



Reflections from The Arkhe

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In March 2024, MAIA hosted the final event in our Associate Artist's Lab. The cultural event, The Arkhe: Black British Embassy Launch, marked the culmination of many events and spaces that opened up the community.

Jaz, our Associate Artist, used her residency to consider the Black British cultural identity, resistance within the wider community to be labelled as such and Black British coming-of-age ceremonies.

Meaning 'first principle', the Arkhe is a semi-tangible embassy and vessel for Black Brits. It will first 'dock' at MAIA's Yard Art House, before making visits across the country.

An Afro-Speculative project, the Arkhe is the first morphological Black British Institution, designed to equip British-born Afro/Black people with:

- 1) historical and contextual education;
- 2) intentional, foundational Black British culture-building staples and rites;
- 3) and ways to gather, celebrate and organise despite limited access to space. These are Jaz's reflections.



I was initially very nervous and overwhelmed at the expansive potential of the Arkhe. I felt that although culture-building may have some foundational factors, it can ultimately span across various proposed events, activities, observances, and rituals. Also, coming from a specific lived experience and not feeling at all like an authority on existing Black British culture was a palpable factor in how I approached and engaged

with the MAIA team. I wanted them to take one of the reins and help steer the programming, but retrospectively, I admit this led to very little in terms of formulating the language around the Arkhe.

My pursuit of collective authorship led me to take a bit of a backseat to shortlisting contributions, which I regret. Although I'm still very happy overall with the Arkhe's first collection of texts, experiments and artefacts, we ultimately did not accept every commission. I feel like I should have had some kind of introductory meeting or conversation with each artist — the Arkhe is my "brainchild" after all.

I should have been on hand to answer any questions and provide any needed clarity on our goals. I also wish we would have kept the open call commission for a Ladywood-based artist, and in retrospect would have done so by inviting in fewer contributors.



As time passed, I felt more comfortable suggesting specific intentions and outcomes for this project. It was useful having to re-explain my ideas to new audiences and collaborators — I began to find a preference for how I wanted to talk about the Arkhe and culture-building, and this had a stronger bearing on the language around the project. These conversations broke the concept of the Arkhe down into something more familiar and accessible, while reaffirming that its speculative quality had not been lost. The Arkhe was taking shape, and I could finally see that MAIA had been holding onto the logistical and operational reins. From here I was able to have conversations about making the programme as accessible to the community as possible, considering who should be prioritised during programming. This included events having BSL and captioning, having a mixture of online and offline events, and other access standards.

A culture-building project is expansive and needs to be able to reasonably scale up. A series of experiments can only ever be a snapshot of this potential, and this was felt during the planning process. It was a bit of a challenge to decide on what to prioritise this time around, even after taking our time frame, budget, and accessible space into consideration. But I received quiet reassurances from contributors who 'caught the spirit' of the Arkhe, producing its foundational affirmations and provocations; I was moved by how they infused the programme with complementary themes informed by their own identities and experiences. This reminded me that I didn't need to know or do everything; and that as long as the Arkhe remained transparent to the community, they would always be able to give to and receive from it. Conversation, collaboration, and community defined the Arkhe's maiden "docking".



Throughout March, the Arkhe felt like a Black space — a place where you can access other Black people for social purposes; where you can learn about Black Britain and the Diaspora; where signposting to Black services is available; where provocations and calls-to-action can be announced to the wider community; a space for Black spirituality via guided meditations, prayer space, Capoeira, and proposed rituals; a gallery to show off the ‘artefacts’ of its people; a public house to share beverages, break bread, and casually discourse; a progressive site of mutual aid, dialectical materialism, resistance and protest; a fledgling library of speculative fiction, poetry, and educational material; the “bush” we retreat into for respite, coming of age, and rites of passage; and ultimately a morphological Black institution that encourages Pan African values, and disallows space for the Othering of marginalised identities. The support from the wider community and non-Black comrades, particularly at the Embassy Launch, has been exciting and promising.

I spent a lot of time reflecting on the financial and technical accessibility of various tools designed to bring communities together. I think this is what really made me push for a need for a manifesto or code of conduct for gathering — something I’d like to continue to develop in the future. Tamara Jade Kaz’s gorgeous visual notes from the FUBU Manifesto Session will aid in this. A proposed ‘social contract’ for our gathering spaces and events can be a sustainable foundation for forging new culture, building new sites, and occupying existing institutions.



My time in reflection has also organised my culture-building research prior to this Lab. Although this research is still expansive, I now feel so much more clarity on my next steps.

My future artistic goals almost wholly surround this culture-building effort. I'm trying not to take too much ownership of this because if done properly, the Arkhe will outlive me. It is not my legacy as I don't care for that; Buju Banton reminded us in 2020: *'You think I sit here in Jamaica and think about a thing named legacy? If history has taught us anything, it's that a tall man must die, yes?'* Rather than legacy, this work is my duty as someone born in my context:

*'We are not interested in how it is to be an artist, if the artist is finally interested in fooling around with paints and brushes or in perverse juggling with words while he contemplates his next royalty cheque or how he is going to mesmerise his liberal patrons at the next exhibition or book party; **we are interested in how it is to be alive.**'*



*'And what or how is it to be alive today? Fascist tyranny and barbarism is a reality that even the most limp-minded need not be reminded of. To be **fired with the spirit of freedom**, to be determined to **fight and destroy that tyranny**, to usher a new chapter of life where there is peace, progress and happiness — this we see as our mission; our duty; our ultimate responsibility.'*

- Keorapetse Kgositse

The Associate Artist Lab didn't necessarily imbue me with an arrogance that Black Brits should uncritically adopt experimental suggestions of culture... But I am more confident to propose (and co-propose) subversive ways of being, to help us navigate the post-apocalypse of *Maafa*.



In the future I want to collaborate with Black Historians, Researchers and Archivists to consolidate a Black British Timeline, starting in the 1500s when groups of Black people were first recorded migrating to and settling in the UK. Alongside educational materials, I hope this will also result in more Black British imagery — new emblems and symbols and folklore tailored to our positionality. It would be great to explore ‘Grieving Room’ or ‘Meditation Bus’ concepts and further collaborate with Camille Sapara Barton and Tesha Murrain-Hernandez.

Over the past year I have made connections in the wider Diaspora, introducing to them this Black British culture building project; many are interested in experimenting on Pan-African, Afro-Speculative and Dialectical Materialist hybridities that can unite us across borders, ethnicities, and Empires. And lastly, I hope that the Arkhe’s engagements lead to more ‘Ambassadors’ and supporters of the culture-building effort.

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Written by MAIA

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