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Philly high school students get to be part of a famous art movement

by [Brandon T. Harden](#), Posted: July 17, 2020



TYGER WILLIAMS / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Wendy Wang, a recent graduate of Central High School, thumbed through the pages of Ralph Ellison's 1952 novel *Invisible Man* and stopped at page 575, just a few pages from the end.

"The fact is that you carry part of your sickness with you, at least I do as an invisible man," she read out loud to about a dozen high school students on a Zoom call last week during an innovative art workshop. "You go along for years knowing something is wrong, then suddenly you discover that you're transparent as air."

In modern art terms, Wang and the others were “jamming” — a technique associated with New York’s influential Studio K.O.S. collective — in which one artist reads a groundbreaking text and others respond by literally tearing it apart to make art.



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Samir Ross, of North Philadelphia, a senior at Franklin High School who participated in the Studio K.O.S. workshop, holds a copy of "Invisible Man" by Ralph Ellison.

The Zoom call was a part of a weeklong virtual art workshop for high school students organized by Old City’s [Wexler Gallery](#) and led by original members of K.O.S. (Kids of Survival), founded in the Bronx in 1982 by Tim Rollins.

Artworks from the collective are now displayed in more than 120 museums and public collections, including New York’s Museum of Modern Art, London’s Tate Modern, and the Art Institute of Chicago. To make them, Rollins or another member of the group would read selections like W.E.B. Du Bois’ *Darkwater* and Franz Kafka’s *Amerika* while others cut or ripped the pages of the text, or drew or painted on them.

“We had no idea of the significance of what we were doing but certainly do now,” said Angel Abreu, who was an original member of K.O.S. as a teenager and is now an instructor for the program. “And this is why we continue the legacy.”

This year’s program in Philly adapted the jamming method, now using digital tools. “Before and after every meeting, the organizers told us that we were making history,”

Wang said. The digital format was a first for Studio K.O.S. and for the tradition of jamming.

The workshop was organized into four sessions (one 90-minute session each day) and included 13 students selected by the [University Community Collaborative](#), an organization based at the College of Liberal Arts at Temple University that provides career and technical development for young people.



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Samir Ross, a senior at Benjamin Franklin High School, poses for a photo in front his home. Ross participated in the Studio K.O.S. program. “Art isn’t set on boundaries,” he said. “It’s really everything and everywhere. I learned about my history and learned about myself as a person.”

“We had talked about the workshop in the fall, pre-pandemic,” said Barbara Ferman, the organization’s executive director. “Of course, we had to move it online once [the pandemic] hit, but the mission of the workshop aligned with ours so we really wanted to be a part of this.”

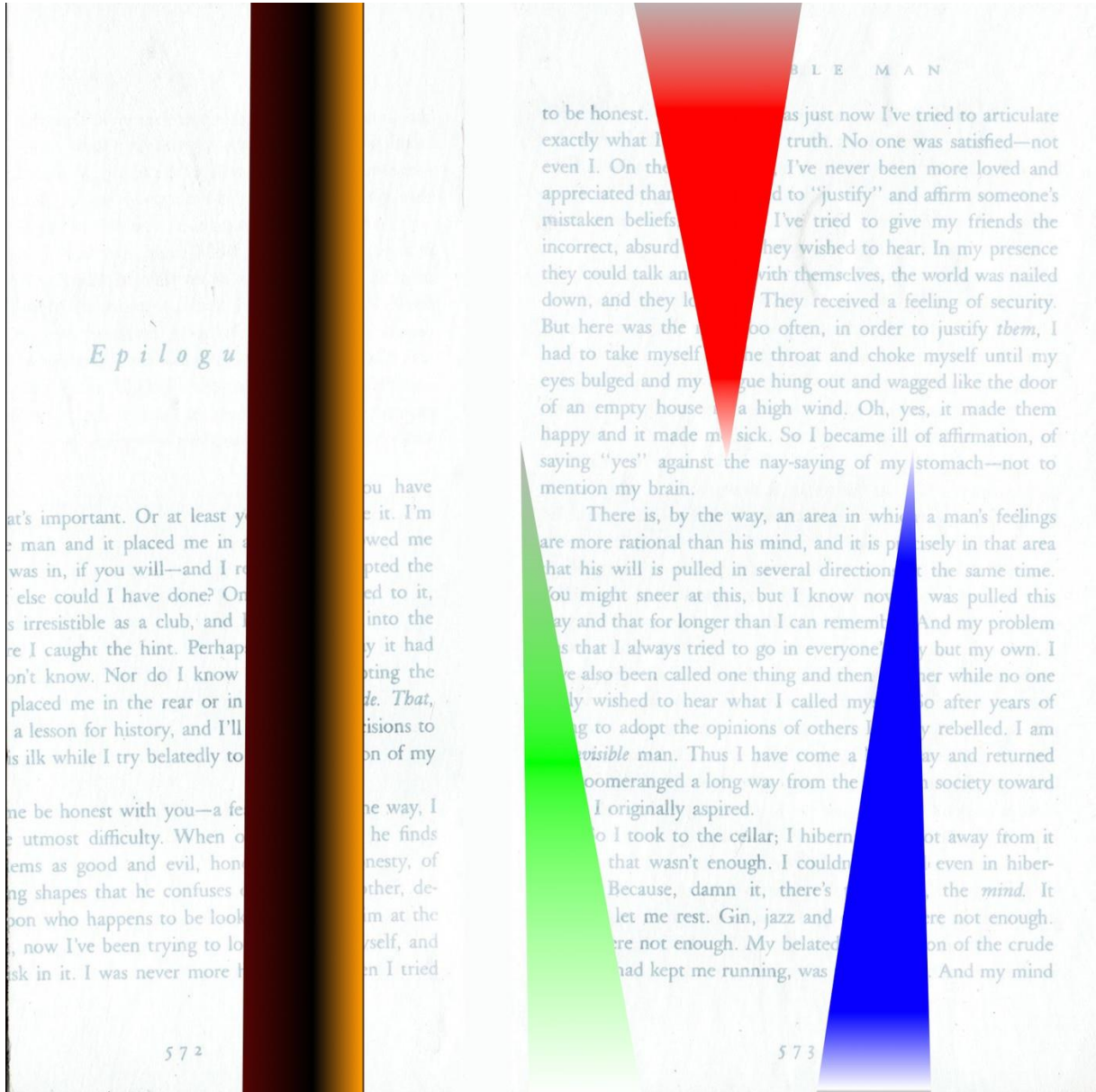
“The workshop was eye-opening,” said Samir Ross, a senior at Benjamin Franklin High School. He learned that art could be found in a multitude of places — not only in the vast corridors of the Philadelphia Museum of Art as he had once thought.

1. The power in listening

“When’s the last time you were read to?” said Abreu. “There’s this power in listening to everyone’s voice and seeing everyone connect to Ellison’s text.” After reading and listening

to sections from *Invisible Man*, students designed a color scheme that was then digitally integrated into a template of the book's epilogue.

Ross was inspired by the colors of the South African flag for his design. "I didn't know what colors I was going to use at first, but I thought, 'why not go back to my racial origins?'"



SAMIR ROSS

Digital artwork created by Benjamin Franklin High School student Samir Ross as a part of the Collaborative Workshop for Transcendence through Art and Knowledge.

Maryem Bouatlaoui, a junior at Central High, said she created about five images but was most proud of her design that resembled steel bars.

"The meaning behind it was to show that being a minority is like being behind bars, figuratively and in real life," Bouatlaoui said. "Especially in America, things don't feel like

they're even for everybody. ... I think we should be able to get out of those bars and demand social justice and racial equality.”

Wang said that she had previously read this book in a senior AP English class, but the workshop “was nothing like my class. Hearing my peers read made the book come to life.”

2. A fragmented history of pain

For her design, Wang applied a motif of geometric shapes layered onto the template. “My image is supposed to represent the repetition of history,” she said.

“All the different fragments are supposed to represent the different identities that we learn from, the voices of history,” Wang said. “They’re all fragmented and not just one person, and I think there’s a lot of pain and hurt that goes behind their stories.”



WENDY WANG

An image of digital artwork created by Wendy Wang, a Central High School graduate. Wang was a part of a weeklong art program that teaches students to be inspired by written text.

On the second day of the workshop, the K.O.S. instructors showed a prerecorded interview with Jeannine A. Cook, the owner of Harriett's Bookshop in Fishtown. Robert Branch, another K.O.S. instructor, said that Cook represented an alternative approach to activism and entrepreneurship.

In June, Cook [handed out free books about Black leaders during marches against police brutality in Philadelphia](#). Since the coronavirus pandemic, Cook has hosted sidewalk sales in which she moves a portion of her inventory outside of her store to attract customers.

Branch called her a role model for community engagement. "What a great person to model to our students," he said, "given some of the beautiful things she's done with her practice in terms of opening up a dialogue during these very difficult times."



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Artist Wendy Wang said, "It was really inspiring to hear personal stories and take away from it" in the Studio K.O.S. workshop.

Plans for publicly displaying the student's work are still being worked out, according to Mat Tomeszko, associate director of the Wexler Gallery. Abreu said that he'd feature the students' digital artworks on [his website](#) and make physical work from some of them "once we're all able to get to our studio in Hoboken." He hopes to showcase them in April at EXPO Chicago, an annual art exhibition.

More than lessons from history and important texts, the students said they learned about themselves. For Wang, it was gaining a deeper understanding of the power of her own voice.

“One of my takeaways was learning that there will always be people who don’t see the point of what you’re doing,” Wang said. “You can use your voice to create art and change the status quo.”

Ross said he gained a “new respect for the little things” and how to value the connections in his life. And Bouatlaoui learned that suppressing her creativity isn’t sustainable.

“Angel told us that creativity is like a balloon in a pool,” Bouatlaoui said. “If you try to push it down, it will keep floating back up. And if it keeps floating back up, that’s what you’re destined for.”