SI

c mag

C Mag print edition
Nolan Oswald Dennis: Overturns
Apr. 15, 2026

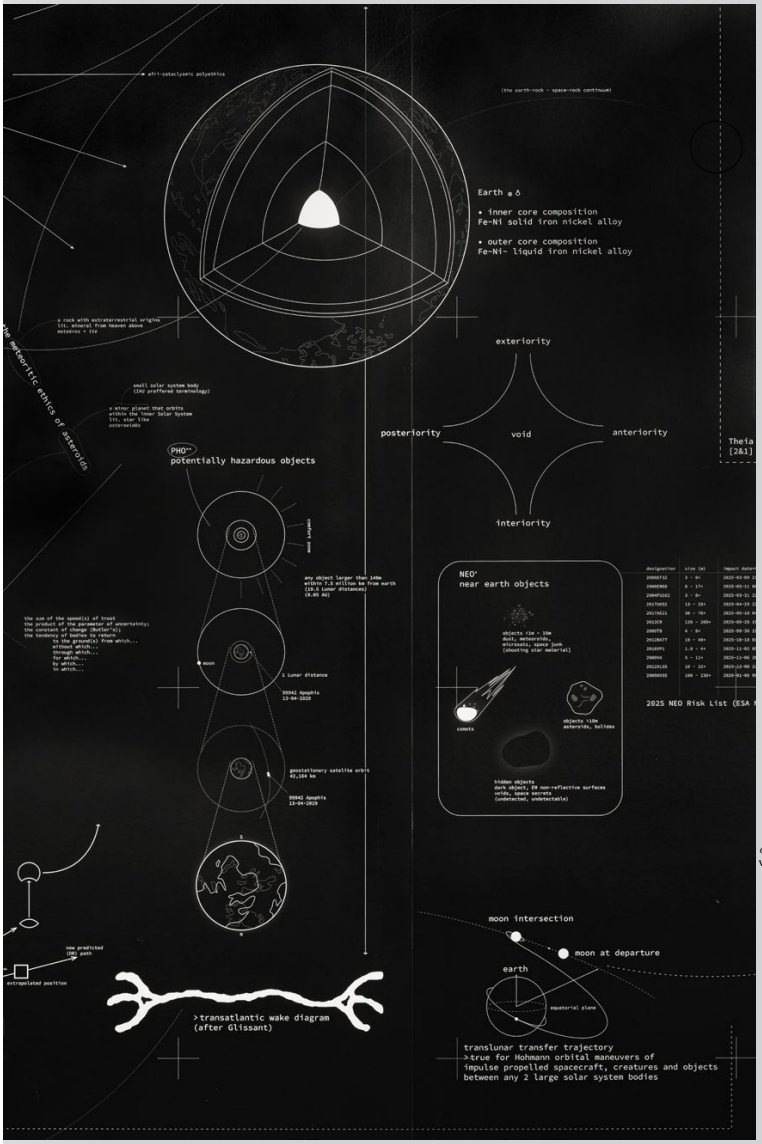
An Un/Written Proposition

Nolan Oswald Dennis's *Black Liberation Zodiac (Kgositsile's Folly)* (2022–ongoing) is a good place to start. In this installation for "overturns" (2025), the artist's solo exhibition at the Swiss Institute, black wallpaper hangs from a stanchion and then, as if pulled by a gravitational force, seems to merge with the floor. Circular-cum-fractal star charts composed of staccatoed white lines bear glimpses of constellations from the south celestial pole. Dennis's charts hide the stars' exact coordinates, challenging the presumption of the cosmos' availability to transparent mapping. Also threaded into this night sky is iconography associated with South Africa's anti-apartheid Black Consciousness movement of the '70s, including: a reference to the Wedgwood anti-slavery medallion, the outlines of a rifle, the Black Panther Party symbol, and an image of handcuffed fists.

Nolan Oswald Dennis Overturns the World

by Sarah Jane Cervenak

Swiss Institute / Contemporary Art
38 St. Marks Pl
New York, NY 10003
info@swissinstitute.net
swissinstitute.net
Tel +1 212 925 2035
Fax +1 212 925 2040



Both: Nolan Oswald Dennis, *recurse 4 a late planet (lush)* (detail), 2024, wallpaper, notebook pages; installation view from "overturns," 2025, Swiss Institute, New York City
PHOTO: DANIEL PÉREZ; COURTESY OF SWISS INSTITUTE

The artist, born in Lusaka, Zambia, now lives and works in Johannesburg, South Africa. Foregrounding anti-colonial, Black radical thought, their attention to the south celestial pole moreover indicates a Southern-oriented view of the cosmos. Southernness in *Black Liberation Zodiac* appears in both a latitudinal and a longitudinal position, as well as in the geopolitically marginalized perspectives of philosophers, artists, and scientists living in what is referred to as the Global South. According to the artist, printed on the black wallpaper background are "diagrams [...] based on the International Astronomical Union constellation charts, as well as the South African Astronomical Observatory's southern planisphere of star patterns."[1] Along with Black Consciousness movement and Black Panther Party iconography, the artist also draws on Chinese and Zulu "modes of mapping the sky, and other Indigenous systems for cosmic meaning-making."[2] This foregrounding of African Indigenous and non-Eurocentric astronomies is furthered by *Approximations (1)* (2021). On a conference stand in front of *Black Liberation Zodiac*, a video screens an interview with, among other interlocutors, the South African astrophysicist Sukuma Mkhize.[3]

1 Monisha Holmes and Nolan Oswald Dennis, "Astrologer Monisha Holmes and Artist Nolan Oswald Dennis on the Zodiac and Black Liberation," *Art in America*, January 1, 2020, https://www.artnews.com/art-in-america/interviews/nolan-oswald-dennis-monsha-holmes-black-liberation-zodiac-1202673932

2 Ibid.

3 Nolan Oswald Dennis, email correspondence with author.

The colour black is featured prominently across the works that make up "overturns." In addition to *Black Liberation Zodiac*, it is repeated in wallpapers for *recurse 4 a late planet (lush)* (2024), and *further notes 4 a planet (nine-dash)* (2024). Black primer also coats one of the globes in the installation *Articulated globe (pair)* (2024), and the pyramid pedestal in *Isivivane* (2023–ongoing). Against the imposed illuminations and enclosures of whiteness, the colour black here enacts an un/writing of Earth and sky that respects their shared "right to opacity."[4]

4 Edouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* (University of Michigan Press, 1997).

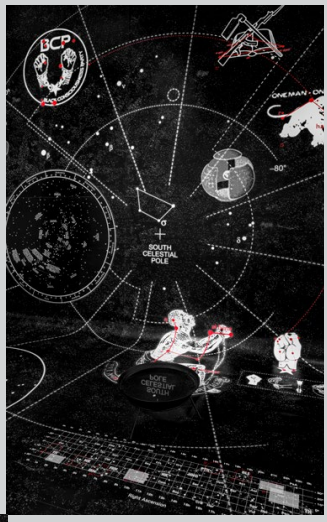
Indeed, the colour white has an aesthetic history overdetermined by colonial assumptions of its originary presence as the world's base colour and blank canvas.[5] In his scholarship tracing the Euro-American colonial and Enlightenment histories of paper production, Jonathan Senchyne writes: "[W]hiteness is a key feature of paper's function as a substrate for written and printed texts. It serves as the ground against which the figures of text and image become visible and legible to readers and viewers."[6] Moreover, white paper's phantasmatic instrumentalization by European Enlightenment thinkers like John Locke as the symbolic cognitive ground of reason persists today as the normative aesthetic choice for intellectual and artistic re/production.

5 Bernd Herzogenrath, "White," in *Prismatic Ecology*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (University of Minnesota Press, 2013).

6 Jonathan Senchyne, *The Intimacy of Paper in Early and Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (University of Massachusetts Press, 2019).

In contrast, Dennis's black wallpaper installations foreground the mutual rights of Blackness and earthliness to express, as philosopher Denise Ferreira da Silva might say, their own "creative potential" and epistemic autonomies outside of whiteness.[7] *Black Liberation Zodiac* decentres white astronormative visions of a universe that is Eurocentrically graphed and codified, by illuminating often-ignored cosmological views, offering a view from a black background that is everywhere. According to the exhibition statement, Dennis's starry arrangements are mapped along the ecliptic plane—the route Earth travels around the sun—to allow the Earth some reprieve from visibility's violence. Across *Black Liberation Zodiac*, these ecliptic paths appear as striated white circles that repeat and increase in size, like a star's radiation.

7 Denise Ferreira da Silva, "Toward a Black Feminist Poethics: The Quest(ion) of Blackness Toward the End of the World," *The Black Scholar* 44 (2014).



In *recurse 4 a late planet (lush)*, we find another sheet of black wallpaper upon which an array of elliptic, circular, conic, and oblong diagrams laterally bloom. The curved lines that occupy much of the topography of the installation are muted. Soft whites, along with faded reds, greens, and ochres, seem to hyperbolically curve out from the flat wall. From afar, my initial experience of the artwork's stunning diagrammatic sprawls was riddled with anxiety around my inability to "do math." With that said, I found the roundedness of the lines appealing. The absence of numerical data, in conjunction with the abstract relationship between shapes and their accompanying labels, provokes a certainty that is eventually refused. For example, on the left side of the canvas, the curved lines sometimes complete as circles, and sometimes jut out as bent lines arching elsewhere. Relatively small circles seem to collide into a centipede-like shape accompanied by labels like "a yt world," "a black world," and "a colonial world." Other larger circles feature obtuse labels like "something else" or "for those who know what a stone can do." The latter's ambivalence in lieu of shape's calculable data suggests a kind of non-Euclidean refusal. A predominant mathematical theory derived from ancient Greek mathematician Euclid, Euclidean geometry posits that all lines are held together by mappable points. Relatedly, according to scientist-artist Margaret Wertheim, a Euclidean-informed rectangularity and compulsive "straightness" structures the modernist imposition of gridded design on a presumptively disordered and "undeveloped" Earth.[8] Even still, as Wertheim continues to argue, Euclid's postulates about the world's availability to gridded knowability break down in the face of how earthly living actually is: fractal, askew, elusive, curvy, and unmappable.

8 Margaret Wertheim, *A Field Guide to Hyperbolic Space: An Exploration of the Intersection of Higher Geometry and Feminine Handicraft* (The Institute for Figuring, 2007).

9 Calvin Warren, "The Catastrophe: Black Feminist Poethics, (Anti)form, and Mathematical Nihilism," *Qui Parle* 28 (2019).

The array of errant lines in *recurse 4 a late planet (lush)* arch with and into the black wallpaper. While the lines curve and intersect, they don't carry numerical data. The diagrammatic arrangements in *recurse* also reference the phenomenon of "space rocks," with particular focus on 99942 Apophis, an asteroid that was once thought to threaten the Earth's very survival. While it was recently determined that the asteroid will not in fact collide with Earth in 2029 (as originally forecast), Dennis brilliantly attends to the insistent incertitude, or what Calvin Warren might call "terror," of not being able to mathematically deduce and formalize cosmogeological unfolding.[9] For Warren, a theory of catastrophe, and of math's inability to anticipate "sudden variation," bespeaks its larger anxiety around that which resists formal containment. Dennis alludes to math's limitations even as they indict the terrible certitude of coloniality's world-ending operations. Even as Earth's geological intactness *seems* predictably "safe" from Apophis, as the accompanying labels indicate, "a yt world and a colonial world" nonetheless morph the shape of a "black world."

Above: Nolan Oswald Dennis, *Approximations (i)*, 2021, video, 11 min; installation view from "overturns," 2025, Swiss Institute, New York City
PHOTO: DANIEL PÉREZ; COURTESY OF SWISS INSTITUTE

Top Right: Nolan Oswald Dennis, *Black Liberation Zodiac (Kgositsile's Folly)* (detail), 2022–ongoing, wallpaper, bowl, water, cowrie shell; installation view from "overturns," 2025, Swiss Institute, New York City
PHOTO: DANIEL PÉREZ; COURTESY OF SWISS INSTITUTE

We might say that Dennis's art unmoors the line from its relationship to something knowable or calculable. Across *recurse*, alongside lines that seem hard and straight, there are also lines that undulate and wave. There are lines that seem to be so thinned out that they appear striated enough to let air in. One dotted line is labelled as "afro-indigenous." Black Indigeneity here isn't mapped but, rather, exists as a pulsing, deregulated assertion of living. Recalling *Black Liberation Zodiac*'s references to the Black liberation struggle in '70s South Africa, the artist's reimagining of lines in the sky and floating geologies is an insistent anti-colonial defamiliarization of mapping practices, toward a critique and destabilization of enclosure. We see this in the artist's juxtaposition of "afro-indigenous" with a striated line that both *isn't* and *doesn't*. Accompanying diagrams of various rocks are curved lines labelled with the seemingly transparent language of "cause" and "effect 1." But these same lines are also eventually la-

10 Wertheim, 15.

Below: Nolan Oswald Dennis, *Black Liberation Zodiac (Kgositsile's Folly)*, 2022–ongoing, wallpaper, bowl, water, cowrie shell; installation view from "overturns," 2025, Swiss Institute, New York City
PHOTO: DANIEL PÉREZ; COURTESY OF SWISS INSTITUTE

belled as leading to a more obtuse "something else." I am reminded of Wertheim again, who writes about how even in Euclidean straightness, there's still something "surprisingly plastic" about diagrams too.[10] Indeed, in their own writing, Dennis shares that "the diagram is simultaneously an actual concrete arrangement of representational elements as well as a virtual device, an arrangement of potentialities, capacities and tendencies."[11] For example, both *Black Radical Zodiac* and *recurse* gesture toward particular views made possible by the South African Astronomical Observatory (in the former work), and the orbit of the feared Apophis (in the latter). While both views are linked to particular geopolitical contexts—of post- and pre-colonial Africa—they are also unsettled by other kinds of topographies and geologies. These include sites where Indigeneities across Africa draw and live out their own lines and relations, without the closures imposed by settler maps. These are also places where rocks aren't named, and where Earth is just one node of cosmic light among many others.[12]

Nolan Oswald Dennis, *A Fragment on Diagrams and Dreams*, 2018, https://www.nolanoswald-dennis.com/studio_theory/a%20fragment%20on%20diagrams%20and%20dreams%20.pdf

I want to conclude with *Articulated globe (pair)*—an installation where two globes are propped up by steel armature, while their upper regions rest on one another. To the left, there is the "standard" blue globe upon which the "world" is mapped. This globe is typically used as a teaching accompaniment in geography classes, and is often marketed with words like "explorer," "pioneer," and "traveller." With this device, the world becomes flattened, even though it bears a spherical conceit. With every spin, waters and lands are subject to chromatic ordering and differentiation, which in turn invites colonial modes of seeing and touching. By contrast, the second globe is covered entirely with black primer, and bears a veil made of loose netting and cowry shells. The difference between the two globes manifests as the violent viewability of the commodified blue version, on the left, and the somehow protected and concealed version on the right. As with the wallpaper installations *Black Liberation Zodiac* and *recurse*, black primer in conjunction with the cowry shells function as a spiritually informed, anti-colonial aesthetic shield. The black globe might also be the artist's way of enjoining us to (un)see the Earth as originarily anti-colonial and anti-apartheid, as "difference without separability,"[13] and as just another unwritten-upon orb in the sky.

Denise Ferreira da Silva, "On Difference Without Separability," in *Incerteza viva* exh. cat. (Bienal de São Paolo, 2016).

In a conversation with scholar Zoé Samudzi for The Kitchen, Dennis shared: "I've been wrestling with (the implications of) this fragment on grammar from South African photographer Santu Mofokeng: 'My approach to landscapes is informed by cleaving the word landscape into its portmanteau component parts: "land" (the verb) and "scape" (to view).' I'm committed to the idea of *'land' (the verb)* and the question of what it means to view a verb. It feels like a demand to think of the land as something we do (a collective happening)—a process, procedure, and practice rather than a thing."[14] The black globe of *Articulated globe (pair)* enacts the kinetics of that other view. Across the black globe, the violence of Enlightenment modalities of imposed transparency are interrupted. The Earth is invisible as undifferentiated, unextracted, and somehow protected. Land's opacities join with the sky's own secret arrangements. Maybe there's that Wynterian overturning that the artist evokes as a moniker for the show: another ceremony, but one whose coordinates remain (un)written.

Nolan Oswald Dennis and Zoé Samudzi, "Land: Experience, Myth and Memory," *ON MIND*, July 1, 2022, https://thekitchen.org/on-mind/land-experience-myth-and-memory

Sylvia Wynter, "The Ceremony Must Be Found: After Humanism," *boundary 2* 12/13 (1984).

Below: Nolan Oswald Dennis, *Articulated globe (pair)*, 2024, PET globe, synthetic stone finish, black primer, cowry shell veil, steel armature; installation view from "overturns," 2025, Swiss Institute, New York City
PHOTO: DANIEL PÉREZ, COURTESY OF SWISS INSTITUTE

Sarah Jane Cervenak is the Linda Arnold Carlisle Distinguished Excellence Professor of Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies and African American and African Diaspora Studies at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. She is the author of *Black Gathering: Art, Ecology, Ungiven Life* and *Wandering: Philosophical Performances of Racial and Sexual Freedom*, and is at work on a third book.