



The Age of New Babylon

22 November - 12 December 2018

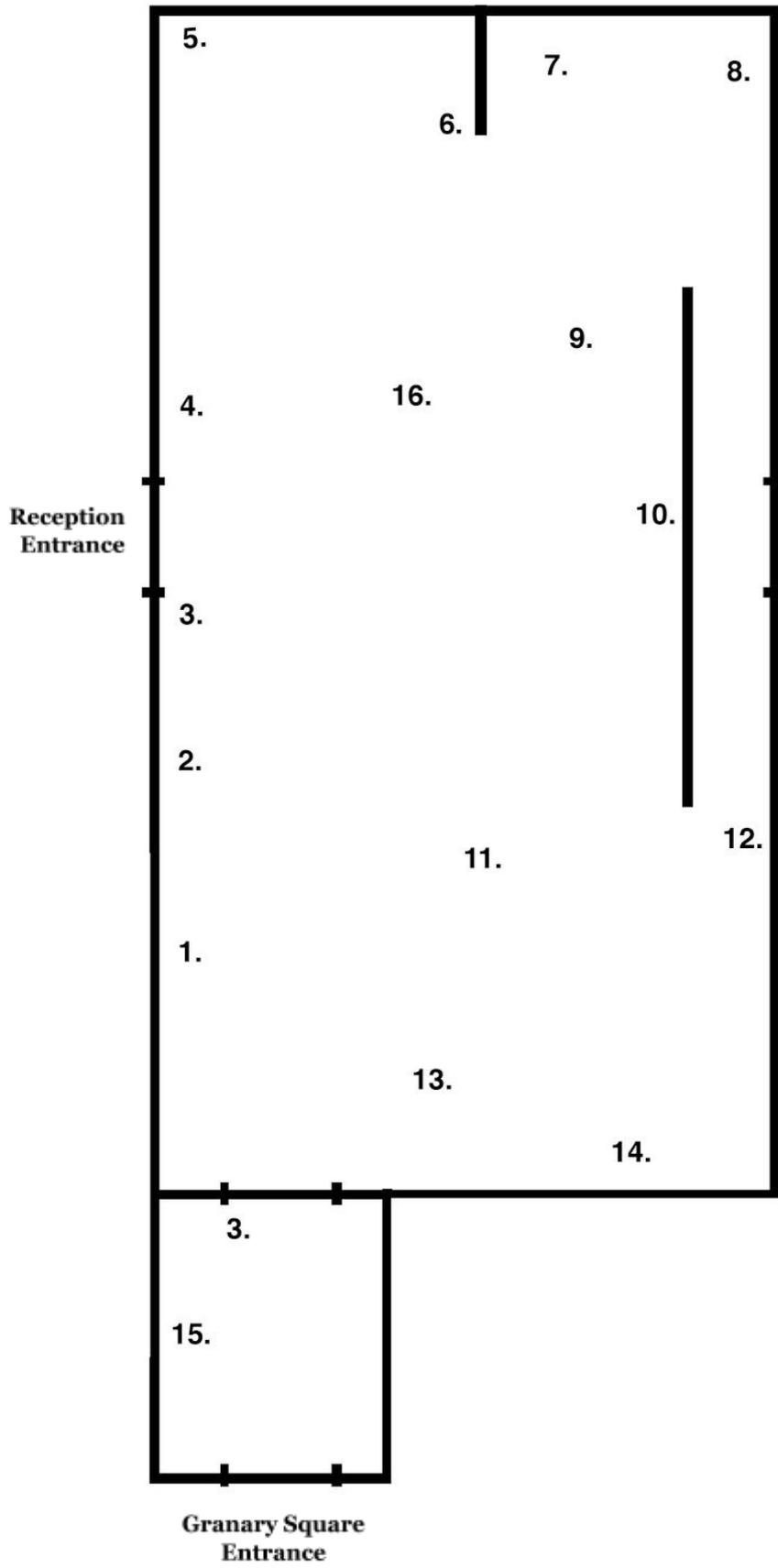
The Age of New Babylon is the first student-led exhibition in the Lethaby Gallery. Its title is a reference to the utopian city conceived and designed by Dutch artist Constant Nieuwenhuys between 1959–74. Perched above ground, Constant's *New Babylon* was conceived as a gathering of informality and performance, a future home for *Homo Ludens* – man at play. This radical proposal inspired us to examine the different realities that could emerge from the lived experiences of today.

Constant abandoned *New Babylon* after realising the inherent dread of a social utopia. Our principal commitment is to the role of imaginative gestures as interventions and ways of proposing future potentialities. We wish to expand the idea of an **image** to encompass anything which activates the imagination – whether that be a visual work or a piece of sound or text. Traditionally, such images were a way of organising the world into fixed cultures and histories. However with the rise of new technologies, images have gained the ability to multiply and spread, allowing them to slip out of their frames and gain new life as performative beings.

As a result, an ever-changing fluidity displaces things that were previously seen as fixed – such as the recurring nature of selfies compared to a definitive portrait. Our use of the term **live-archive** is a direct reference to this dual nature of the contemporary image. Here, we have curated the works to express the same rhythm and dynamism that gives the images of today their seductive openness, highlighting the endless remixing of our bodies with visual, linguistic and poetic objects.

We believe that live-archiving can help to reframe our understanding of **otherness** by conveying the multiplicities contained within ourselves and the networks we inhabit. This approach helps us to understand that things are in constant flow and flux. It shows that without a clear centre and periphery, everything has the potential for **difference** and centrality at one and the same time. The varied nature of the works in this show allows us to highlight their multiple functions as opposed to their form – to see being out-of-sync as the rhythm of the contemporary and to uncover new modes of knowledge. In doing so, we believe that these artworks can help to express a poetry of togetherness.

Samboleap Tol and Sara Gulamali (Curators)



Floorplan

1. **Maria Mahfooz**, Dad dancing, 2018
2. **Abbas Zahedi**, Neo-Babylon Juice, 2018
3. **Sid and Jim**, Ask Your Parents, 2018
4. **Neale Willis**, A Practice Run at a Lucid Dream, 2018
5. **Moza Almatrooshi**, The Guest Palm Tree, 2018
6. **Alaa Kassim**, Mother Other, 2018
7. **Grace Black**, 55 Bolina Road, 2018
8. **Abundance Matanda**, We will be Dead Tings, 2018
9. **Abbas Zahedi**, The Boulevard, 2018
10. **Yili Liu** and **Mingjing Yu**, Rowing in the Desert
and Ploughing in the Wave, 2018
11. **Imann Gaye**, Can you dance Mbalax?, 2018
12. **Sandra Poulson**, 8+1, 2018
13. **I-M Jerome** and **Jannat Hussain**, Red Through Red, 2018
14. **Amina Osmanu**, tell me, 2018
15. **An Viet Foundation**, 15 purple velvet chairs, 2018
16. **Hannah Smythe**, Postcards, 2018

Talks, Performances and Events

Thursday 22 November, 6–9pm

The Private View will feature live works, performances and social gestures including:

Abbas Zahedi, *The Boulevard*

Alaa Kassim, *Mother Other*

Samboleap Tol, *The Babylonians*

Paprika Collective, *INFLUX, REFLUX, EXFLUX*

Friday 23 November, 2–6pm

Performances:

I-M Jerome and Jannat Hussain, *Red Through Red*, 2–3pm

Yemi Alade, *Unity*, 5–6pm

Saturday 24 November, 2–4pm

Panel Discussion: *Of Other Futures*:

Artist Abbas Zahedi will host *Of Other Futures*, a panel discussion exploring the potentiality of otherness within the scope of contemporary art practice. Zahedi will be joined by curators Paul Goodwin, Annie Jael Kwan and Cédric Fauq.

Tuesday 27 November, 1–3pm

Performance: Alaa Kassim, *Mother Other*

Wednesday 28 November, 2–4pm

Talk: *Distributed Spaces 04: On the Move Part 2*

Central Saint Martins academics Liz Wright and Anthony Davies have invited educationalists and activists Sheyla Maria Alves de Melo and Priscila Mastro to talk about the “New Babylon” of the favelas and occupied housing struggle in Brazil. Wright and Davies will reflect on their work with Melo, Mastro and others in São Paulo as part of the Distributed Spaces model. They will focus on the efficacy of offline communications in supporting community led self-representation and struggles of resistance.

Friday 30 November, 1–3pm

Performance: Alaa Kassim, *Mother Other*

Tuesday 4 December, 1–5pm

Performance: Alaa Kassim, *Mother Other*, 1–3pm

Workshop: Raju Rage, *From other to another*, 1-5pm

In this workshop, artist Raju Rage will invite participants to devise a performance or artwork using the concept of the body as a living archive. This workshop is free to attend and open to all.

Wednesday 5 December, 7–8.30pm

Talk: Cédric Fauq, *Curating for the Age of Blackness*

In this talk, Cédric Fauq delineates the historical relationship between blackness and exhibitions to better unlock their common potentials. The ambition is to instigate new thought around exhibition-making as “in and through” blackness rather than about it.

Friday 7 December, 1–3pm

Performance: Alaa Kassim, *Mother Other*

Tuesday 11 December, 1–3pm

Performance: Alaa Kassim, *Mother Other*

List of works

Hannah Smythe, *Postcards*, 2018

Print and handwriting on cardboard, 14.8cm x 10.5cm

Smythe sent postcards to ex-tutors and alumni with the request that they be redelivered to the Lethaby Gallery once filled with the recipient's reflections and experiences about Central Saint Martins. The participants are united in both their distance and connection to the College – emotional and financial. Initiating this archive in the gallery brings together the worldly scattering of this group while documenting their varying opinions on the institution.

Neale Willis, *A Practice Run at a Lucid Dream*, 2018

Speaker, wires, scaffold, computer, financial data, algorithms

An algorithm constructs a strange language-like system, attempting to detail a story it doesn't know. The story is recounted to an artificial intelligence which in turn tries to make sense of the narrative and repeat it back to us. A soundscape constructed from public UAL financial statements, shaped and performed by cooperation between bespoke algorithms and artificial intelligence, the result is a call out from and to the institution.

Moza Almatrooshi, *The Guest Palm Tree*, 2018

21 sheets of A4 paper, palm tree

Almatrooshi's work is an archival process which calls out UCL's refusal of the artist's request to plant a palm tree on campus. A symbolically "orientalised" object, the palm tree actually spreads across the world and is not specific to one region. It also denotes placemaking, economic and political relations. Here, the correspondence between the artist and the institution is printed on handmade paper from Saffron Lokma and Tibetan Tea – both foreign to the UK and which often fall prey to acts of exoticising.

Grace Black, *55 Bolina Road*, 2018

Ceramic, fluorescent light, wooden platform, 120cm x 120cm x 40cm

In this installation, Black presents hand-built objects and sculptural forms born out of her recent research into a specific site. Referencing bodily and architectural structures, the work draws on uses of the built environment in methods of control and defence. This is combined with ambiguous ceramic skeletal structures. Black's practice draws on her own encounters, photo-documentation and drawings, which go through cycles of processes and objects.

Sid and Jim, *Ask Your Parents*, 2018

Bookmark, folded paper, chair, maquette, 30cm x 20cm

On show are discarded and repurposed fragments taken from the design process for the utopian housing development The Shangri La Towers in Terry Gilliam's film *Brazil*, 1985. An architectural sketch is wedged under the leg of the invigilator's unstable chair, the design plan for the cooling towers is printed on a bookmark and a maquette acts as a doorstep to the gallery entrance.

Yili Liu and Mingjing Yu, *Rowing in the Desert and Ploughing in the Wave*, 2018

Video, 4:49 minutes and 0:49 minutes, looped

This video collaboration presents the irony of the impossible: to sail a boat in the desert or to plough the sea. While the depicted actions may seem to have no use, they explore the notion of "action without action" – hard work with no results.

Abondance Matanda, *We will be Dead Things*, 2018

Picture frame, trainers, empty vase, birthday card, MP3 player

Matanda's shrine is made in recognition of the existence and survival of girls like her who have grown up "in the hood and are just tryna make it through or out." The soundscape is composed of audio clips from Black British women who have worked in music this century alongside the "occasional old school American tune." The mix is devised to articulate the range of emotions and experiences black women have, without altering their voices or modes of expression.

Zeinab Saleh, *Trevi Fountain*, 2018

Inkjet print on synthetic silk, 130cm x 80cm

The Trevi Fountain is an icon of Rome's imperial history and, in more recent times, the Italian colonial Empire presence in Somalia. In Saleh's collage, power is subverted and the Somali woman is seen in a position of dominance – an alter ego ready to make demands. The work reflects on fascism, trauma and the afterlives of colonialism.

Amina Osmanu, *tell me*, 2018

Film and audio, 7:27 minutes

Osmanu uses personal, tacit, YouTube and collective archives in her video work. She references music videos from her childhood, contemporary films, 80s Western newsreels and “ethnic” footage among other sources – all of which hold the pretence of telling the truth. With her voice altered within a techno-like soundscape, Osmanu juxtaposes these against her own audio production: her versus the media machineries.

Maria Mahfooz, *Dad dancing*, 2018

Film and audio, 3:39 minutes

For Mahfooz, who identifies as a female British Pakistani Muslim, “Dad dancing” allows for the navigation of her bicultural sense of self, while using tropes of failure and clichéd signifiers of ethnic identity. The performance of traditional, masculine dancing by two brown, female bodies straddles these disparate spheres, representing diaspora not only on the screen but within the context of the institution.

Private View Performances

Abbas Zahedi, *The Boulevard*, 2018

Paper roll, clothing rail, food

The Boulevard is a green-screen which extends across the floor of the gallery. It is designed to slow down audience passage and invite them to share in a provincial meal. The generous gesture of this *live-archive* feeds the notion that a green-screen can be anything – a flower, an image or even a community.

Alaa Kassim, *Mother Other*, 2018

A green figure will perform poetry and interrogate visitors in the space. When the figure is not performing, her costume and transcripts of her interact will be displayed in a designated area. The work asks: what does alienation in a city of alienated aliens look like? How is otherness performed?

Samboleap Tol, *The Babylonians*, 2018

30 mins

Tol explores the multiplicities of her body of friends and friends' bodies in the contemporary art space through instructed actions and improvised performances. This work encompasses trained musicians reacting to artworks, a convivial jam in the dark and an invitation to harmonize together.

PAPRIKA Collective: *INFLUX, REFLUX, EXFLUX*, 2018

Artists: Helen Davison, Ada Hao, Eunjung Kim, Boram Moon, Chloe Nili, Panic Attack Duo (Emilia Demetriou, Naz Balkaya), Demelza Toy Toy.

This work brings together a group of performance artists who deal with self-othering and social abjection, where power is constituted through forms of inclusive exclusion. This will be a singular event: the artists will enter the gallery space and leave with no remnants or documentation of the action. The space is then engaged with the agency to act, to generate, to grow and to commence the future actions taking place.

Ongoing Performances

Yemi Alade, *UNITY*, 2018

UNITY relies on contact improvisation, as the performers collectively react to elements such as physical touch, momentum, balance, sound and intuition. This process bring dancers with diverse practices and styles together through a unifying goal of emotive and organic expression.

I-M Jerome and Jannat Hussain, *Red Through Red*, 2018

Red Through Red explores the ideals of friendship, including trust and vulnerability and the process of becoming familiar with the otherwise unknown. Through these concepts the performers will embrace the intuitive exchange of live written language as a means of exploring otherness.

Imann Gaye, *Can you dance Mbalax?*, 2018

The dance music genre Mbalax has been present in Gaye's everyday life since she moved with her family to Dakar: music playing in taxis, family dancing in the kitchen, people dancing in the streets. *Can you dance mbalax?* retraces seven days as she learned the basic dance moves with family and with new acquaintances. The work will evolve weekly, with additions every Wednesday for the duration of the exhibition.

Mati Jhurry, *Working Title [EK-Basically allovertheplace and constantly tired]*, 2018–2021

Jhurry's performance encompasses her work as a flight stewardess for Emirates airline. The performance will last three years – the full length of one contract. Jhurry has now been flying for over a month. You may encounter windows or small openings onto this performance in the form of video or voice calls throughout the duration of this exhibition.

Sandra Poulson, *8+1*, 2018

Garments, shelf

8+1 is a reflection on group dynamics and the influence of external bodies onto the way related bodies operate together. It consists of nine identical garments – which are folded and shelved, available for activation by the audience, who are invited to handle the dresses.

An Viet Foundation

15 purple velvet chairs

We express our gratitude to An Viet Foundation (AVF) for their generous donation of 15 chairs. AVF is a community centre in Hackney for the Vietnamese community, including refugees and asylum seekers. For over 35 years, it has provided language support, employment training, business advice, health and social activities, the first Vietnamese UK housing association, a restaurant and a Southeast Asian research institute for PhD students. We would also like to thank Cường Phạmalam and William Pham for their support.

Interview with Samboleap Tol

Abbas Zahedi: OK, so how do you want to intro the show?

Samboleap Tol: Well, *The Age of New Babylon* is the first student-led show at the Lethaby Gallery, which I am co-curating with Sara Gulamali. Perhaps the reason I chose to go with *New Babylon* as a reference is because I am keen to blend what art and life is – like how people did in the post-war period. I think I'm kind of doing the same thing.

AZ: Can you explain why this reference in particular? Because I don't think anyone in the College was thinking about *New Babylon* until you came along.

ST: I'm Dutch and when I was in the Netherlands – one of the rare times that I was in my native country – I saw an exhibition by Constant Nieuwenhuys, who was part of the avant-garde movement COBRA and the Situationists. He was a Dutch architect and artist and he created this imaginal world – an anti-capitalistic city in which people could only play. I think he was really attracted to this idea of play and what that could really do for the future of humanity.

He translated his idea through an effort which took years to complete. He made all these architectural models, which you really couldn't scale, along with thousands of sketches. Walking into the exhibition was like walking into his mind. That was very inspiring, just to experience this almost insane commitment to realising an idea. I was really attracted to that. So when I initially made the exhibition proposal in March, I was thinking about the energy one could get from just expressing how you could view the world. Maybe in this time we're all very careful that. So I think I get a lot of energy from taking the risk to express how an individual can imagine the world.

AZ: So is this what the show is? Your own imagining of a new world?

ST: No, I think I've always been more interested in the tool of imagination rather than what the outcome is. As opposed to what Constant did, where he is very specific about wanting to have an anti-capitalistic world where you only play, I was mostly inspired by the tool of imagination. This was the emphasis of my approach to the show and the selection of artists. We portrayed it as something that's constantly in flux. So imagination almost becomes like a verb rather than a static, fixed idea that should be realised. I think it's the sense of unrealised potential that I'm most attracted to.

AZ: The works in the show include different disciplines and practices. Are you then saying that the thing that ties them together is the imaginative potential, or the use of imagination within each work?

ST: Yes definitely, and maybe the imaginative potential does tie into what Constant talks about in terms of play. What do you think about what you've seen so far from the show?

AZ: When I think about imagination, I think of what an image is. I see it in the sense that an image is anything that activates imagination. So the "images" in the show really play into the idea that anything can be an image – text, sound or performance. For me, these function in the most interesting way, in terms of how they activate the imagination of a viewer and that's actually where the performance is happening.

ST: Yeah, it's exactly that – the performance is happening in your head when you view the works in the show. For example Yili's work, she's rowing in the desert and it's a wide shot of her in the Sahara, where she brought this boat and she starts rowing. You look at the image and you don't know whether it's real or unreal, whether it's photoshopped or not. Then when you discover that she actually went there and smuggled her boat into Morocco, you start imagining what that journey must have been like and what drives a person to commit to an idea like that. It also shows this feeling of potentiality, in terms of being interested in what she might do next as an individual. I think this is one of the qualities that makes someone a really interesting artist, having the feeling of excitement of not knowing what comes next. This applies to all the artists who we have in the show.

AZ: It seems there's a lot of opportunities to bring people together and establish ephemeral communities or gatherings of togetherness. Was it always your intention to have this convivial aspect to the show?

ST: Togetherness as a concept is something that I've been researching for a long time. I bring it into the gallery to try and put it under a "microscope."

When we look at sociological reports, such as the recent BBC report, we learn that we are very lonely, in a situation often referred to as networked-solitude. As a child of parents who survived war as orphans themselves, I've sensed a particular feeling of being isolated because I wasn't part of any community. So there's this almost tribal desire to be with people and to feel connected and in-sync with people. There are contemporary artists, such as Hito Steyerl, who talk about the quality of being contemporary as being out of sync and being fractured. The current situation seems so fragmented.

AZ: When you talk about this tribal desire to be part of something in a collective sense, it brings to mind aspects of the show which relate to music and the performative elements of club culture and live shows which you find sort of repeated here.

ST: Yeah, there's a music video in the show and there's also a band which I put together with my friends, in which we really explore this idea and "technologies" of togetherness and intuition. The tribal reference in particular comes from psychoanalyst Erich Fromm who wrote a book called *The Art of Loving*, in which he considers how mankind was part of nature but got uprooted from it. He writes that we can still remember what it was like to be a part of nature, to not be so self-conscious and then he talks about being in the womb and how that is also still in our memory, also a feeling of what it's like to just be part of nature. He then talks about how we try to find our way back to that feeling, by going to clubs, taking drugs, having sex, through mad rituals, but I don't know whether that's all necessarily true.

In the same way that being out of sync is quite interesting, I think the variety of works in the show that are physical or ephemeral portrays this too. There are some elements which extend beyond the physical place of the gallery, such as calls from Mati who is undertaking a performance for three years as a flight stewardess and will use the show as a check-in point. So she should be calling every now and then for the whole three weeks. And then there's Imann who is in Senegal and she's sending updates through a monitor.

AZ: I've been involved in the development of the show from quite early on, so everything you're saying to me sounds familiar, but how do you envisage someone who has no relationship to this reacting when they walk into the space?

ST: It depends on when they walk in, but when they do they might think, "okay this is different" because of how the show is designed aesthetically. There are cut flowers in different nooks and it kind of feels like there's been a flower intervention. Also there are no plinths and there are no frames. Stuff is on the floor – a monitor, for example, is not hung up. It's curated and un-curated.

Maybe in terms of the exhibition design, people might think it's different or interesting but it's also quite familiar. A lot of the things that are happening in the show, people are doing in real life too. Again, like with Mati – she calls via Skype. There's a little shrine with shoes and an empty vase and a birthday card by Abundance Matanda. She just uses her life and then puts that on show. She says this is her artwork and I resonate with that. There's a bottle of rum in there and when I look at that I guess I get memories from when I was

16 being drunk off my first bottle of rum. I'm not saying whatever is happening is what you should put inside a gallery but, instead, these are works which talk about life and so they elicit this familiar feeling but sit quite differently in here.

AZ: It's interesting when you talk about the plants and the role of nature in the show, going back to the previous reference to Erich Fromm, but also at the same time we're talking about performativity and images having a fluidity. So there's this relationship between nature as something that changes throughout the course of the show, but the technological interventions are also changing. For instance, Neale's speaker is an automated response to the information about the institution's finances and there are other video works which are updated and changing throughout the course of the show. So, this kind of reaches this point where the distinction between nature and technology is being lost, just becoming about movement and change.

ST: Philosophically I like the idea of things being in flux – maybe it's my Buddhist background. Looking at life as linear means that something happens in the past and which determines what's happening in the present and the present determines what will be happening in the future. I see life as a bit more cyclical. That said, nature and function in that way for some reason – they are networked and reacting to each other, it's interpenetration. I don't resist this. I am banking on my intuition and being in the moment. The work that I am presenting in the Private View is all of us asking to be that way.

AZ: When I think of the approach of the sixties and seventies, where we talk about Fluxus, I feel there was a kind of banking on everything being hyper-fluid and maybe a lack of acknowledgement towards the archival aspect. Would you agree?

ST: Yeah I think the proliferation of the fixed, of being fixated on the fixed, had a really big backlash after the second world war. What happens after such a destruction is that everybody starts from scratch in some sort of sense and they know what they don't really want. I'm really inspired by these post-war art movements because they have a real sense of potentiality; they really want to do something but they do not necessarily want to do what their ancestors did and I feel kind of the same way.

AZ: I think now when we talk about it, there seems to be a reaction to their reaction in the kind of identity discourses borne out of the same power dynamics that gives us this resurgence of right-wing fascism. These movements are trying to find a centre or trying to fix what is apparently very fluid.

ST: I have so many thoughts on this but I'm aware of time and would like to ask what you think is exciting about the show?

AZ: I think there's a sensual aspect that has to be felt. If we look at the whole show as this spread of latent potential, then when a body is in the space it activates the imagination in a very strong way. For me that's really exciting and especially when the physicality of the works are fairly minimal, there is enough of a gesture to activate a sense of the uncanny. This brings me back to Neale's work, an anthropomorphic noise-making device running off of the information contained in UAL's financial statements. It's kind of bonkers but at the same time there are humans whose job it is to maintain those records so this machine has a kind of mirroring quality to the institution and what these spaces can do to bodies.

ST: Yeah and a similar work that's less automatic is Hannah Smythes' work where she asks Central Saint Martins alumni and Diploma in Professional Studies students who are away from the College but still have a close relationship to it, to send postcards to the Lethaby Gallery. She asks them how they feel about the institution and so this work talks about this exchange between the bodies and the structure, which is also similar to Moza's work – the email exchange regarding her palm tree.

AZ: I think it's interesting how when we think about the kind of technological future that's looming, everyone seems to be worried about the whole robot reality and often artists are presented as being in a very precarious position because if you can automate creativity well then why do you need artists? But at the same time it seems that artists are really responding in a playful way to this foreshadowing.

ST: Artists are the hackers really and they will find the cracks and they're going to sit on the cracks and chill there for a bit. Then they will ask their artist friends to come and chill in these cracks and they will open up the crack further. Then on the other side of the world there's more cracks, so artists will always sit on some sort of crack – whether it's technological, social, economic or political instability. They will always sit somewhere uncomfortable just to find out what it's like and then call their friends to come over. I think that's exciting; I want to be that person.

AZ: I think I can see that in the show.

Reading List

The organisers and curators of this exhibition have compiled a reading list to accompany the show and expand upon its works and themes.

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Curators Note

It was important for us to ensure that the vision of this show was at the forefront of every curatorial decision Sam and I made.

Being in my final year, and Sam having just graduated, curating a large-scale show in a space such as the Lethaby Gallery was extremely daunting. However, despite how challenging the experience was at times, it has given us an immeasurable amount of knowledge as both curators and artists alike.

Sam and I were able to create a show that worked for both of us and I will always be grateful this partnership.

I also respect curators a lot more.

Despite our position as curators, neither Sam or I ever lost our role as artists. Our interventions throughout the space act as an ode to our own creativity – a gift to our audience which we hope you appreciate.

This show is an accumulation of months of stress, tears, breakdowns, laughter and pure elation. To have you all finally see what has consumed our lives is such an exciting moment and we hope that you are as excited by our artists and concepts as we were.

To everyone who supported us through this, thank you.

On to the next one!

Sara Gulamali

Thanks

We would like to thank:

Kate Pelen, Kathryn Lloyd, Jo Ortman, Alexander Shady, Christiane Brittain and the rest of the Central Saint Martins, UAL team for helping us develop this exhibition.

The Lethaby Gallery team for giving us this opportunity and believing in us.

International Curators Forum, Asia-Art-Activism, The University of the Arts London Research Centre for Transnational Art, Identity and Nation (TrAIN), Decolonising the Arts Curriculum zine team for their continuous support of our ideas.

An Viet Foundation, especially Cuong Pham, and our production assistant Martha Armitage.

Square Root Soda Works

The original New Babylon group.

All the artists, speakers and researchers in the show.

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We would especially like to thank Abbas Zahedi.

LETHABY GALLERY

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Opening times: Tuesday to Friday 11am - 6pm

Saturday: 12pm - 5pm

The Age of New Babylon's exhibition is supported by:

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