

PRESS CLIPPING

Mousse  
Zoë Hopkins  
Nolan Oswald  
Dennis: overturns  
April 27<sup>th</sup>, 2026

# MOUSSE



*for Reverse Archaeology, 2022–23, overturns installation view at Swiss Institute, New York, 2025. Courtesy: Collection Harrwig Foundation, Amsterdam. Promised gift to the Rijksdienst voor het Cultureel Erfgoed / Rijkscollectie*



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PREV



*Black Liberation Zodiac (Molalatladi)*, 2024, *UNDERSTUDIES* installation view at Zeitz MOCAA, Cape Town, 2024. Photo: Dillion Marsh

What is the topographical richness, the sediment, or the soil from which Black liberationist and decolonial speculation effloresces? What fissures and frays emerge at the edges of science, mathematics, and geology when these disciplines originate not with the analytic desire for mastery and extraction, but with an undisciplined giving to, and with, the irreducible density of the Earth? How do Black, Indigenous, and queer entanglements with the Earth sing of a renewed thought of the world? These are among the questions that tremor in the subsoil of Nolan Oswald Dennis's practice. Toward an undoing of the world as it has been schematized by modernity and racial capitalism, Dennis moves with the many worlds that are assembled and imagined by African and diasporic ecological and cosmo-poetic thought. Their formal and material approaches are invested with the rigor and precision of scientific grammars, but elasticized by Dennis's commitment to the poetics and metaphysics of Black consciousness.

#### ZOË HOPKINS

Historically, so much of your work has been invested in questions of language and semiotics: where and how these structures cohere and fall apart, what Blackness does to language, to grammar. I'm thinking for example of your works manipulating receipt paper and script, or of the writerly marks in the wall diagram *recurse 4 a late planet (lush)* (2024), recently presented at the Swiss Institute in New York.

The diagram is such a vast unfolding of relations between scientific events and mathematical principles—like planetary orbits and meteorite paths—and broader conceptual and philosophical concepts or musings, like the graph where you map Black temporality in relation to the possibility of its being and worlding. The surface is replete with annotative marks that, on the one hand, offer direct illustration or description of scientific forms, and on the other, deploy these mark-making practices to point toward a more indirect language of metaphysical allusion.

Your recent research and new project for the Venice Biennale—which began with your research for the large sound installation *Superpositions* (2026), presented at the Diriyah Contemporary Art Biennale 2026—focuses on the acoustics of the Earth. It marks a relevant shift from privileging signal to privileging noise. Signal is to noise as the linguistic is to the non- or pre-linguistic, or the un-signifiable. We might conceptualize this as a shift from a register of coherent representation to one of less coherent abstraction, where language gives way to something else. I'm wondering: In what capacity can these acoustics signify? Or do they stand outside of a relationship to language?

NOLAN

The work comes out of my interest in geophysics, specifically the immaterial dimension of Earth sciences. I've been talking to scientists based in Johannesburg at the University of Witwatersrand, and through them, connecting data from geophysics research stations across the African continent and across the world. Their research involves monitoring acoustic phenomena called seismic waves. They detect vibrations in the Earth's crust, allowing researchers to listen for events like earthquakes, or for military explosions and industrial activities. They also use this data to understand the composition of the Earth itself. I'm interested in how these more immaterial, vibrational qualities of the planet are perceived, collected, and worked with—their mediation, as well as the “land-ly” intimacies carried through infrasound, infrasonic waves, and seismic waves. These ultra-mediated phenomena feel like space and time travel. They are accessing information from deep underground, or from the other side of the world, through waves that travel along the planet's solid crust and through its liquid core. The seismic wave recordings are assumed to be below the threshold of human audio perception, so they must be decompressed in order to be heard. But before this decompression, they are silent to us. The world is vibrating even when we hear nothing.

The project is dealing with the significance of bringing this nothingness, these otherwise silent acoustic vibrations, into perception without, in a way, betraying their silence. All of this is grounded in a hundred-million-year-old ongoing geological event called the African Rift System. The part of the Earth we call the African continent, and part of the Levant, is gradually tearing itself apart, and will eventually create a new ocean and two separate continents.

ZOË

You've articulated tensions: between the silence of the Earth and the endeavor to listen to this silence—to “betray” the silence; between listening to depths and standing on the surface of things; between the metaphysics of aural presence and aural absence or nothingness. Or rather, we *perceive* a nothingness, but the Earth feels a somethingness—the abundance of its vibrations. What are the politics involved in this desire to hear the Earth talking to us, when maybe it doesn't want us to hear it?

NOLAN OSWALD DENNIS

The simple answer is yes. The complicated answer is that signification is a loop. I am listening to the Earth's vibrations that travel both across the surface and through the crust, but also through the core, so they complicate the idea of the local. A scientific station in Uganda is recording vibrations that originate in Indonesia, Italy, Palestine, North America. So the significance of those events has to do with the network of meaning in which the vibration is encoded and decoded. The material relies on a social mediation. Geologists are looking at signals that tell them about the composition of the Earth because they're interested in which compositions are more valuable than others. Where's the gold, where's the coltan? Military stations are looking at this material because they want to know how big the bomb was, or where the bomb was dropped. In both instances, the question of value or privilege is central. In a way, the Earth is signifying for sure, but the communities of listeners are much more complicated than it seems. I'm trying to further complicate the community of listeners, complicate the assumptions of value that we bring with us. Signification is not enough. Witnessing is the inescapable partner to signifying. We might be talking about a witness-less signification.

ZOË

Could you contextualize the project for Venice? How did it start?

Scientists have a signal-seeking practice wherein everything that doesn't reinforce the signal is considered noise. I'm interested in precisely that thing that they discard as noise, those vibrations of the world that make their jobs difficult. The sources of noise? The world itself. At any given time, the seismic frequency spectrum of the Earth is always a polyphony, vibrating with the effects of all minor movements of the planet planet-ing: waves crashing in the ocean, planes taking off and landing, people and animals digging, gathering, moving around. Also the echoes of major movements, like earthquakes, bombs, landslides, hurricanes—the acoustic memory of those events. This is all noise when you're seeking a signal, literally a blurriness in the spectrogram, sound like buzzing, clicking, humming in the soundtrack. I'm interested in this part of the vibrational data, this quality of the data that I don't really know or understand, and that geo-scientific practice treats as a nuisance.

I think misrecognition is in some way a more generative or capacious style of encounter, which involves seeing something as entirely different from what it might be. It's somehow related to a sense of mutual alienation. Coming to the planet through this thing that is already there tells us why "discovery" is such a poor paradigm for learning and knowing. These seismic vibrations are already there, but listening to them turns the ground into something else. They become alien, which is to say, a version of you but different. And in that alien-ness you find something you recognize, or misrecognize. You find the events of your world somehow resonating in the noise. In the anti-signal of the Earth.

ZOË

I certainly felt this defamiliarization breathe in the decompressed recordings you shared with me. There's a visceral beauty in them that is totally disquieting and disconcerting. On the one hand, the sound is quite penetrating—it gets inside you—but on the other, it doesn't completely let you get inside of it. It holds you at the distance of the uncanny. I'm curious about how the process of decompression produces these effects. I'm also thinking about "decompression" as a synonym for "relaxation." The sound waves have to be drawn out of tension, to slacken, in order to reach our faculties of audition. It's almost like we're hearing the Earth stretch out into the expanse that it always already is. There's a release and a withholding at the same time.

NOLAN

Maybe it's a question of some form of misrecognition. Everything picked up by these instruments is already there. For the Earth, it's not a secret. The dynamic of "secrecy" and maybe even "suppression" comes from us, and it's got to do with the limits of perception that we've inherited, that have been projected onto us, and the power dynamics informing those limits. Scientists have made this complicated instrument to discover something that we supposedly don't know. My general project is more interested in *recognizing* something in the scientific apparatus that speaks to a condition of relation that is social, political, maybe even spiritual. A recognition that the world is always vibrating, and that vibration is a material force. There's something in the experience of the acoustic vibration that somehow reflects the political project of perceiving and projecting different relationships to the world.

When I speak of the betrayal of silence, it's not a desire to maintain phenomenological purity; mediation is always necessary. But I want to avoid simple resolutions of complicated phenomena. How can we keep the uncertainty and the complexity of these vibrations with us for as long as possible?

NOLAN

I think it has something to do with tension and compression. The Earth is held together by intense forces that are not at ease. There's the gravitational pull that's holding everything together. There's heat from the center of the Earth, but we know it is also slowly cooling down. In an ideal universe, eventually, the Earth would be cold; that would be the moment of relaxation. But until then, there's this tension, the mass that's holding everything together and the heat that's forcing everything apart. We are part of these forces, the history of our tense and compressive movements, the geodynamics of our ongoing struggle. The noise that we're hearing in the ground vibrations is the noise of these forces being negotiated. A seismic event usually occurs when the tension is released. This is the signal seismologists are waiting for.

Digital decompression is another stage in a chain of mediation. The vibrations are recorded in real time, and immediately compressed into a data file that is usually parsed as a visual spectrogram, but we convert twenty-four hours of recording data into a sound wave that is about four hours long. So there's already a lot of mediation before we try to stretch that four hours back into twenty-four hours of sound. I'm still working out my feelings about this process, which seems to be a strange attempt to move backward—to loop this chain of mediation back and re-entangle these sounds with the noisiness of the world. There's a political dimension to this spiral that involves trusting that the material registers the same project of liberation that all the other material in my local universe resonates with.

ZOË

Perhaps there's a sort of political analogy we can draw between what's happening inside the Earth and what's happening on its surface. Hearing the frequency of this ongoing, incessant noise, this generalized vibration of the Earth's forces, is sort of akin to hearing the ongoingness of colonialism and slavery, the terrible and constant rumbling of our global political background noise. The suddenness of seismic ruptures, on the other hand, bears a frequency we might liken to the *political* event, those loud moments of eruption in the world order that beget eruptions of consciousness.

NOLAN

The significance of this project lies in stepping away from the clarity of signal seeking. If we want to think about geological violence in relation to social violence, or revolutionary moments of clarification, we have to remember that even within the moment of the revolution, there are very important questions that are not clarified. If the seismic rupture maps onto the revolutionary rupture, I think this noise is more like when Frantz Fanon says, in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), that “the explosion will not happen today. It is too soon . . . or too late.”<sup>1</sup> A way to contrive but also reflect a vibrational environment that we are always already embedded within. A sense that the non-rupture, non-event, non-signal is akin to a zone of non-being. The politics aren't really about the question of resolvability or irresolvability. It's a question of what is there and what it means to perceive what is actually there. There's definitely a negative dimension to perceiving this as opposed to the positive dimension of clarification. But it's important, coming from the condition that I grew up in, which is a kind of post-apartheid, post-clarification moment, you know? There's this ongoing thing and maybe there's a language for it that's in the Earth. I don't like that line. *[laughs]*

ZOË

You don't like the line about language?

NOLAN

No, I do. I like the line about language. I don't like the poetics of a language that's in the Earth. The idea of something buried, the implied need to unearth something.

ZOË

Absolutely. Can we circle back to your decision to depart from the graphic language that has structured your practice into the sonic? Particularly as it concerns these questions of representation, signification, and mediation?

NOLAN

To me, this work is not about sound per se but more about "land-ly" and "landless" phenomena. Through this, the spatiality of sound becomes important to think with. Sound is a very environmental phenomenon. Whereas vision and light have to do with surface, sound has to do with the in-between. I didn't come to this material looking for a sound project. I arrived looking for a way to understand land differently. Through this, I discovered what the geologists were up to.

Everything that I learned about this phenomenon and this disciplinary space kept kind of confusing and blowing up my assumptions about what the planet is. Can a planet itself signify? For me, we're beyond that question when we think about this because in this instance, the planet is both the source of the vibration and the receiver of the vibration. Maybe it's the split between the emitter and the receiver, the signifier and the signified, that somehow falls apart, because the Earth is recursively the medium, the source, the amplifier, and the receiver. It's everything, you know? That sounds a bit loose and sentimental, but I am interested in what it might mean to think alongside a localized model of everything, in the way that our planet is named after the ground.

One of the things that I've been thinking about in my practice for a while is: Who are you thinking with? If you're not thinking with the right people, with the right apparatus, with the right community, with the right knowledge, then you need to find better ones or get busy making some. My interest in sound has a lot to do with that, with trying to find a better way of learning and knowing. My eternal question is how to think about everything I encounter through the theory and practices of Black consciousness. What does it mean to think of the Earth in this configuration as a Black consciousness?

ZOË

I love that question. I'm reminded of Édouard Glissant's *Treatise on the Whole-World* (*Traité du tout-monde*, 1997), where he writes of "the cry of the world," this noise of the world's desolation and erosion, the noise of the Earth's obdurate, ongoing struggle to survive. We all hear this cry, but some are uniquely positioned to listen to it, uniquely poised in our consciousness of how we listen and why we listen. Blackness is situated as a sort of a co-conspiratorial openness to listening with the Earth, to the force of its cry, a mutual submission to listening to each other's wounds.

NOLAN

Yes. This whole thing about recognition, misrecognition, alienation, et cetera has to do exactly with this. You hear the sound, you see the waveform, you learn about what they're doing, and you realize that you and the Earth have something in common. You understand this from encountering not just the material, but also the abuse of the material. A shared experience of being in the world. And you go, "Ah, okay, working on this is a way for me to connect with some quality of this planet, but also a way for me to work out some quality of my own experience on this planet." This is what I mean by recognition: a moment of mutuality.

Nolan Oswald Dennis (b. 1988, Lusaka, Zambia) is an artist based in Johannesburg. Their practice explores the material and metaphysical conditions of decolonization, questioning histories of space and time through system-specific interventions. They hold a bachelor's degree in architecture from the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) and a master's degree in art, culture, and technology from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Their work has been the subject of solo exhibitions at Kunstinstituut Melly, Rotterdam; Swiss Institute, New York; and Zeitz MOCAA, Cape Town. They have been featured in group exhibitions at FRONT Triennial, Cleveland; the Lagos Biennial; the Liverpool Biennial; MACBA, Barcelona; Palais de Tokyo, Paris; Seoul Mediacity Biennale; the Shanghai Biennale; and the Young Congo Biennale, among others. They are a member of artist groups NTU and Index Literacy Program, a research associate with the VIAD Research Centre at the University of Johannesburg, and a member of the Édouard Glissant Art Fund Scientific Committee. They were invited by Koyo Kouoh to participate in the 61st Venice Biennale. Zoë Hopkins is a writer, scholar, and independent art critic. She is a PhD student in English at the University of Pennsylvania, where she focuses on experimental poetry and the poetics of the Black diaspora. Her writing on art has been published in *The New Yorker*, *Frieze*, *ArtReview*, *Hyperallergic*, and *The Brooklyn Rail*, in addition to several exhibition catalogues.

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