Whyte & Zettergren (Olando Whyte and Rut Karin Zettergren): *Galaxy Revolution* (2025)
Idiorrhythmic Imaginaries research exhibition in Kuva/Tila gallery, 5–21 December 2025, Academy of Fine Arts, University of the Arts Helsinki.
Photo: Petri Summanen

HEALING THROUGH SPACE TRAVEL: AN INTERVIEW WITH RUT KARIN ZETTERGREN FROM WHYTE & ZETTERGREN

Lyenne Palü

Jamaican-Swedish artist duo Whyte&Zettergren's work explores transatlantic histories, tracing places and materials, and using healing practices to confront historical trauma and imagine alternative futures.

Transatlantic cultural heritages, healing practices, and speculative space travel form the constellation at the heart of Whyte&Zettergren's latest work Galaxy Revolution—Space travel as a tool for change.

The duo, consisting of Swedish visual artist Rut Karin Zettergren and Jamaican dancer and performance artist Olando Whyte, have collaborated since 2018, when they began tracing connections between the Nordics and the Caribbean through sites historically linked to the triangular trade. Bringing their different cultural contexts and artistic methods into dialogue, they work with objects crafted from materials extracted, manufactured, or exported from these places, developing practices that open pathways for world-building and healing.

On the day of our conversation, Olando cannot join us due to Hurricane Melissa, which struck Jamaica days earlier. Despite these difficult circumstances, Rut Karin shares insights into their collaborative practice.

Lyenne Palü: How is Olando doing at the moment?

Rut Karin Zettergren: He lives in Kingston, which, compared to other parishes, was not affected by the hurricane as badly, but there's still a lot of heavy damage. Trees have fallen on his roof, which needs rebuilding now, but it's still raining. So we are trying to organise some support to help with this right now.

And you were there yourself only a few days ago.

Yes, by the time I left for Finland, we already knew a tropical storm was on its way, but not yet whether it would hit Jamaica directly or how strong it would be. So I have been watching news updates all week, and when it hit land on Tuesday, it turned out to be their strongest hurricane recorded in history. With climate change, of course, these are getting stronger and more frequent. It's the third time in three years now that Olando has had to fix his roof because of storms or enormous rainfall.

That's a lot to go through. And what you're describing also already connects to the themes you address in your work together with Olando—how upheld power structures and violent histories continue to shape the present, for instance.

In Jamaica—and really everywhere—you can't separate climate change from colonialism and the old plantation economy. The indigenous population didn't plant the land in the same way before that. Jamaica has volcanic bedrock, the soil isn't very deep, and there were rainforests. But with the sugarcane monoculture, big parts of the island were deforested, and later the bauxite mining also cleared and damaged huge areas. The soil doesn't hold in the same way anymore. So the landslides and all the damage now, they're definitely connected to that history.

Your collaboration as the artist duo Whyte&Zettergren began in 2018. Can you share with us how you met and what places of interest you were both coming from at that time?

Olando and I are both working together, but we are also partners privately. In 2014, I was filming a project about Dancehall in Jamaica. I was interested in this music genre and how it had come to the Nordic countries. That's how I met him, because he's a dancer.

When we started collaborating, the question of how coloniality has shaped both Jamaica and Sweden was very present. Our first project together, *Herring, Iron, Gunpowder, Humans and Sugar,* traced materials and places across the two countries.

One starting point was when we were in a supermarket in Jamaica, and I was like, "Why do you have salted herring here?" because the herring fishery and industry is really big on Tjörn, the island where I grew up. Only then did we find out why it's also part of the local culture in Jamaica: it was exported from the Nordic region as a cheap source of protein for enslaved people during the transatlantic triangular slave trade—to maintain their labor capacity in this very brutal system. For Sweden, even if it wasn't the largest player in the triangular trade, it was an economic surplus to export salt fish—and still, in the Nordic regions, these histories haven't really been told.

So in our work, we explore these material histories that connect our countries, as well as their differences and how they've played out. In Jamaica, of course, the impact is more extreme; the culture is still shaped by this violent history. In Sweden, these legacies are more subtly embedded, for example, in cultural practices like Fika, which has its roots in colonial goods.

Our artistic practices also met in this context. Olando began to draw more on Afro-Jamaican rituals from his heritage, developing them into performance and ritual forms that are not exactly traditional but adapted—using materials from the places we work in, combining them with contemporary art approaches.

Is he choosing not to do these rituals in their historic form in order to keep them separate from his artistic practice?

That, but also because these more original forms of healing practices can in certain circumstances be read as rituals that are illegal in Jamaica. Jamaica has a law called *The Obeah Act* that was introduced under a different name, *An Act to Remedy the Evils arising from Irregular Assemblies of Slaves*, after the big slave uprising *Tacky's Rebellion* in 1760. These communal rituals were believed to make the practitioners

immortal—that the bullets of the enslavers couldn't hurt them. Whether the British colonial authorities actually believed this is questionable, since witchcraft was legal in Great Britain at the time. But the community-building aspect of Obeah traditions made the enslaved people strong enough to organise uprisings, which was very dangerous for the colonialists. And because the Black population outnumbered the White population in Jamaica, the colonial violence had to be very high to prevent further uprisings.

So after that, they had a death penalty for what was defined to be Obeah, and later on they rewrote it to be called *The Obeah Act* in 1898. Today, the police can still search your house and arrest you on suspicion of practising Obeah. The law is debated and rarely used, but people are sometimes held without charge or asked for bribes. This year, a case went to court and the person was fined. And the definition is so broad in the sense that you're not allowed to use what they call "tools of Obeah," which can be a candle, silver rings, herbs, rum, water or soil. So in theory every church service could fall under this, but Christianity is very strong in Jamaica and it's only people practicing more traditional Afro-Jamaican traditions who are targeted.

For Olando, his performance and dance practices are a lot about healing. In our collaboration, he has brought in this knowledge, while I contribute mine from fine art, filming, sculpture, and thinking through performance scores.

Now I've shared a lot of historical background, but I think if you're coming from a Western perspective, these things might be harder to understand without it, since they're rooted in a very specific Jamaican context. I'm sharing these practices from my perspective as someone who is not Jamaican and doesn't have the same depth of cultural knowledge as Olando, while he would likely describe our work and his practice differently, informed by his heritage and culture.

Still image of Whyte & Zettergren conducting geological training in a former sulphur mine near Lake Mývatn, Iceland. Image credit: Bryndís Björnsdóttir

In *Idiorrhythmic Imaginaries*, you're showing Galaxy Revolution—Space travel as a tool for reimagination. It's an interactive work combining game instructions, stories, research notes, drawings, and videos of space training practices, amongst other things. Could you tell us about how this work developed and how the healing practices enter into it?

We were invited by Bryndís Björnsdóttir to do a project in Iceland that explored the country's colonial histories. We were a small group of artists, and Bryndís organised lectures for us. In one of them, we learnt that Iceland had been used to train the Apollo 11 astronauts. Because its volcanic landscapes were believed most similar to the moon, they used it to practice collecting moon dust—which we found really fascinating.

In my own work, I engage a lot with speculative fiction from a feminist point of view, thinking about different worlds and futures, reading authors like Ursula K. Le Guin or Alice Bradley Sheldon (who published as James Tiptree Jr). Olando was drawn to space in his own way, through dreams, music and drawings, and through what he named "Yaad Futurism"—a local Jamaican perspective on futurity that draws on the yard, the word for homestead. So, our interests met in thinking about space, in connecting it to colonial histories and seeing the space race as a form of continuing colonisation.

We learnt that Iceland doesn't have an official governmental space agency. There is a private organisation called the Iceland Space Agency, initially formed by just one guy. So we thought, "Okay, we can have our own space agency too." What the astronauts did in Iceland we've found out by visiting the locations and talking to Örlygur Hnefill Örlygsson at the Exploration Museum in Húsavík. There, we saw materials left by the astronauts and learnt how they trained in geology. When we revisited these places, we did our own practices for our space travelling programme, quite spontaneously coming up with exercises like drawing in the sand and imagining journeys to different planets.

Being in a place that carries its own mythologies of technological progress and conquest, I was curious how you chose to engage with it—how to complicate or resist these dominant narratives that tend to erase marginalised histories?

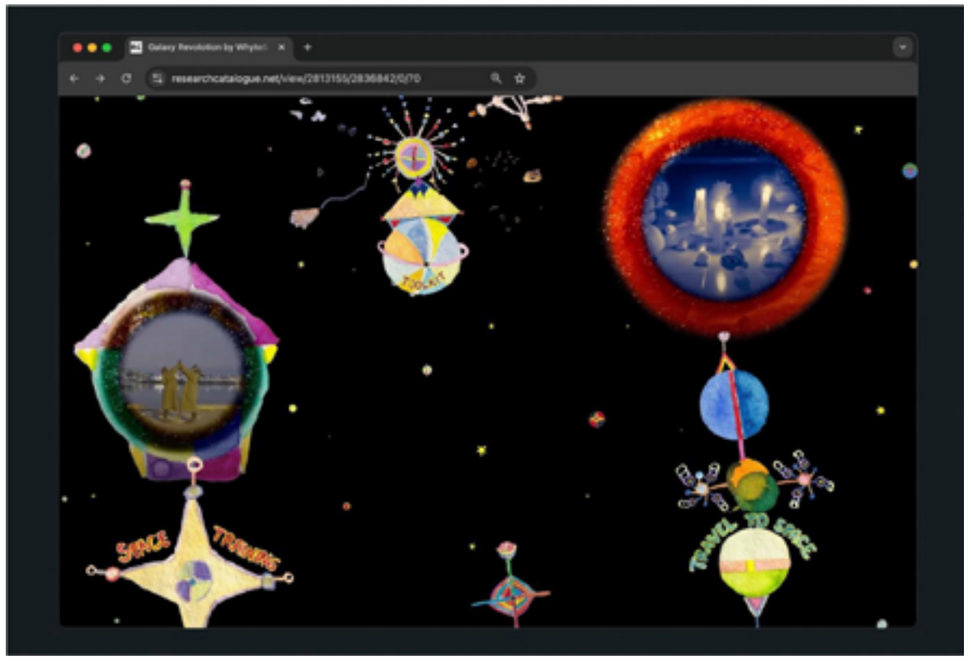
I think for us it was more about reimagination. Of course, the Apollo program and NASA produced a lot of research and technological development, but there are these grand narratives carrying this idea of progression that is closely tied to colonisation; we see it in how Elon Musk or Jeff Bezos imagine life in space. Imagining different futures is important, because otherwise it's only people like them shaping these visions—neural links in your brain, mining on Mars, or living in free-floating space pod colonies. Because they have so much money, they get to make these predictions.

Instead of continuing that predominant tradition, we are interested in more imaginative practices: feminist speculative fiction, Afrofuturism, local futurism—ways of imagining space as somewhere you could be free or where the world could be different. So parts of our space-travelling programme became almost like a game, a bit like how children play, rather than a hard industrial programme. Others are more like ritual acts. These games or practices help you envision another future, and imagining a different future can also prompt you to change the present.

For Olando, the ritual side is also a connection to the past, to ancestors or people who aren't here anymore. He has a different perspective on time than I do; the boundaries between a spiritual and a physical plane feel less separate to him. I'm more shaped by Western thinking, but I'm trying to invite his perspective and not reproduce the same hierarchy.

I was struck by the poetic gesture in Act 1 of your launch ceremony, where you turn a model of an old trading ship into a spaceship. You describe this as a "healing practice for the space race," bringing objects that witness historical trauma into the future. What does it mean, for you, to carry historical trauma forward, and how can this act function as a form of healing or transformation?

I think it's partly an act of remembering. Even if you imagine a different life in space, you're still formed by history. In Olando's case, very personal experiences shaped by the violent history of Jamaica—and specifically his own community—



Screen capture of the exposition *Galaxy Revolution*, published in *VIS: Nordic Journal of Artistic Research*, no. 13, *Breftopia*.

influence how he works and why he can do these actions. So, carrying that history doesn't mean reproducing it; it's about bringing the knowledge of the past into the future.

It's similar with feminism. The oppression of women has shaped what feminism is and its practices of care. If that oppression had never existed, technology might have been developed very differently from the beginning. The same with colonies—the world would look very different. But since this is our history, remembering the trauma becomes a way of knowing how to act, or how not to act—a way of acting in the world differently.

In the exhibition, I wondered what you expected the audience to engage with in your work. In the instructions I read that they are invited to "(mis)use" your methods to reshape the past, present, and future in their own ways. I'm curious how you mean that and how you navigate the challenges of remixing histories and rituals without unintentionally appropriating or simplifying complex cultural traumas.

We hadn't thought about it that way—we imagined that wherever you are, you could explore a practice of your own. Not by doing Afro-Jamaican rituals, but by developing a ritual from your own culture as a practice to reimagine. So, "misusing" our methods can mean anything; it's an invitation: one person might imagine a future without genders, another a future without money. For us, it made sense to work in a greenhouse or in places where the Apollo astronauts trained. For others, it might be somewhere in their own community. The idea is to open up possibilities rather than prescribe a specific outcome.

When you imagine visiting other beings or planets, what do you want to learn from that experience? How do these imaginative journeys shape your perspectives?

I feel that these fictive journeys are really about seeing the world in a different way—returning to the present with a shifted perspective. Sometimes it's almost like meditating together: creating a calm, imaginative space where we can simply notice things and say, "Oh, look at this beautiful plant." In my head it looks one way, it will look different in Olando's, and by sharing those images we build a kind of shared imaginary space.

It's a way to acknowledge these complicated histories and cultural differences while also imagining how things might play out otherwise in the future. Another tool that helps me with that is filming with infrared—it lets us see the world as if it were another planet, which puts me in a playful, almost childlike mindset. In those moments, I try not to be analytical but to focus on the act of filming, of looking, and of seeing the world in a different way.

Lyenne Palü is a Swiss artist and writer, currently on exchange in the Master's programme Praxis – Curating and Writing in Contemporary Art & collecting ghost stories, weather reports, and medieval memes.

For direct access to the online work itself, see here:
https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/2813155/2836842/151/444

Imagining otherwise: Critical interviews with artists
Ed. Elham Rahmati

Publisher
Academy of Fine Arts, University of the Arts

Layout: Petri Summanen

ISBN 978-952-353-504-6 (pdf)