

Nottingham  
Contemporary



Alien  
Encounters

Exhibition Notes 10 Oct – 31 Dec 2015

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# Alien Encounters

10 October – 31 December 2015

Alien Encounters is a series of four inter-related solo exhibitions – each a new production. All use performance and filmmaking to explore identity and difference, reality and fiction, in fluid, overlapping ways. Social norms and accepted histories are questioned and transformed through biographies and other narratives, real and imagined, that subvert accepted wisdom. The artists use humour and excess to confront serious political and moral questions affecting individuals, communities and nation-states.

The season evolved from discussions between Nottingham Contemporary's curatorial team and the Collabor8 collective. It coincides with *Circuit:Affinity*, our arts festival curated for and by young people.

## *Gallery 1*

### **Rana Hamadeh**

#### **The Fugitive Image**

Rana Hamadeh's lecture-based plays, installations, texts and game-like structures explore the idea of "alienness" as a way to address urgent issues in the Arab and wider world today. A recurring concern of hers is how the legacies of colonialism continue to shape an often traumatic political present. Her work interweaves images and narratives, taking us on journeys through outer-space, land-sea thresholds, migration flows, and mining and transport histories, as well as state-sponsored, corporate and military sites of violence. Hamadeh's work scrutinizes the relationship between criminology, epidemiology and theatre.

For her first solo exhibition in the UK, Hamadeh presents the latest chapter of her long-term project *Alien Encounters*, which was inspired by Sun Ra's film *Space is the Place* (1974). In *The Fugitive Image*, the artist presents the set of her new filmed-play, *The Sleepwalkers*, specially commissioned for this exhibition, and shot in *The Space* at Nottingham Contemporary. In the exhibition, the set is presented as a sculptural re-interpretation of the film.

The *Sleepwalkers'* point of departure is Hamadeh's interest in the genre of legal spectacle - whose origins lay in Soviet theatre and cinema of the 1920s - as discussed

by American scholar Julie A. Cassiday in her book *The Enemy on Trial* (2000). In her filmed-play, *Hamadeh* revisits the story of the infamous 1920s serial killers, sisters Raya and Sakina - the first women to be sentenced to execution by a court of law in Egypt's modern history. Their execution in Alexandria coincided with Egypt's transition to independence from British colonial rule. The two sisters and their husbands were found guilty of the murders of 17 women, most of whom were prostitutes. Since their deaths in 1921 a large number of plays, television series and books have been made about them, turning them into the epitome of female monstrosity within Arabic popular culture. Their behaviour came to be associated with the political turmoil of the time. They were viewed as a perverse product of colonialism, while also attracting urban prejudice and suspicion at that time, against people who migrated from rural areas to cities.

By rewriting their history, *Hamadeh* uses the figures of Rayya and Sakina as a framework to explore Egypt and the wider Arab world today, including the persistent tension between modernity and rural traditions, gender inequality in the legal system, and the recurrence of military coups and states of emergency. *The Sleepwalkers* aims to generate an alternative archive for understanding histories of injustice.

The sets and props used in the making of *Hamadeh's* film appear as sculptures and installations and are shown with extracts of the unedited film. Each panel represents some of the film's protagonists – *The Villains*, *The State*

represented by the character of a whirling trickster, and The Colonizer. Hamadeh's coded aesthetics are revealed through the intricate association of images and letters on the panels. The film and the installation draw on Russian Constructivist art, and German Expressionist cinema of the 1910s and 1920s, as well as Marcel Duchamp's iconic work *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* (1915-23), also known as *The Large Glass*.

*The Fugitive Image* is a stage without actors, representing Hamadeh's web-like approach to complex and layered histories.

*The Sleepwalkers* is a co-commission by Nottingham Contemporary, The Showroom (London) and Institute of Modern Art (Brisbane), in collaboration with Flat Time House (London) and Primary (Nottingham).



Rana Hamadeh, *The Sleepwalkers*, 2015. Film still. Courtesy of the artist.

## *Gallery 2*

### **Sun Ra: The Cosmo Man**

Exhibition design by Nadia Lauro

Sun Ra was an extraordinary musician, poet and thinker. He is both a seminal figure in the development of Free Jazz (alongside Ornette Coleman, John Coltrane, Charles Mingus and Cecil Taylor) and a key pioneer of Afrofuturism. Sun Ra's influence continues to run through music beyond jazz, from Funk to Detroit Techno. He has also been a touchstone for visual artists, including Mike Kelley, Black Audio Film Collective, The Otolith Group, Glenn Ligon, Lili Reynaud-Dewar and Rana Hamadeh.

This is first exhibition in the UK to present Sun Ra as a total artist – visual, sonic, literary, theological and philosophical. It is set within an exhibition design created by acclaimed designer Nadia Lauro.

Although he always claimed to have come from Saturn, Sun Ra was born in 1914 in segregated Birmingham, Alabama. In 1952 he had his name legally changed from Herman Poole Blount – derived from masters of his slave ancestors – to Le Sonny'r Ra, subsequently shortened to Sun Ra, which was inspired by Ra, the ancient Egyptian sun god. As descendants of slaves – who had been forcibly removed from another continent and defined by law as chattel – African-Americans were, literally, aliens in America, Sun Ra argued.

In 1946 Sun Ra moved to Chicago – the centre of African-American political activism and fringe movements at the time – where he flourished as a musician and bandleader over the next fifteen years. There, he founded one of jazz's last major big bands and created his own record label, El Saturn Records, in 1955 with his business partner Alton Abraham. The band – which still performs today as the Sun Ra Arkestra under the direction of Marshall Allen – constantly changed name, reflecting the improvisatory and multifaceted nature of Sun Ra's music and his thinking: the Astro-Infinity Arkestra, the Cosmo Swing Arkestra, the Intergalactic Myth Science Solar Arkestra, etc.

Sun Ra's interest in the cosmos coincided with the beginning of the Space Race between the US and the Soviet Union. But instead of it standing for the global contest between the forces of Communism and Capitalist Democracy, Sun Ra's cosmic futurism offered a powerful political allegory for black emancipation from white supremacism in America.

As well as playing the piano, the synthesiser and other handmade instruments, Sun Ra composed hundreds of songs, most of which were recorded for El Saturn Records. Owning his own label gave Ra the freedom to release hundreds of LPs, fully controlling the outcome as well as the band's public image. Ra himself was closely involved in the design of the album covers, sometimes drawing the artwork himself. Many of these are presented in this exhibition. During the Chicago

period of the label (1955-1961), other Chicago-based artists contributed album cover designs, such as Claude Dangerfield and James Bryant.

In 1961 Ra and his band moved to New York, basing themselves in the Lower East Side until 1968. From 1966 they secured a regular night at the well-known club Slug's where the eclectic audience included Dizzy Gillespie, Thelonious Monk, Andy Warhol, Allen Ginsberg and William Burroughs, bringing Sun Ra and his Archestra increased visibility across the cultural avant-garde.

Ra's interest in the totality of the image the band projected developed further at this time. They wore opulent costumes on stage inspired by both outer space and ancient Egypt. Sun Ra's transformation from second-class citizen to space shaman was complete.

In 1968 Sun Ra and the Archestra moved to Philadelphia. Known for long, exhilarating performances that conveyed a sense of infinity, their music by then had altered the conventions of jazz. Fixed chord changes and tempos were broken down and done away with.

As a young man in Birmingham, Ra would preach his own readings of the Bible, reinterpreted from an African-American perspective on street corners. Later he melded Biblical ideas with influences from Freemasonry, the Kabbalah, numerology, psychic phenomena, the occult and ancient Egypt. Central to his syncretic philosophy was the belief that black people the world over are the direct descendants of Ancient Egypt – the most advanced

civilisation of its day. In the 1950s, he co-founded a secret society called Thmei Research – also referred to as Infinity Inc or Saturn Research – for the research, development and dissemination of technological / spiritual truths. At this time Ra was influenced by the Black Muslim movements of the 1950s and 60s and supported the Black Arts Movement, the artistic strand of the Black Power movement. Sun Ra's poetry, which he self-published, has only recently become better known.

In 1972 Ra conceived and starred in a feature film, *Space Is the Place*, which proposes an exodus of African-Americans into outer space to escape racial injustice, presented on continuous loop in this exhibition. Witty, outrageous and politically trenchant, it remains the ultimate statement of his Afrofuturist mythopoetics.

*This exhibition is curated by Irene Aristizábal and made possible with the generous loans by John Corbett, Christopher Trent, Graham Lock, Sun Ra LCC and the Special Collections Research Center from the University of Chicago Library.*



Sun Ra and his Solar Arkestra  
Visits Planet Earth, LP cover issued  
in 1966 by Saturn Records.

### *Gallery 3*

## **Pauline Boudry / Renate Lorenz**

### **In Memoriam to Identity**

Pauline Boudry and Renate Lorenz have been collaborating since 2004. Their performance-based films and installations investigate marginalised histories through appropriation and re-enactment. Film is their primary medium, becoming in their hands a critical context for presenting their Queer subjects. The performers in their films are usually other artists and filmmakers, or friends, conveying a sense of solidarity, intimacy and community.

For their exhibition at Nottingham Contemporary the artist-duo presents *I Want*, a specially commissioned film. It appropriates texts of punk poet/novelist Kathy Acker and the online chats of American Army whistleblower Chelsea Manning. The film takes place in an empty nightclub, where the disco lights recall the lights of a searching helicopter. Filmed with two cameras in one take, and projected across two screens, the subject of the work appears split or doubled.

Boudry and Lorenz's film echoes Acker's own poetic strategies, including her use of pre-existing texts, and the sense of switching identities that is a feature of her work. The performer is American artist Sharon Hayes, whose own work questions identity and history from a Queer perspective, using performance and historical re-

enactment. In *I Want*, Hayes slides between being Kathy Acker and Chelsea Manning. Manning was convicted in July 2013 for leaking classified American military and diplomatic documents on WikiLeaks. Born a man, Manning announced her transgender identity and her desire to undergo a hormone replacement therapy the day after she was sentenced. Her words shed light on how gender and sexuality are dealt with in the military context, as well as criticising what she regards as military strategy in the service of neo-imperialist aims.

Presented in between screenings of *I Want*, *Opaque* (2014) deals with the idea of the enemy as discussed by French writer Jean Genet (1910-1986) in his famous 1970 May Day speech in support of the Black Panthers at Yale University. Genet is concerned with how to resist an enemy that does not declare itself, or make itself visible. In *Opaque*, two performers are inside the remnants of an old public swimming pool. The performers claim to be representatives of an underground organisation. Backdrop curtains and dry ice evoke warfare, political demonstrations and Queer states of being.



Pauline Boudry & Renate Lorenz,  
*Opaque*, 2014. Performance: Ginger  
Brooks Takahashi, Werner Hirsch.  
Courtesy the artists, Ellen de  
Buijine Projects and Marcelle Alix.

## *Gallery 4*

### **Danai Anesiadou**

**"Don't commit suicide just because  
you are afraid of death"**

Danai Anesiadou works across performance, installation and video. These are combined to create surreal netherworlds alluding to classical myths, biblical stories, pop culture, a fascination with avant garde cinema, and her personal experience.

Born in 1970s Germany to Greek parents and raised in Belgium, Anesiadou has recently returned to Greece. Reflecting on her experience as a recently repatriated person in a turbulent and uncertain political, social and financial climate, Anesiadou's first UK solo exhibition explores her self-proclaimed sense of "in-betweenness". The title of the exhibition is taken from the words of Jean-Claude Juncker, President of the European Union. Juncker was trying, unsuccessfully, to persuade the Greek people to agree to the punitive conditions, imposed by the European Union in return for financial bailout, in the referendum of July 2015.

Anesiadou's work is structured around spontaneous chains of associations. In this exhibition, the wall installation presents a random and eclectic selection of classical paintings depicting states of purgatory alongside imagery from Jacques Demy's darkly surreal 1970 musical

Peau D'Ane (Donkey Skin), Eric Rohmer's film *Perceval Le Gallois* (1978) and a personal memento. Anesiadou creates here an overload of information enhanced by plastic elements of architectural ornamentation and body parts, commonly used in film and theatre sets.

Covering the walls are temporary portraits of Anesiadou's friends that haven't fled the country in the midst of the current crisis. Thich take the form of plastic vacuumed sculptures filled with their personal belongings.

An intimate space in the middle of the gallery has been built out of the last existing slabs of red marble from Eretria in the Greek island of Evia. Close-up images of this same marble appear in the monumental collage covering the walls. The nobility of marble - traditionally used in sculpture – is turned into a carnal, abject image. Anesiadou intentionally chose to use red marble instead of traditional white marble playing with 18th century German art historian Wincklemann's idea that classical art and architecture is wrongly thought of as being white.

This information overload of histories will be untangled during the artist's performance on 11 December when she will resuscitate the exhibition.

Nottingham Contemporary's Collabor8 Collective are part of Circuit, a national programme connecting 15 – 25 year olds to the arts in galleries and museums. Led by Tate and Funded by Paul Hamlyn Foundation.

Look out for the Collabor8 collective zine – for an alternative view on the exhibitions.



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Screaming with passion,  
the Queen of Hearts  
beheading of the  
Cheshire Cat

The executioner's argument  
was,

that you couldn't cut off a  
head unless there was a body  
to cut it off from:

The king's argument was,  
that anything that had a head  
could be beheaded and that  
you weren't to talk nonsense.

The Queen's argument was,  
that if something wasn't done  
soon he in less than no time  
she'd have everybody execut-  
ed all round.

**OFF  
WITH HIS  
HEAD!**

**OFF  
WITH HIS  
HEAD!**

*Cover image:* Image courtesy of Danai Anesiadou

*Back image:* Rana Hamadeh, Can You Make a Pet of Him Like a Bird or Put  
Him on a Leash For Your Girls? (detail), Western Front, 2015.  
Photo by Maegan Hill Carroll.



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