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AARCHITECTURE 44

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In this issue, we recognise the presence of the gap – an absence that then becomes. We put forth this state of INTER- and attempt to grasp its various conditions by gathering perspectives on the in-between: in language, in the archives and within the AA community.

AS HARDLY FOUND IN THE ART OF TROPICAL ARCHITECTURE

Virtual Roundtable

HARRIET
JENNINGS

DEBBIE
MENIRU

ALBERT
BRENCHAT-AGUILAR

ATO
JACKSON

The *As Hardly Found in the Art of Tropical Architecture* exhibition was on view in the AA Gallery and the Front Members' Room of 36 Bedford Square from Friday 20 January until Saturday 25 March 2023. Curated by Albert Brenchat-Aguilar, the exhibition was a critical examination of the existing archive of the Department of Tropical Architecture (DTS), established at the AA in 1953. *As Hardly Found* also invited its audience to consider the concept of a potential archive, and to acknowledge the overlooked and 'peripherised' figures within the DTS: a division of the school which aimed to export methodologies of architectural design and development planning to countries in the Global South.

We asked some of the people involved in the exhibition to answer questions that relate to breaks of continuity in the archive and to acts of translation. Their replies illuminate the nature of the interstices in which the

exhibition was positioned. By applying a range of critical strategies to the content of the DTS archive as it appeared in the exhibition, the respondents not only propose critical reconsiderations but also question the role of the archive as a logical holder of documents in which we represent our work, ourselves and others.

Exhibition curator Albert Brenchat-Aguilar, contributor Ato Jackson, AA Senior Public Programme Curator Harriet Jennings and Debbie Meniru, Assistant Curator of *In the Black Fantastic* at the Hayward Gallery, joined a virtual 'roundtable discussion' with us, in which we shared a document with them containing our questions and they consecutively added their responses. Below, the four discuss the tensions between what we archive and what we don't, how we might (or might not) intervene within the archive critically, and the possibilities for the future of the *As Hardly Found* exhibition.

1. Is investigating the idea of 'the gap' about retrieving information or about expanding the narrative?

It's about retrieving what is not there, or what is missing in the equation, and using that as potential material to expand the conversation within an ongoing narrative.

Yes, I agree that both processes are connected and complementary. Retrieving is a complex action that requires a total awareness of one's own position in relation to others and their contexts, of one's own heritage in relation to others' heritages and of one's own privilege to shape the future in relation to others' privilege. The historical approach to the archive is, for me, about inhabiting the gap instead of filling it – coexisting with the struggles and the hidden joyful lives that the silences represent and approximating things carefully whilst acknowledging that we will never get it entirely right. This process of self-questioning never stops, but must be kept internal while we expand the narrative towards other histories and other collaborators.

This is, after all, the work of 'Potential History' as I understand it from Ariella Aïsha Azoulay:

- 'Potential history does not mend worlds after violence but rewinds to the moment before the violence occurred and sets off from there.'
- 'Potential history is a form of being with others, both living and dead, across time, against the separation of the past from the present, colonised peoples from their worlds and possessions, and history from politics.'
- 'Potential history is the transformation of violence into shared care for our common world.'

I like what Albert said about 'inhabiting the gap instead of filling it'. I am interested in how we make the gaps visible and acknowledge their presence rather than how we fill them. To me, filling the gaps or retrieving 'lost' information suggests that we are working towards a complete narrative. I prefer the idea that a complete narrative is not possible or desirable. Therefore, 'expanding the narrative' is a way to understand that widely accepted histories and narratives are actually fictions and myths.

2. In the exhibition, you applied critical fabulation² as a curatorial strategy. How do you feel about archiving examples of critical fabulation or of fabulography³?

Do you think these should be placed in the gaps within an archive, or as separate pieces of work that follow their own timeline?

I think those works are more like responses to what history failed to do. It's like adding another branch to a tree; one that takes its own path to the east, west, south or north. For me these fabulations take on their own life, creating friction with what is already there.

Ato raises a vital point about the capacity of critical fabulations to disrupt the archive. The archive has a significant influence on the writing of histories in academia and elsewhere; you always have to start with the evidence. What I find powerful about critical fabulations, such as Ato's and Mariana's work within the exhibition, is that they become points of departure in their own right; we don't have to speak about the archive any more because they have created a new beginning.

¹Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (London and New York, NY: Verso, 2019), pp 10, 43, 57.

²Critical fabulations aim 'to displace the received or authorised account ... to imagine what might have happened or might have been said or might have been done.' Saidiya Hartman, 'Venus in Two Acts', in *Small Axe*, vol 12, no 2, 2008, p 11.

³Priya Basil defines fabulography as 'a practice of projecting freely, associatively into the gaps of the past to retrieve in any form – song, dance, film, text, drawing, recipe – something of what has been lost'. Priya Basil, 'Writing to Life', in Dan Hicks, 'Negrography: Death-Writing in the Colonial Museum', in *British Art Studies*, no 19, 2021.

3. How might the exhibition itself be archived?

I would prefer for it to be distributed to other spaces, to make its content accessible to as many people as possible.

Ifeanyi Awachie, a poet, scholar and film director, has argued through her work on Black and African feminist festivals that there are ways of archiving that disrupt the notion of the archive itself. She advocates for non-hierarchical forms of archiving such as 'oral communication, memory and social media [which] can effectively serve as alternative means of knowledge transmission and preservation'⁴. Ato, Manijeh Verghese, Harriet Jennings and others involved in this project manage to do some of this through their active social media accounts and their roles as powerful social activators. They create spaces of interest that exist for the time being – archives that are accessible worldwide to people who will later expand that knowledge. Here, I quote *karí'kachä seid'ou* from his proposal of knowledge as the ultimate gift in the arts, wherein both parties have it and both parties benefit from it: 'we must look at what kind of form the gift takes and what social forms it can enable'⁵.

I like Ato and Albert's intention for the exhibition to travel. The distribution of the exhibition to different places and audiences will open the archive up once again as a site of possibility – its representation will allow reinterpretation, and hopefully inspire new threads of investigation and imagining. The enquiries that follow will themselves be another form of archiving the exhibition, sometimes tangible and sometimes intangible. Speaking as part of the *Imagining Otherwise* event series at the AA recently, Huda Tayob paraphrased Michel-Rolph Trouillot to state that we are both 'the actors and narrators of history'. How the exhibition goes on to be distributed and archived is another chapter in that narration.

AA × ACCELERATE



On Saturday 18 February 2023, in collaboration with the Open City Accelerate programme, the AA held a workshop for year 10 and 11 students from under-represented backgrounds who are interested in exploring a career in architecture or engineering.

The workshop was inspired by the *As Hardly Found in the Art of Tropical Architecture* exhibition in the AA Gallery, and by the practice of 'critical fabulation', initiated by Saidiya Hartman, which uses imagination and speculation to address omissions in an archive.

Participants in the workshop were asked to respond creatively to the task of filling gaps within architectural collections such as libraries and archives; they did so by bringing together their own personal narratives and family histories through drawing and design.

⁴Ifeanyi Awachie, 'Archiving the African Feminist Festival Through Oral Communication and Social Media', in *Feminist Review*, vol 125, no 1, 2020, pp 88–93.

⁵Edwin Bodjawah and others, 'Transforming Art from Commodity to Gift: *karí'kachä seid'ou*'s Silent Revolution in the Kumasi College of Art', in *African Arts*, vol 54, no 2, 2021, pp 22–35.