

1971, Sun Ra in Egypt

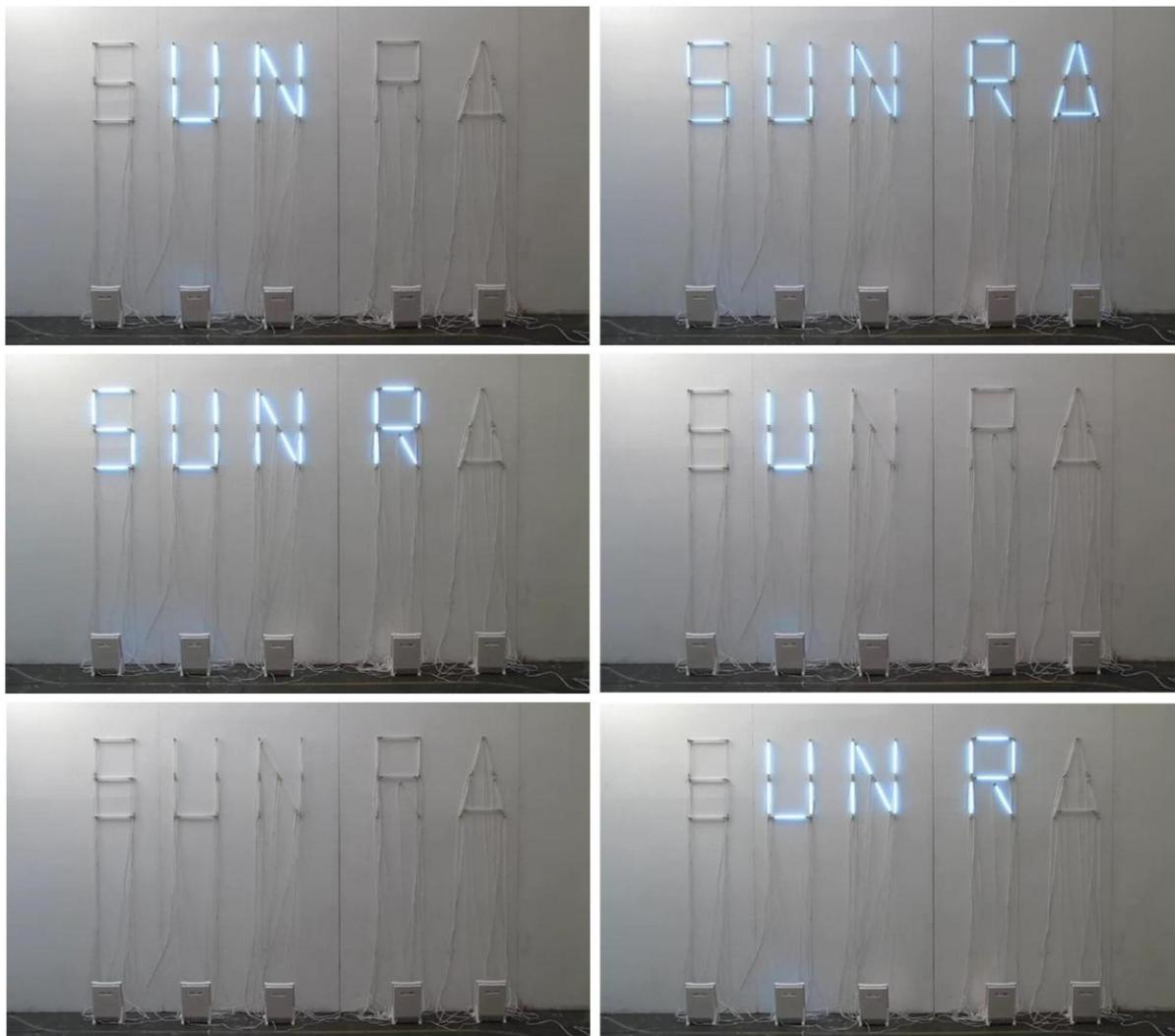
Tom Bogaert

Bogaert's "1971, Sun Ra in Egypt" is an ongoing research project based on the life and work of Sun Ra that exists as a series of performances, lectures, installations, videos, art objects, and a related publication. The project takes as its starting point Sun Ra's 1971 visit to Egypt, and many of the related works playfully insert Sun Ra's life and legacy into the conceptual, pop, and minimalist *zeitgeist* of the New York art world of the 1960s and 1970s.

Tom Bogaert came to art over a decade ago after practicing refugee law. His artistic practice is organized through long-term research projects that often examine the intersection of humanism and human rights, politics and entertainment, and art and propaganda. Bogaert moved to Amman in 2009 and has since produced a series of works under a project called "Impression, proche orient," which draws from his experience as a European living in the Middle East and uses irony and criticism to interrogate the layers of his own understanding of contemporary issues throughout the region.



M E D R A R



"Monument" 1 for Sun Ra, 2014

27 tanning lamps, mechanical timers, 300 x 200 x 30 cm

The legendary American jazz pioneer, mystic, poet, and philosopher Sun Ra was born Herman Poole Blount, but changed his name to Le Sony'r Ra after a visionary experience led him to believe that he came from the planet Saturn. From then on, Sun Ra was fascinated by both outer space and ancient Egypt, and incorporation of the Egyptian sun god Ra into his name was the first of his many invocations of ancient Egypt's culture and beliefs. Famous for his music as much as his eccentricity, Sun Ra's unique sonic productions reflected his mix of new age mysticism, black nationalism, Freemasonry, Kabbalah, Rosicrucianism, and other non-Western cosmologies. From the mid-1950s until his death in 1993, Sun Ra led a band called "The Arkestra", which continues to perform its eccentric mix of free jazz, bop, and electronic music under the leadership of Marshall Allen.

In "Monument" 1 for Sun Ra (2014), Tom Bogaert draws inspiration from Dan Flavin's "monuments" for V. Tatlin (1964-90) a series of fluorescent tower-like compositions, the titles of which propose a tribute to Russian avant-gardist Vladimir Tatlin and his unrealized spiral tower *Monument to the Third International* (1920). Of the series, Flavin confessed, "I always use 'monuments' in quotes to emphasize the ironic humor of temporary monuments. These 'monuments' only survive as long as the light system is useful (2,100 hours)." Just as Flavin's sculpture brings Tatlin's revolutionary Constructivist tower down to earth through his use of commercial lights, Bogaert's "Monument" 1 for Sun Ra (2014) plays on the heliocentric worlds of Sun Ra with what has become a fetishistic substitute for sun—the tanning lamp.

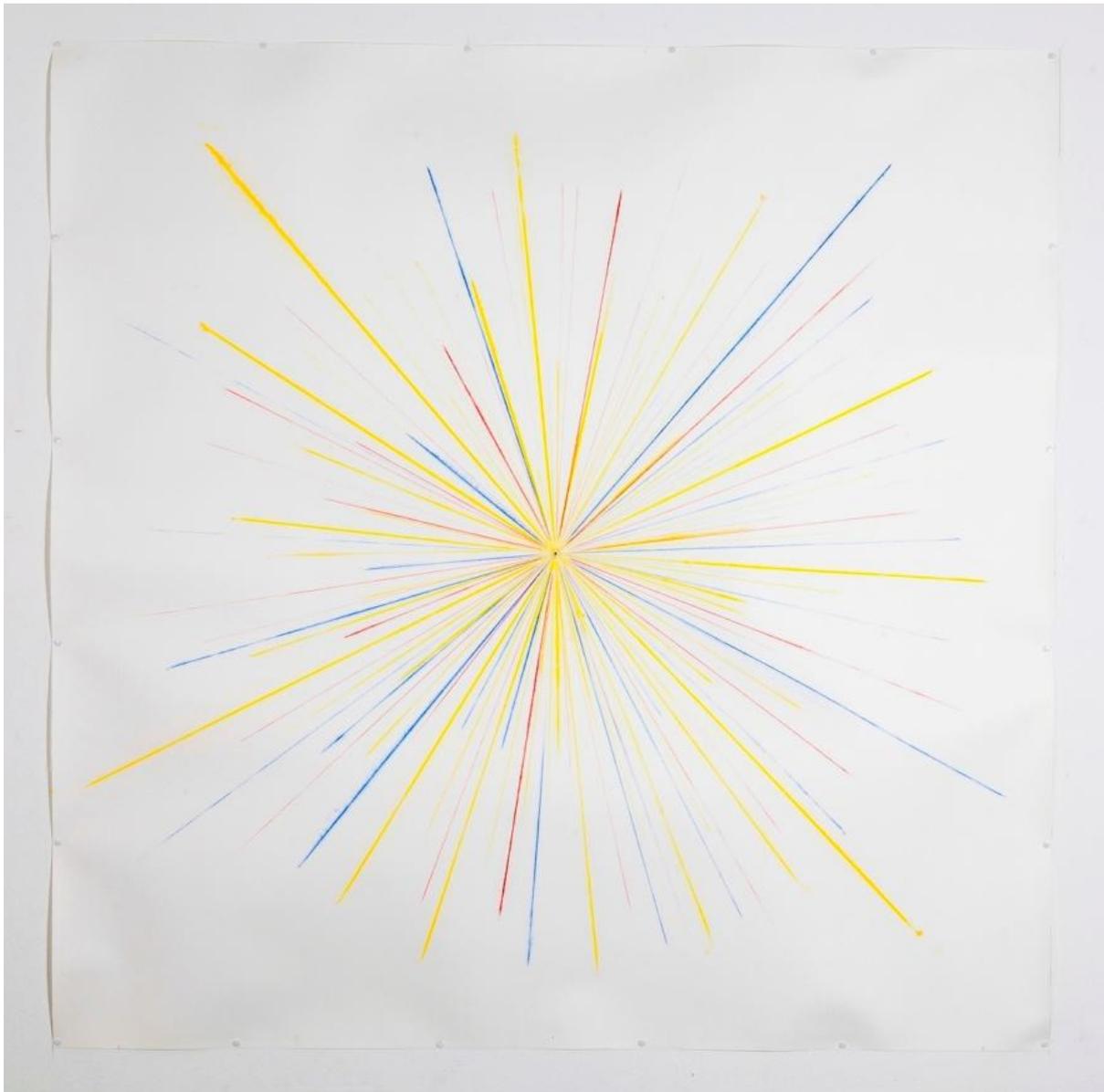


The Broken Light Year, 2014

Folded Mylar sun shields, dimensions variable

In 1922, when Sun Ra was just eight years old, the tomb of King Tutankhamen was opened in Luxor. For days and weeks following the event, newspapers around the world detailed the discovery of a mummy and incredible riches. This early event was formative for Sun Ra. As his biographer John Szwed has written, "He fell under Egypt's spell - became obsessed, some might say...but it was an honorable obsession, one shared by Napoleon, Debussy, Verdi, and Mozart... [and] secret societies like the Freemasons."

The Broken Light Year (2014) borrows its title from Walter De Maria's *The Broken Kilometer* (1979), in which five hundred solid brass rods, each two meters in length, are spaced with mathematical precision in five rows. In *The Broken Light Year* (2014), Bogaert mimics De Maria's severe minimalism but uses pop art's appropriation of everyday objects—here, he employs the car sun shields that literally break the path of the sun's rays. Their bright colors, in red, gold, and blue, recall the colors of Tutankhamen's burial mask, while their exotic metallic texture evokes the eccentric uniforms worn by Sun Ra and his Arkestra.



Wall Drawing 4.1, 2014

Powdered pigment on wall, variable dimensions
Studio sketch on paper (above), photo: Nathalie Rebholz

Wall Drawing 4.1 (2014) is comprised of hundreds of red, gold, and blue lines of varying length that emanate outward from one central point using a chalk snap line, a tool first used by ancient Egyptians to create straight lines on flat surfaces. In this work, Bogaert takes inspiration from Sol LeWitt's *Wall Drawing 51* (1970) which illustrates "all architectural points connected by straight lines" using simple but technically precise means. In LeWitt's installation, each corner of the walls is connected to any and all surrounding architectural details with a straight blue chalk line in a minimalist web of sharp lines that draws attention to every spatial relationship that might have once gone unnoticed.

Bogaert's *Wall Drawing 4.1* (2014) uses a single center point and red, yellow and blue pigment to create a sunburst-like wall drawing, referencing Sun Ra's heliocentric philosophies and obsession with outer space. Bogaert's installation also recalls a number of his related interventions in which he has used snap lines to make similar mural-like street drawings.



Sputnik Power, 2014

Sound installation, dimensions variable

photo: Nathalie Rebholz

In the early 1950s, the moon became a plausible goal for space travel and Sun Ra was fascinated by the possibility—in fact, he talked about it so much that some musicians took to calling him “the moon man.” Around this time, Sun Ra also claimed to have been abducted by aliens who transported him to Saturn (he told this story many times with remarkable consistency in detail). In the summer of 1969, when the world was excitedly awaiting the flight of Apollo 11, *Esquire* magazine asked contemporary popular figures for their suggestions for the first words on the moon. Sun Ra, then at the height of his fame, eagerly penned a poem in response:

*Reality has touched against myth
Humanity can move to achieve the impossible
Because when you've achieved one impossible the others
Come together to be with their brother, the first impossible
Borrowed from the rim of the myth
Happy Space Age To You....*

Sputnik Power (2014) refers to Sun Ra’s belief in “Pyramid Power,” the alleged supernatural or paranormal properties of the Egyptian pyramids and objects of similar shape. With this power, even model pyramids are said to preserve foods, sharpen razor blades, improve health, function as idea incubators, and trigger sexual urges—among a number of other dramatic effects. Sun Ra was a strong believer in “Pyramid Power” and was often seen wearing a copper wire “pyramid hat.”



Greatest Hits (Tribute to Sun Ra), 2013–14

Vinyl records, glue, 30 x 20 x 10 cm (approx.)
photo: Nathalie Rebholz

Intrigued by the oil-based texture of vinyl records, Tom Bogaert began his practice of cutting up old vinyl records over a decade ago when living in Brooklyn, and the title of the series comes from the title of the first record he ever cut, Elton John's "Greatest Hits." As his practice developed, Bogaert came to appreciate how the vinyl records dictate how they can be cut: their round shape and concentric grooves make it almost impossible to cut a straight edge, so the sculptures often take on an organic and improvised form, which Bogaert crowns at the top with the album's center label.

The Sun Ra-related sculptures that join the series resulted from Bogaert's ongoing performances and lectures about the life and work of Sun Ra. While listening to Sun Ra's music on a turntable, the artist cuts up Sun Ra's records with a fish scissors and composes trophy-like sculptures with a hot glue gun. After the performances, Bogaert stages interventions in Egyptian souvenir shops by placing his vinyl trophy among other trinkets and fake artifacts (one such intervention took place in the display window of the Mena House Hotel, where Sun Ra spent his entire stay in Giza.)

The Sun Ra records that Bogaert cuts up are often regarded with reverence, and occasionally audience members have reacted with outrage when he starts snipping at them in his performance. These people assume that because they are vinyl, the records must be original and therefore extremely rare and irreplaceable. Bogaert, however, takes them for what they are—they are in fact copies of bootlegged copies, inauthentic reproductions that have become ubiquitous in record stores around the world. They are most certainly not original records, and for Bogaert, even the music sounds different. As a kind of personal solution to this injustice, Bogaert repurposes these records by making them into trophies—offering a kind of poetic tribute or symbolic compensation for the awards and recognition that Sun Ra lacked in his lifetime.



Greatest Hits (Tribute to Sun Ra), 2013–14
Installation view, Mena House Hotel, Giza, 2014
photo: Tom Bogaert



Sound and Light, 2014–ongoing

Video (work in progress)

photos: Giza, Egypt, February 11, 2014

Every evening since 1961, multicolored lights of changing intensity are directed against the facade of the pyramids and the sphinx, synchronized with a soundtrack by Halim El-Dabh and accompanied by a dramatized history of the site as narrated by Omar Sharif. Bogaert's work-in-progress video shows daytime and nighttime footage of the light show's technical setup amid a sci-fi-worthy lunar landscape. Playing with the color and rhythm of these light shows in relation to Sun Ra's work and performance, Bogaert will continue to develop the video to incorporate computer animation as well as music by Sun Ra.





Sun Ra Was Here, 2014

Video (work in progress)

Stills from a YouTube video "Sun Ra in Egypt and Italy"

In the video *Sun Ra Was Here* (2014), Tom Bogaert follows a local tour guide on a fictitious "Sun Ra Pyramids Tour" through Giza and Cairo. The video and tour draws on the artist's research in Egypt, Italy, and Germany in 2013 and 2014, in the course of which he attended an Arkestra concert and had multiple interviews and conversations with Hartmut Geerken, a free jazz artist who had originally invited Sun Ra to come to Egypt, Marshall Allen, the longtime Arkestra bandleader, and Ahmed Aladdin the grandson of Egyptian drummer and jazz musician Salah Ragab, who collaborated with Sun Ra in several performances in Egypt.

During their stay in Egypt in December 1971, Sun Ra and his Arkestra famously visited the Giza plateau, a complex of ancient monuments that includes three pyramids, the Great Sphinx, several cemeteries, and a workers' village. The "Sun Ra Pyramids Tour" visits these "must see" places relating to Sun Ra's epic sojourn. Among these sites are the gate near the Sphinx that figures prominently in the only remaining footage of the visit (above), the king's chamber inside the Great Pyramid where, as the story has it, the lights went out upon Sun Ra's arrival, and the spots where Sun Ra and the Arkestra worked and played—from the Mena House Hotel where he composed poetry, to the Balloon Theater, the American University, Geerkens' Heliopolis villa, and the Versailles nightclub in Zamalek.

Bogaert uses the video to reflect on the few oral histories, films, and photos that offer clues to Sun Ra's experience in Cairo. On one hand, the dearth of information seems commensurate with Sun Ra's outward attitude toward his legacy and toward documenting his own life. "They ain't supposed to know it," Sun Ra replied when asked if people would know his story in four thousand years. "If they ain't going to live forever, they don't need to know it." And yet Sun Ra also complained that his work had been overlooked in other ways. Bogaert's project opens up these overlooked moments in Sun Ra's history and, in the absence of substantial documentation of this period, approaches them with a speculative and imaginative spirit akin to Sun Ra's own.



The Sun Ra Mobile Music Library, 2013-ongoing

Installation view, Townhouse Gallery, Cairo, 2013

photo: Dina Kafafi

The Sun Ra Mobile Music Library is a collection of music, video, and printed matter that reveals Bogaert's ongoing attempt to survey Sun Ra's legacy. The library is a rotating collection of books, catalogs, journals, photographs, vinyl records, cassettes, CDs, pamphlets, magazines, and ephemera, along with audio and video relating Sun Ra's infatuation with Egypt and space. It includes El Saturn Research fanzines, LPs (with cover art designed by members of the Sun Ra Arkestra), assorted poetry and writings by Sun Ra, and footage of the Sun Ra Arkestra performing in Egypt and Italy.

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