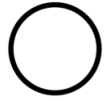


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TOM
BOGAERT - -
INTERNATIONAL
HUMANITARIA
ACTIVIST,
ARTIST

April 22, 2014

by boyuan



I received an email over a year ago that I was intrigued by, but didn't quite believe was real. Tom Bogaert, a then Cairo-based visual artist, asked to use an [article that I had written for Revive Music on Sun Ra](#) for an multimedia installation in Egypt on the iconic jazz composer, bandleader, and musician who had a mysterious and poorly recorded transformation in Egypt, and Tom wanted to uncover it. As I watched the Sun Ra project progress, as Tom was making headway into connecting with music historians and former Sun Ra band members--deepening his research, I also deepened my research of Tom's work. I was fascinated to find out that his original career was in international refugee law, and that he only exhibited his first solo show in NYC at the Elizabeth Foundation Studio Center in 2008. I wanted to understand how someone could transition so boldly from law to art, and actually bring his passion for humanitarianism and

geopolitics from a legal context into the visual realm. His interview below is a reminder that what propels and fuels you is what you believe in, and the most natural way that your message is communicated from you--even if to onlookers--the connections may seem disparate.

Where are you from, and where did you spend your formative years?

I grew up in a family of cigar makers in a small town near Bruges, Belgium. I had a happy life there but I knew that I needed to do other things, that I had to leave. After high school I halfheartedly toyed with the idea of applying for film school but my mother disapproved and told me to get a 'real' diploma first. I settled with law school: no more mathematics and the university was in a real city. The fact that the cool uncle in the family was a lawyer also played a role. But to be honest I had absolutely no clue.

You were a refugee lawyer for several years for the UN. How did you initially become interested in these issues, and how did you decide to affect change in that way?

When I graduated from law school, Belgium still had mandatory military service for all able-bodied male citizens. I was deemed able-bodied but I really didn't want to go the army. So I applied for the status of consciences objector. I had to write a letter to the mayor of my hometown explaining my objections – the horror. I can't remember the exact words I used but my letter was based on a template given to me by an Anti War organization. My request was approved, and I did two years of Alternative Civilian Service in a center for asylum seekers in Brussels. After that I was employed by the Belgian Government Refugee Agency and later I worked for

the United Nations in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Burundi, Cambodia and Thailand. Upon my return to Belgium I was appointed Refugee Coordinator for Amnesty International. By then I had become an activist; absolutely dedicated to the struggle against human rights violations across the globe.

How was the transition for you--from the analytical field of law--to the conceptual field of becoming a visual artist?

As far as I can remember I have always made art and after participating in a few exhibitions while still working for Amnesty, the idea of giving up my day job and spending more time making art became stuck in my head. It was time for change. I also wanted to start channeling my experience as a human rights activist more into my practice as an artist and at the same time I felt I needed more distance from the seriousness of my activism and subject matter. So I guess the usual mixture of push- and pull factors. I officially stopped practicing law in 2004 when I was selected to participate in the Elizabeth Foundation Studio Center program in New York City. I moved with my family to the US, started working with 'Jack the Pelican Presents' gallery in Brooklyn and since then I've been fortunate enough to be able to work full time as an artist.

When did you decide that you were an artist?

It took a while, but I think that somewhere by the end of 2004 I started writing 'visual artist' as my profession on official documents. So that's maybe when I decided for myself that I was an artist. Almost ten years ago now.

Would you consider what you do, social innovation?

As an artist it's not my intention to try to fix certain things in society by making art or by being innovative in my production process. Maybe I can place this in the context of the art / activism discussion. I don't see my artwork as an extension of my refugee work – even though it directly confronts the intersection of human rights, geopolitics, visual art and propaganda. I realize that given my academic background and professional history, an autobiographical reading of my artwork is unavoidable. People assume that I'm an activist. I operate within the tradition of political art but I try to steer away from one-dimensional didactic socio-politics that is often associated with the activist canon of visual culture. And there's also the issue of preaching to the contemporary art choir.

My work and that of many of my colleagues is inevitably politicized by its rootedness within various geopolitical contexts - but that doesn't make us activists. I don't think artists are per definition activists - it's about choice and intention. An artist becomes a militant when he or she moves beyond the aesthetic, the opportunity, the conceptual, and intentionally and persistently intervenes in the 'real world.' I have huge respect for activists. Being an activist comes with extremely hard work, passion, dedication and sacrifice whether you are an artist, a plumber, a lawyer or indeed a fruit vendor.

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process.”

How does your passion for geopolitics affect or inform your creative work now?

I have always been a geopolitical news junkie – that is on the academic, theoretical level—and it was through my work with refugees and other victims of human rights abuse that I witnessed first-hand the concrete consequences of geo-politics in Europe, Central Africa and South-East Asia. After five fantastic years at the Elizabeth Foundation in Manhattan it was somehow time to move on. So in 2009 I followed my wife to the Middle East where we lived in Amman, Jordan for more than three years. In Amman, I started working on 'Impression, proche orient' (IPO), an art project referring to issues relevant to the contemporary Near East society including the changes, politics, artistic identity and the New Arabs. Drawing on my experience as a foreigner living and working in the East, it was and is my intention to interpret understandings of the region - or lack thereof - from the inside out. As an outsider with the privilege of being given access to the inside, my aim is to use irony, gesture and narratives from the region by means of artistic production.

This is Rwanda 2004 from [Tom Bogaert](#) on Vimeo.

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What do you hope for your viewers to gain an understanding of after experiencing your work?

I make art that encourages viewers to interact and participate in serious scenarios. I don't make propaganda aimed to influence the attitude of the public toward a cause or position. I aim to provoke serious reflection but I have always tried to maintain a degree of lightness and humor in my work. The seriousness of the work and subject matter are often masked by this humor and by an intentional lack of high-production values.

What does it mean to you to be a creator? How does that hold you to account in the world? What parts of that enliven you or scare you? Or are those latter two one in the same?

Recently I was invited to participate in the 3rd 'Ghetto Biennale' in Port-au-Prince, Haiti. Many things about the Ghetto Biennale seem problematic, from its name to its history, its art, its production, and its general progress. Participating in this type of context is risky on many levels. I don't work in a vacuum; I do feel I have responsibility, artistically, historically and theoretically but at the end of the day you have to make decisions for yourself.

One of the curators asked us: "Is it more politically correct or more ethical to eschew a slum neighborhood rather than to sit down and talk to its residents and hazard the consequences?" I decided to

participate in the Ghetto Biennale and it was a fantastic experience – scary and exciting at the same time. Same thing with being an 'accidental orientalist' in the Middle East. I ended up in the Orient by accident – when I followed my wife to Amman. I understand that the issue of Saidian Orientalism – prejudiced outsider interpretations of the East as surveyed by Edward W. Said – that pervades my work is problematic. Constant self-examination and -criticism have indeed confirmed that there is very little moral higher ground for me to be left standing on. At the same time I seek to be more than a mere 'Accidental Orientalist.' Edward W. said: “there is, after all, a profound difference between the will to understand for purposes of co-existence and humanistic enlargement of horizons, and the will to dominate.”

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What is your creative process?

I pursue my practice by engaging an idea first, and then developing a plan that usually involves a combination of media, technologies and techniques, some of which are linked to conventional art media, and some of which are not usually associated with artmaking.

I've been told that I work in the tradition of the post-conceptual, the post-studio era. Sounds all very 'post', I would also like to be something 'pre' as in 'avant' - I'll keep you posted.

How do you approach creating an installation, and synthesizing disparate elements (sounds, words, images) into a multimedia piece? Can you use an example from a past exhibition?

For the Ghetto Biennale in December 2013 and after having done some homework I decided I wanted to do something with the local beer 'Prestige': a brand of American-style beer produced by the Heineken-owned 'Brasserie Nationale d'Haiti.' It is the best-selling beer in Haiti and the promotion campaign for it is based on a blatant nationalistic Haitian identity narrative. Fierce Haitian nationalistic discourse propagated by a Dutch multinational company – in order to sell more beer. So I invited Haitians to comment on the narrative behind the Prestige publicity campaign. In a mini survey, I asked about Haitian identity and possible ways of linking the results to a beer label. While interviewing and having conversations with people, Haitians and foreigners alike, I was acting less as an anthropologist, a sociologist or a visual artist and more merely trying to have a conversation with people about beer,

multinationals and national identity. It was playful and a bit provocative and I wanted the project to reflect that attitude.

We gave a short introduction about the project and the interviewees and I were pretty soon on the same wave length and they understood what I was after. We talked about the benefits and dangers of foreign investments, about identity, about the old days and the new, about god and voodoo and death, things predictable and unpredictable - I guess we talked about life in general. After each conversation (we did about 60 – we only had a couple of days) we invited the participants to come up with a slogan that would best convey their thoughts. I then asked a local artist to paint publicity murals with the new slogans in downtown Port-au-Prince and I made 24 new Prestige etiquettes which we glued on empty beer bottles. They were presented in a voodoo temple and we had too many Prestiges at the opening event.

How do you reconcile fact from human experience in your work?

Personal encounters nourish my work; these experiences and memories are inscribed and expressed in the artwork. However, I have always been very reluctant to publicly share these personal elements on their own. I've worked in so many different places with so many great people; I don't feel comfortable blending the personal into the professional.

What does it feel like to finally birth a project? What is that initial feeling of letting go of your work and giving it away to the public and something bigger than yourself?

It feels great, intoxicating and therefore perhaps addictive, and all of the sudden your work is out there, in the open, and the public

will see whatever they want to see in it.

A well-known art critic once described one of my Genocide pieces as an "effective, amusing piece, a metaphor for childhood play and angst." To be honest I was stunned. Also because I always provide a purely factual and descriptive text alongside my artwork – not to say that meaning only appears in text but simply to contextualize it; to draw some lines in the sand. What I'm trying to say is that when Gonzalez-Torres declares that "meaning is always shifting in time and space", this only goes for part of the artwork.

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Describe a time when you almost gave up finishing a project?

It happens all the time. I have a massive archive of unfinished projects, rejected proposals, rejected grant applications, missed deadlines – now and again when I look over these files, I might recycle an idea or a phrase.

What grounds you to continue waking up each day and commit to making art?

I'm constantly amazed that I've been able to forge a function for myself as an artist in society. And that this new reality coexists with my desire for otherness, for change and difference. And paying my bills and feeding my kids of course.

Describe what you are currently working on:



Very excited to be currently working on '1971, Sun Ra in Egypt' a research- and visual arts project about the life and work of Sun Ra, the legendary American jazz pioneer, bandleader, mystic and philosopher. The project focuses on Sun Ra's concerts in Egypt in 1971 and after Jordan, Syria, Palestine, Lebanon and Iraq this project is the sixth installment of 'Impression, proche orient.' It will take the form of performances, jazz concerts, a publication, video and an exhibition at Medrar for Contemporary Art in Cairo in May 2014. Political stability is still far of the horizon in Egypt and when I started working in Cairo the local art scene was having passionate debates about its relationship to the revolution of early 2011 and the perennial issue of the role of an artist in revolutionary times. I think maybe my choice for the 'less serious' Sun Ra as a resource for my project in Egypt should be seen in the context of my desire

to further distantiate myself from the artist/activist connotation by means of a self-imposed estrangement from the usual seriousness of my subject matter. Not to say that Sun Ra is not serious, he was actually very serious about his un-seriousness. But that's another story.

Interview by Boyuan Gao

BOYUAN GAO is a Brooklyn based writer, musicologist, facilitator, creative catalyst, and community cultivator. She's the co-founder of Project Inkblot, an online magazine and creative incubator to help individuals develop passion-based work with a social impact. A Jacqueline-of-all-trades, Boyuan has worked as a marketer, program director, business development consultant, in fields as diverse as youth development, HIV/AIDS, environmental justice. She was also the former hip-hop editor for the quarterly print publication BRM, as well as the former editor-in-chief of the online magazine, The Revivalist.

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