindere's *Space Refugee* (2016) revolves around Muhammed Ahmed Faris, who began as a cosmonaut in the Syrian-Russian space program, became an opponent of Assad's regime, and is now a refugee in Turkey. Weaving new layers of science fiction around an already legendary character, Altindere uses socialist realism, bespoke spacesuits, augmented reality, and expert testimonials to cast Faris as the hero of a new space program whose mission is to resettle unwanted refugees on Mars. As in Sun Ra's equations, the act of imagining space as an outsider's utopia betrays bitter cynicism about ever finding a sense of belonging on earth.

Conversely, Berlin based artist Azin Fezabadi explores just such a possibility. Re-envisioning an ancient Saudi Arabian poem of love and exile as a space odyssey, his film *Uchronia* (2016) tells the story of two aliens looking for human bodies in order to finally consummate their love.

While these projects posit travel as a gesture of resistance, others explore the refusal to leave as a form of protest. Artist duo Lou Cantor explores instances of spontaneous collective action. Inspired by travelers on a Swedish airline who recently thwarted the deportation of a fellow passenger by refusing to fasten their seatbelts, Lou Cantor asks: which small gestures can destabilize the system? Sudanese refugee-turned-activist Napuli Paul Langa attempted to find out. Her occupation of a tree in central Berlin is the subject of Berlin-based artist Tobias Zielony's ongoing project, *The Citizen* (2015). Since February 2014 Zielony has followed refugee activists in Hamburg and Berlin, often giving them his camera so that they can represent themselves and their peers on their own terms.

From Afronauts to Cosmonauts, *Fellow Travelers* affirms that art is a tool for testing limits, crossing boundaries, and providing a refuge for voices of dissent. The subjects of these artworks may be disenfranchised but through their involvement in these projects they regain some form of representation.

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