

Associate Exhibition 2024:
we went outside and it's the entire earth



Emelia Kerr Beale, Lucia Coppola, Jas Dhillon, Middleton Maddocks
Kenny Mala Ngombe, Nikki Sheth, Gwennan Thomas, Alex Vellis

Featuring new work made by OSE's Despacito Art School

Curated with Beatriz Lobo Britto

Thursday 27 — Sunday 30 June 2024

we went outside and it's the entire earth presents a series of artworks echoing artistic research grounded in community-building processes. Throughout 2023-24, the Open School East (OSE) Associate cohort investigated the forms, meanings and possibilities of socially embedded practices through a series of programmes: *Despacito Art School*, *Lacuna*, the Guest Project, the Artist-led Curriculum, and the Associate-led Public Programme. This exhibition foregrounds artistic development followed by a year's dedication to social practice and community-centred projects. It serves as a culmination of the Associates' studio practices, after experiences working outside of the studio and dreaming beyond themselves, alongside others.

This year's Artist-led Curriculum was based on the process-driven project titled *It's My Life, Don't You Forget*. The project was developed in collaboration with invited Lead Artist the vacuum cleaner, communities at The Beacon, a community mental health centre in Thanet, and Arts In Ramsgate (AiR), a not-for-profit inclusive and accessible arts community space and gallery in Ramsgate. OSE Associates delivered a programme of 10 workshops between January – April 2024. The programme embedded aspects of Associates' artistic practice in response to outpatient and staff member's needs and creative ideas. Each session created a space in which participants could platform and share their own experiences through art-making in a safe and accessible environment.

The Guest Project *Circulating Energies*, devised by artist Hugh Nicholson, was a four month cross-border programme between Open School East, Margate, and École Supérieure d'Art, Dunkirk, examining the interplay between energy production, ecology, and contemporary art. Dunkirk and Margate, separated by 80 kilometres, share intricate industrial and ecological ties with global repercussions. The programme included mentoring, reading groups, and seminars to explore contemporary art's response to these dynamics, investigating the limits and possibilities of artistic practice. *Circulating Energies* culminated in a performative workshop during the closing weekend symposium of Chaleur Humaine, Dunkirk Art and Industry Triennial 2023-24.

Integral to OSEs' efforts in community building and skill sharing, *Despacito Art School* is a project-based programme for young people aged 5 to 12 living in and around Cliftonville and Margate. *Lacuna* is a network programme for creative teachers and educators, a collaboration with Turner Contemporary and Arts Education Exchange. Both programmes often serve as fertile ground for collaborative projects with the Associates and invited artists. This year one of OSEs invited artists, Samara Scott, shared their methods and approaches as part of OSEs *Despacito Art School* and *Lacuna*. Samara collaborated with the groups to explore DIY processes and the use of non-traditional art materials, such as found textiles like bedsheets and old t-shirts. Utilising latex to experiment with mark-making and image transfer, the process focused on sharing live learnings and failures. Also in collaboration with Despacito Art School, Associates Emelia, Lucia, and Middleton developed *Wish You Were Here, The Disappearance of Fido* (2024). The installation emerged from a two-day performance and set-making workshop with the Despacito group, exploring storytelling and speculative fiction.

The Associate-led Public Programme, *Where Echo Lies*, explored the boundaries of human experience. Plunging into new depths, the programme was built on ideas around deep time and the unconscious mind. What forms of solace might be found in the night that cannot emerge in the light of day? What might we hear when surrounded by this darkness? Exploring myth making and spectatorship through performance and painting, audiences were invited to look inward and reflect on how human experience can help us understand what lies beneath the knowable.

Space-making, both conceptually and physically, appeared in the works of Kenny, Alex and Jas. They create spaces where one is allowed to refuse, or to speculate what becomes possible when authorship, and therefore authority, is dissolved. Spaces where people can exist beyond, before or in spite of what they represent. Spaces where the confluence of histories are welcome, held and embraced. These spaces may be created by the movement of bodies, the challenging of time, through sound or the physical transformation of a room into an environment that invites audiences to complete the work.

Works by Emelia, Kenny and Middleton present an opportunity for rehearsing new worlds. Reflecting on what came before and what we have now, the works point us to possible directions for what comes next, inviting us to practise before actualising it. Reminding us that we already have some of the answers for the questions that haunt us, and trust that the time to execute them will arrive, it is an invitation to experiment with what we have and get ready for what is yet to come.

Jas speaks about survival in the context of migration and imperial colonialism, while both Emelia and Gwennan have shared an interest in precarity, and what comes out of it. With no naivety about what people deserve and the multiple forms of violence that prevent most humans from living with dignity, the three artists explored the awe and creative potential that still thrives in resilience in all its forms, through aesthetics, community organising, and memory making.

The explorations of duality presented in the works of Nikki, Lucia and Gwennan provide us with the challenges of perception. While acknowledging that perspective is fundamentally bound to previous experiences and personal interpretation, the artists offer an opportunity to imagine otherwise. The works invite us to experience the world via sounds of the more-than-human, provoke feelings of doubt between fiction and reality, and subvert perceptions of value built through class systems and cultural background. As it becomes impossible to distinguish between 'me' and 'them', ideas of 'otherness' are dissolved altogether.

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The title of the exhibition is inspired by Fernando Pessoa's famous poem *The Tobacco Shop*. Written in 1928, the verses are a record of the time in which he lived, of rapid modernity and the uncertainty of feeling lost in the face of so many changes. It's a long-form poem that explores several questions, too many, one could say, from social to philosophical issues. Ultimately, it is a metaphysical poem and expresses fundamental questions around existence, mortality, purpose and futures. Similar questions have been explored through this year's Associate-led Programme *Where Echo Lies*, and remain foundational questions for socially embedded artistic practices. Despite the feelings of emptiness, loneliness and incomprehension that guide the poem, there is a recognition of possibilities. Regardless of how one perceives the world as it stands, there will be another world after this present world. We can dream about it, and we can build it now.

This exhibition serves as an opportunity for OSEs Associates to reflect on experiences, realise and share ideas as individual practitioners. This year, it comes as a result of Associates being immersed in community-centred projects, experiencing different people and places, sharing various feelings, and lives. They returned to the studios and, as individuals, continued carrying the knowledge, dreams and concerns that were once shared with their communities, which informed their works and together made we went outside and it's the entire earth.