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Chapter 10

Archives and Endurance: A Roundtable Discussion

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Grassroots Artmaking coalesced into a book project through a series of online events in 2021 during the COVID-19 pandemic. These discussions revealed two interlinked considerations. Firstly, the intensely polyvocal nature of the field, both in terms of the range of perspectives and approaches researchers and practitioners were taking to grassroots artistic production in the UK, and the ways in which this work was being developed, often involving close collaboration between artists, curators and researchers; direct experience of grassroots art making and organizing; and/or frequent use of interviews and oral histories to privilege a range of perspectives and experiences, a strategy associated with the radical history movement. Secondly, it became clear that archives in many different forms – not just institutional archives – played a key role in this work, but that their roles and statuses were multifarious and shifting, from the precarious and vulnerable, to the dynamic and active.

In *The Archive and the Repertoire*, Diana Taylor highlights the divergence between the archive as a site of state narrative-building and repressive power, and the embodied, ephemeral processes of gesture, movement and utterance that constitute a shared repertoire transmitted over generations and geographies.¹ Taylor's formulation, together with the vast body of thought that has theorized archival power from Jacques Derrida to Julietta Singh, rightly draws attention to the gaps and elisions in any archive, alongside tendencies to uphold and institute hegemonic histories.² Equally, this roundtable seeks to explore the dynamism and reconceptualization of archival thinking that characterizes

grassroots art histories, encompassing practical and conceptual considerations, and in many cases constituting what might be understood as a new form of praxis.³

This roundtable has been created through two online discussions in 2023 and 2024, as well as answers sent via email by the contributors over 2024. It has been edited for flow, coherence and length.

Catherine Spencer: What is your experience of the relationship between grassroots artmaking, organizing and archiving?

Ed Webb-Ingall: I've been thinking a lot about the direct relationship between activism and archiving, and archives. As someone who is involved directly in different forms of activism and has also worked with archives – with community video archives and as a video activist – for me one of the cornerstones of activism is to look around and see what's going on before you start something new. Often archives give us that same opportunity. When I use archives, I'm looking at models for grassroots organizing and activism that have come before me that I can learn from, build on, and draw on, often in quite a practical way. It's important to think about the role of archives in history, and to recognize that I'm not the first person to do something. To me, there is a very direct link between what I think of as activism and what I think of as archives, in terms of how they give us a starting point to say that something came before us.

Catherine Grant: The Women's Art Library (WAL) at Goldsmiths (which began life as the Women Artists Slide Library) is an interesting case study because it was a membership organization where you did have artists using it as a repository.⁴ They were not necessarily thinking about the future, but more about the present, and trying to get their work shown. Now it's no longer a membership organization: instead, it's an archive. We have incredible traces of feminist communities, like Rita Keegan working on the Women of Colour Index at WASL, but also a lot of artists who we still know very little about.⁵ There are hundreds or thousands of women artists who have put their images in as slides, alongside a little bit of information, as in these slides by one of the founding artists, Felicity Allen, captured in a short video by WAL's curator Althea Greenan. But in many cases, even if you wrote to the address that's on the information, they're no longer going to be there. We don't know which women are still living.

As part of her wide-ranging research on the collection, Althea has discussed the slides being semi-anonymous at this point.⁶ They create this vast archive, but it's quite hard to know what to do with it. It's only been in the last fifteen or so years that artists and curators have engaged with WAL, and that has taught me a lot about how to use it as an art historian who typically thinks to look for the famous individuals. What's probably more interesting about WAL is that you've got famous individuals, or individuals who have become famous, but alongside their communities which weren't visible within mainstream art worlds. They might have been in some shows, or they may have been women connected to feminist communities, or been aspiring artists working on their own, who found out about the library through the magazine or the journal. There's a multitude of different levels of aspiration, from the feminist to the artistic. What I increasingly enjoy about the archive is the range of material, and what it represents about a period within

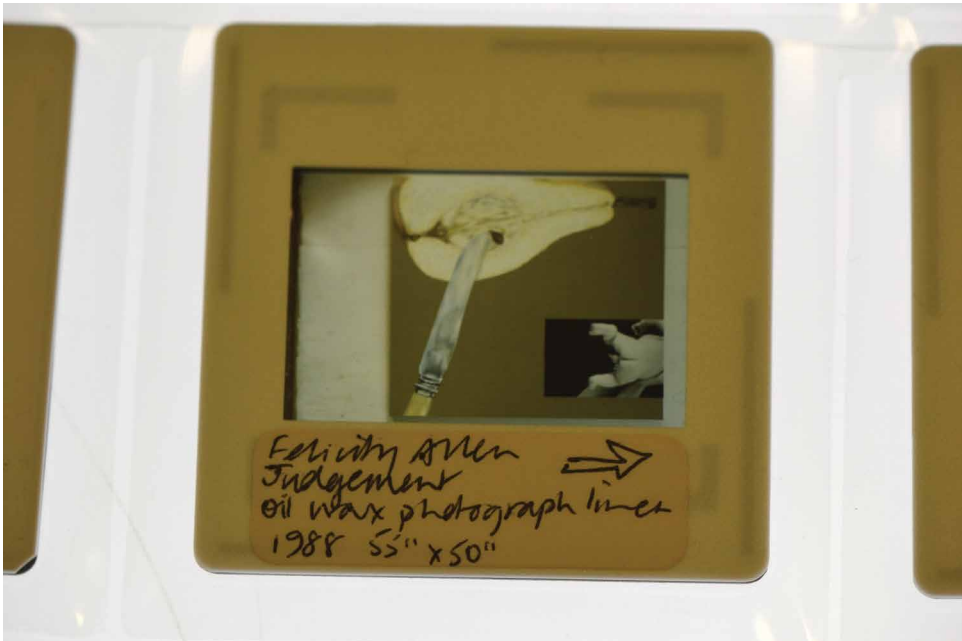


Figure 10.1 Althea Greenan, 'Slide Walking Talking', 2019. Video still showing a slide of Felicity (Flick) Allen's artwork, *Judgement*, 1988. The artwork is rotated 90 degrees to the left, as reproduced in the video. Courtesy of The Women's Art Library, Goldsmiths. Reproduced with permission of Althea Greenan and Felicity Allen.

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feminist and artistic communities. That was something I didn't really understand when I first worked there. It shows that there's been quite a big shift in our thinking around how we map feminism in relation to art.

Al-An deSouza: My work with Panchayat Arts Education Resource Unit grew directly out of my involvement within the Black Arts movement and to varying degrees within other (artist) collectives, including Community Copyart, the South Asian Visual Artists Collective (SAVAC), the Squatters Network of Southwark (SNOW); and the Kings Cross Women's Centre's Wages for Housework campaign.⁷ Each of these collectives was in turn connected to other community and activist groups. It's more accurate, then, to consider Panchayat in relation to this broader network of grassroots organizing, activism, on-the-ground learning and resource-sharing, with art being linked to other issues of housing, immigration, policing, equal pay, sex work and so on.

Panchayat was formed out of pedagogical and artistic necessity, and reflected the framing of our own artistic work, from advocating for broader, more equitable representation within institutional structures. An initial impetus was that, as artists doing workshops in schools, we were often told by teachers that they couldn't teach more diverse curricula because they didn't have material on African, Caribbean and South Asian artists. We recognized this as an excuse, but also decided to provide that material.



Figure 10.2 Copyart at the Cockpit Gallery, 1987. Poster.

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Another impetus was to be attentive to omissions within how Black Art was being framed. The African and Asian Visual Artists Archive (AAVAA) was founded by Eddie Chambers, also in 1988, and we wanted Panchayat to be a parallel archive focused on complex transnational formations, including those that South Asian artists were addressing, not only in their ongoing lived connections to South Asia, but with, for example East Africa, which is where all of us who initiated Panchayat are from. Shaheen Merali and I also returned profoundly impacted from our participation in the 1989 Havana Biennale, which expanded our focus internationally; hence Panchayat's operating basis of 'Third World, First Nation'.

This expansiveness, engaged locally with a global perspective, was a strength but also presented archiving problems for what to collect and how to prioritize that material. Certainly, our ambition exceeded our resources.

Mora Beauchamp-Byrd: I was a graduate student at Columbia University in Art History when I was working on the exhibition *Transforming the Crown: African, Asian and Caribbean Artists in Britain 1966–1996*.⁸ I thought, I'm engaging with these artists because of this project that I'm curating at the Caribbean Cultural Center, but I'm not hearing about them in my graduate art history classes. That's the reason I wanted photographs of the artists in the exhibition catalogue. I felt a real sense of the importance of this rich body of work. I was intrigued by the work that was being produced in Britain, and I wanted the artists to be documented as well. Making sure to take photographs in the artists' studios was part of my process in selecting the work. This was in a period before we had cell phones, so I was taking photographs with a camera, and then getting them developed at pharmacies. In recent years, I've been asked to write about and/or discuss the show, and to write about artists like Rita Keegan and Denzil Forrester. I've also written about Lubaina Himid in my 2011 Duke University PhD dissertation and a 2019 article focused on theatricality in Himid's 1986 *A Fashionable Marriage* installation.⁹ For all of these projects, maintaining an archive has been immensely fruitful. These photographs, notes and other materials help me to recall those experiences of meeting the artists throughout England, discussing their work, having meals with them, and documenting their work in their studios and elsewhere.¹⁰

At the time that I was taking these images, the environment was very distinct from what is happening now. At present, there's a relative celebration of a number of these artists, and a focus on highlighting the Black Arts movement in the UK. Several artists that were in *Crown* are now the subject of retrospectives and other highly visible presentations. Now, I'm even more mindful of how important that documentation was, because I kept wondering, 'Why aren't these artists in art history textbooks?' In terms of Rita's work, every time I went to London and visited her since the early 1990s, I took photographs. There's the curatorial relationship, where I'm documenting what she's produced during each visit. If she's created a new doll, and I see it at her house, I'm photographing it. Usually, we will organize a gathering of friends when I visit. I document these meetups as well, and my engagement with Rita is very similar to what I do with my family. I'm the photographer in my family, the one who documents every family gathering, and Rita is like family to me.



Figure 10.3 Rita Keegan, discussing *Red Me* (1986) at the Bronx Museum of the Arts, press preview for *Transforming the Crown: African, Asian and Caribbean Artists in Britain, 1966–1996*, October 1997. Photograph by Mora J. Beauchamp-Byrd.

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Often, when I met with Rita, she would give me a stack of brochures, exhibition catalogues, reports about arts funding in the UK, opening reception flyers, or invite cards. She wanted me to place these materials into the repositories of my workplaces, including at the Amistad Research Center at Tulane University in New Orleans, where I was Curator for a while. So that was another part of our relationship – that archiving – and Rita was very focused on ensuring that these materials needed to be preserved. I also encouraged artists to make sure that their work was in that collection as well, because I wanted some of the *Crown* artists to be included in this major collection, which had the works of celebrated African American artists like Elizabeth Catlett, Aaron Douglas, William H. Johnson and Henry Ossawa Tanner. I remember being excited about making sure that British artists of African, Asian and Caribbean descent would be represented there at the Amistad, alongside Harlem Renaissance figures and others in that distinguished art collection.

Jennifer Sarathy: These examples remind me of how idiosyncratic archives can be. They bring to mind a photograph by Armet Francis of Angela Davis speaking at the Keskidee Centre in London (1975), where David Medalla is staring straight at the camera centre-front – but in the publication of the photograph he's not labelled as one of the participants.¹¹ This exemplifies some of the challenges of researching an artist like

Medalla, given how interdisciplinary as well as intersectional and diasporic his archive is. Working outside traditional art historical archives has helped me to understand the relationship between Medalla's activism and artistic production in the broader cultural context of 1960s and 1970s London.

The George Padmore Institute, for instance, includes ephemeral papers from the Caribbean Artists Movement (CAM, established 1966), and the archives of John La Rose, who beyond CAM was also a founder of New Beacon Books, which is still open and located next to the archive.¹² CAM was a pivotal organization where questions of Black British artistic practice overlapped with political and cultural activism, with publishing playing an essential role in globalizing the movement. The London Archives (formerly the London Metropolitan Archives) house the papers of Jessica and Eric Huntley of Bogle-L'Ouverture, which like New Beacon Books, was another important alternative activist Black British publishing house. Jessica Huntley can be seen sitting to the far left in Francis's photograph. The Black Cultural Archives in Brixton, London, is a relatively new space focused on Black British history. In addition to its extensive archive of grassroots and activist periodicals, it holds oral histories of Black British photographers, including an excellent one with Francis.¹³ Medalla's practice was firmly rooted in this broader cultural landscape, which is impossible to glean from traditional art historical archives.

The London Archives also hold the papers of the Africa Centre, which opened in London in 1964. They held shows of linocuts by Namibian artists like John Muafangejo, who showed there in 1973. Medalla's own African liberation drawings from this period were done in a similar style to Muafangejo.¹⁴ This points to the influence, in my opinion, of international artistic practices and Medalla's exposure to them in London. The style of his prints perhaps also shows an engagement with the desire for Black British artists to generate a new aesthetic 'free from labels', to use Aubrey Williams's words from CAM's First Symposium of West Indian Artists.¹⁵ The drawings and Francis's photograph document that Medalla was well-versed in debates circulating within CAM and the Black Power Movement.

These examples highlight how archives of different interdisciplinary collections reflect upon the relationship between cultural production and grassroots activism. It's a circular and decentred process.

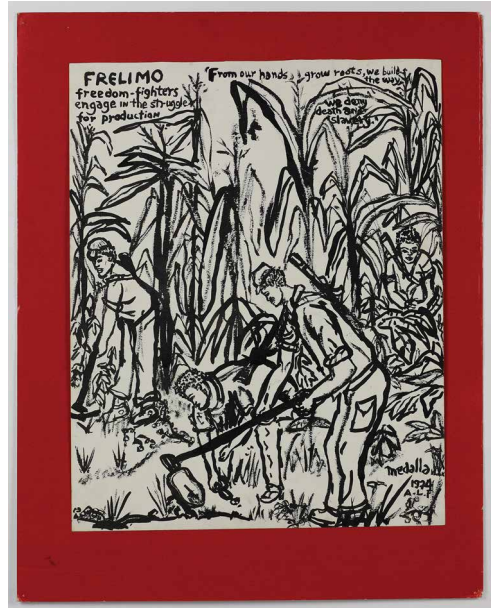


Figure 10.4 David Medalla, *FRELIMO Freedom-Fighters Engage in the Struggle for Production, African Liberation Drawing*, 1974. Courtesy of the David Medalla Archive, image courtesy of the Hammer Museum.

All rights reserved © David Medalla Archive.

CS: Practical questions about archives – where will things go? Who is going to look after them? Who can access them? – are simultaneously ethical ones. What happens as archives are institutionalized?

CG: In the late nineties, there was quite a lot of tension between WAL's magazine, which had a rolling editorship, and the membership. When I was working there, I was doing the subscriptions and distribution, so I'd write reviews or come up with ways of selling magazines and open all the press releases. It was an interesting experience being alongside the wealth of information in WAL's collection that wasn't necessarily what the editors of the magazine wanted to represent. There's now a point where it feels like it's possible to look back on it and appreciate it. With archives like Rita Keegan's being there, and parts of Alexis Hunter's archive: there are these women who have been foundational to WAL who are now getting much more recognized within the art world. It seems amazing that WAL contains so many treasures but for many years people couldn't care less about slides and ephemera.

For me the question of who's going to take care of this material, and where it's safest remains – I don't know where it's safest. When WAL moved to the university, we had a lot of conversations, because it was its own organization, but didn't have enough money to continue. Goldsmiths seemed the safest place. We first went to Central Saint Martins. That didn't work out. In terms of grassroots or archives, there is constant worry about who's willing to keep it, who's willing to keep making it accessible, and who's not going to either burn out, or run out of money. Those are quite serious considerations that I think you can never completely get right. There's nowhere that's going to be 100 per cent secure, unless you're a billionaire.

MB-B: What's happening now is that I am assessing some of the institutions that I've been involved with as a curator, considering my work as a professor and thinking about the placement of my own archival papers. This is the moment for all of us to assess the value of these materials, and think about preservation and accessibility. Which institutions have the resources to catalogue and maintain these archival materials properly, to ensure their availability for years to come?

A-AdeS: I wasn't involved in Panchayat's transitions to the current location of the Tate Library, since I had emigrated when the archive was still at Spitalfields (having moved there already from nearby Hoxton). Thanks are due here to Shaheen and Janice Cheddie, though I know many others were involved. Even viewed from a distance (from my current base in California), institutionalizing an artists' initiative legitimizes it, for better or worse. I'd like to think it's for the better. My priority is less to create alternative histories, and more to rewrite once-dominant ones, which is what institutions are better placed to do. I'd like to see that role performed more broadly and critically by all institutions that define and archive public culture. They have the resources to address what forms of culture are represented and valued, and how they are historicized.

I've been less invested in the physical material itself and have therefore been grateful to others for its preservation. My interests are more in how we activate that material into ideas and ongoing practices, an activation that is foundational to my ongoing

work. My experience of teaching at US universities, of being MFA programme director or department chair, are deeply informed by these histories of grassroots organizing, of resource- and institutional-building, of collective working. In very embedded ways, it's the ideas and practices that are generated from and which expand beyond the initial material and archiving. One is always negotiating (or refusing) or working in opposition to the disciplinary forces of these larger institutions, but whatever our relationship is to them, they remain crucial sites to create access for others to further devolve those structures and make them more equitable.

Gregory Salter: I was thinking about what drives us towards archives or has done over the past decade. At UK higher education institutions, this engagement with archives has also for a lot of us been part of our engagement with the impact agenda, which measures the change or benefit that research has on society as part of a wider assessment of academic research in the Research Excellence Framework (REF). It's a way for us to do impact in a way that often aligns with our politics and our aims and makes us feel like we're not selling our souls too much. This engagement with archives also dovetails with engaging with decolonization, and queering and transing the museum. It's also a means of working with museums, galleries, libraries and institutions that are now under a decade and a half of austerity in the UK – and that's probably not going to stop, regardless of who is in government. So there's a contradiction here: we've 'turned' to archives in various ways, just as institutions are finding themselves less and less able to care for archives and look after them. I got to the rather bleak conclusion that engagement with archives has not saved them from austerity or offset the impacts of austerity. But we're still going, for very good reasons. I think in the future we're going to have to reckon with those contradictions, and I don't have an answer to it, but I've just been very conscious of what pushes me towards this work institutionally and economically.

A-AdeS: One of Panchayat's ambitions was to resist exclusionary institutional practices through developing inclusive materials. That's a start, but we also wanted to supplant the practices themselves, and not simply by relying on institutional goodwill to change. My pedagogical practice, now within a university, in part examines the language and practices of exclusion. With the internet, with online publication and storage, with globalization and increased travel, access to information is not the problem, or at least it's not a problem of a dearth of information. But exclusionary practices, misinformation and historical amnesia proliferate. It's easy to forget or to not know about previous histories of migration and settlement, of societal intervention across generations and centuries.

The New York Metropolitan Museum library, similar to the Tate's acquisition of the Panchayat archive, has collected information about Godzilla, the Asian American Arts Network, which I was also a member of and one of its newsletter editors. While Panchayat, the Black Arts movement, Godzilla, and similar artist-led initiatives were critical of mainstream art/institutions, we also did their groundwork, pre-empting what became known as 'institutional critique', and 'social practice'. If such institutions claim to represent modernist and contemporary art beyond elitist frames, then those artist initiatives rightfully belong in those histories, and need to be backed up by those resources.

Alexandra Kokoli: As a university educator, I would really defend universities as usually safe-keepers of archives in a general sense, because university special collections are used in undergraduate teaching, and the likelihood of graduate engagement with a grassroots community archive of their choice that feeds into one's political interests and creative practices is higher if they already have some familiarity with how archives work. But it is difficult to be having this discussion in 2024 without noting that universities in Britain are under extreme pressures. We are witnessing acts of academic vandalism that have seen, for example, the closure of the Museum of Domestic Design and Architecture at the University of Middlesex.¹⁶ This was unfortunately a museum without a display room for many years, but with a valuable archive, which both researchers and students of art and design used very regularly and often creatively. The fact is that there is no safe space, I think, in the current climate. And yet universities, despite appearances, have historically been more inclusive than we're led to believe.

The other point I wanted to make, anecdotally perhaps because I've only been an archive user, not an archivist, is about the kind of people that are attracted to the work of librarian and archivist at universities. They may not be motivated in the same way as those running grassroots archives. Nevertheless, they tend to be or become very knowledgeable, and often politically interested, in the collections that they take care of. I visited, for example, Feminist Archive South both when it was independent, and after it became part of the Special Collections of Bristol University and had really interesting conversations both times with very knowledgeable and engaged archivists.

CS: How can archives retain a sense of the relationships that are often so fundamental to grassroots organizing and artmaking?

CG: The archive needs an advocate. At WAL, that has often been Althea Greenan. The Artist in Residence programme has been important. The digitized magazine articles still bring in a tiny bit of income: it's just enough to offer a small artist's bursary, and that has built and built every year. I've been involved in it, and there are so many interesting proposals. Often what Althea and the advisory group have tried to do is give one person the bursary, but then also a little bit of money to a few different people. It's often like a whole little flower bed of projects: they might not be big, but they come up at different times.

You also need an archivist who's able to be open enough to say: 'Come and have a look. Look what I've got here.' I think that's why I feel sad about the Women's Library at the London School of Economics: it's so shut down now, so catalogued, and hard to access. It's very formal. At many archives the person that visitors will speak to will also have other ideas, apart from what they're looking at in the catalogue. That legacy is really tough. What happens when those people are no longer able to or want to do that job, particularly where you have to be paid? There are archives run by volunteers, but for WAL to assist the number of people who use it, you really need a paid person. What happens at the next stage? But it does feel like the archive has been waiting, and it's ready for a lot more.

Na'ama Klorman Eraqi: I want to take up your comment about the archive needing the person to prompt you to look inside. I worked at the Jo Spence Memorial Archive

shortly before a large portion of it was transferred to Canada, to the Ryerson collection (now The Image Centre at Toronto Metropolitan University).¹⁷ Terry Dennett – the whole place itself – was suffused with history. The encounter with Terry animated the material, just by conversation. I would just say, ‘I’m interested in this ...’ and he would reply, ‘Oh, you should look at this, you should look at this!’ The conversation went on and on, and it completely impacted my research.

It was the ‘Jo Spence Memorial Archive’, but in no way was it like a typical artist’s archive. It was organized but not traditionally categorized. The wealth of material just took me in so many different directions, with so many new intersections. I had the opportunity to look through Spence’s work in my hands, from writing on photo therapy, to poems that friends wrote in relation to conversation with her. This is something that’s lost. I did not have this kind of experience working in a more institutional setting, looking through catalogues and ordering, and waiting for the item to come. On the one hand, it was a very valuable experience, but Terry, now passed, was getting old. He could not keep on with this project. Humidity was also an issue for lots of the ephemeral material. It’s so transient and it’s gone now, so it’s sad. There was value just in that experience.

Maryam Ohadi-Hamadani: There’s an issue with how you can even access the essence of what some of these archives have been, like Anwar Jalal Shemza’s archive, which I visited years ago. It was held by his widow, Mary, in her house in Eastbourne, and you have these lovely teas and lunches with her and these conversations, and you get to go through Anwar’s archive. That’s lost when you go to Tate Britain, when you sit down in the archives, and they’re just bringing out materials without those intimate or original contexts. That’s the tension for me: the community engagement, collaborative engagement, those personal relationships – and how they become gaps in more institutional archives. And then also the constitution of absence. How do you make presence – an absent present in a sense – felt in an archive? How do you avoid forcing a narrative?

A-AdeS: One archive is simply a node, a cluster in relation to similar and disparate others, some with overlapping and some with opposing intentions. But they are brought into meaning, deployed for political use in ways that are deeply, physically, emotionally experienced, in similar ways that we might respond to family photographs, or to photographs of those we identify with in community.

Family photographs, social media or the photos we take on our phones, constitute our personal, informal archives, the external drives for our brains, our bodily experiences in the world, our living histories. Storage technologies, whether the photo album or the cloud, *are* the archive, and are disciplined by the nature and capacity of that technology, who controls it, who has access, who doesn’t, who can weaponize it. When we reach our storage capacities, we start eliminating data, deciding on what’s more or less important. We, and I’m including police, military and security services, want to observe, record and archive everything, literally everything. To remain unknowable or ungovernable, we might choose to destroy archives. So I’m not sure that archives, in isolation and without broader context, without constant insight and oversight, are themselves an automatic good.

EW-I: With the London Community Video Archive, which I helped set up in 2016, we had ideas about what it could do, but it’s only now that we’ve existed for eight, nine years,



Figure 10.5 A selection of documents collected at the London Community Video Archive.
All rights reserved © London Community Video Archive.

that people return to it.¹⁸ We have different models of organizing screenings, depending on budgets. We say yes as much as we can. We stop when we reach capacity, so our model is very much dictated by our means, and I think we're okay with that in some ways. We have these moments of business and then calmness again. But there is at least some kind of collective around it, organizing around it. I would love to find ways to share more.

I think archives, as well as existing, need to have a model attached to them about how those archives are continually activated and accessed. An archive that exists as something locked away is only half the job. I think so much of that work needs to be done. We talked about it in the London Community Video Archive as a process of reactivation, constant reactivation. How do we take the politics of this thing and bring those politics into the present? The way it's shown, by whom it's shown, where it's shown, what happens in those conversations, and trying to keep that alive through various models, has felt

really important to us. I love how the archive, if left to exist long enough, starts to speak for itself and ask questions of itself. An archive isn't just about an individual; it's always about the context. If things get to brush up against each other, the longer they get left to sit together, conversations start to happen – it's like a party early in the morning when everyone's just met.

JS: I love what you're saying just about how if left long enough, things start to grow out of archives. I think that's important. I'm thinking about Medalla's archive, and the potential when you have a vast archive – Medalla was working in multiple international locations from the 1950s to almost 2021. But I was talking to his partner, Adam Nankervis, about the massive amount of material and the difficulties of the logistics, including the resources needed for moving the massive physical archive and then cataloguing it.¹⁹ Nankervis, along with an archival team, has painstakingly sorted and photographed his artworks and ephemera. This digital record is important, given that the physical archive is precarious and not wholly accessible. This makes it arduous for researchers and for curators to evaluate and represent Medalla's work, which in turn affects the art historicization of his practice.²⁰ It reinforces how important artists' publications, websites and digital documentation have been to me as an academic working in the United States to access archives in the UK, or archives that don't have a physical location yet. When you're talking about an archive that spans dozens of different artists, often working internationally – such as the Artists for Democracy archive, which Medalla was involved in – that's a more diasporic archive.²¹ Publications, exhibitions and websites can be a useful place for the archive to live when there's maybe not a single or physical archive.

Rasheed Araeen is a great example of an artist who has forced topics onto the record through independent publications or his famous exhibition (*The Other Story*, Hayward Gallery, London, 1989), the archives of which are now available digitally on Asia Art Archive.²² Another example is See Red Women's Workshop, who have physical posters at the Women's Art Library, but they've also done a lot on their website to make their archive accessible and they published a book of their archive, which also includes oral histories.²³ These resources along with recent exhibitions of their posters, contemporary interviews and panel discussions with artists in the collective have given new life to their historic grassroots archive.²⁴ I'm really excited about the possibilities for more mobile or diasporic archives, especially when certain archives present difficulties logistically or financially as Catherine [Grant] discussed earlier. How are we going to be able to provide access to these archives for a long time, especially now when funding for these archives is such an issue? Some of them are personal archives, some of them are not, some of them are still being used. How do we provide access for archives that are part of collectives, where the archive lives in many different places?

CS: What creative strategies might help to foreground the relational aspects of grassroots archives? What is the relationship between artworks and archives?

AK: The kind of practices that I often write about are in themselves engaged with archives, such as Greenham Common and its many different archives, including the living archives of Greenham women across the country and internationally. Jemima Brown is an artist who makes little, table-top size figures and environments that are inspired by and recreate,



Figure 10.6 Jemima Brown, *Sian (green)*, from the series *Greenham Common*, 2016–2021. Mixed media.

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to one degree or another, the women's peace camp at Greenham Common. For example, a little sleeping Greenham woman with authentic badges re-made to scale. Jemima is very meticulous in her archival research: she researches specific badges that she sources in archives, prints them out, scans them to scale, and then makes the badges. E L West's quilt work is directly sourced from their own archival research, mostly at the Feminist Library based in Peckham. There are little quotations, snippets of songs, cartoons that they've patched onto this textile work, which they use as a quilt. E insists on handling it, and there is something here about conservation as sometimes being inimical to use. Jemima and E are both great believers in archives being used and handled, even if that shortens their lifespan to some degree.

MB-B: *Transforming the Crown* opened in October of 1997 at the Studio Museum in Harlem, the Caribbean Cultural Center and the Bronx Museum of the Arts. The Bronx Museum was close to where Rita Keegan grew up. It was a big homecoming for her, which she talked about at the time during the press previews. I selected her painting entitled *Red Me* (1986) for the show. In 2023, *Women in Revolt: Art and Activism in the UK 1970–1990* opened at Tate Britain. It also featured *Red Me*. So I'm thinking about the journeys of particular works of art, how they've been displayed over time, their reception, and the collections that they've entered in recent years.

GS: I've also been thinking about artworks in relation to archives: artworks as spaces of history-making, as things that send us towards, or compel us towards, an archive – rather



Figure 10.7 E L West, *Greenham Common Quilt*, 2021. Various textiles, vintage duvet, batting, transfer dyes, embroidery, enamelled chain, 135cm x 200cm. Photograph by Dominic Harris.

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than beginning in archives. Rotimi Fani-Kayode's photography poses challenges of navigating an archive that relates to the spiritual practices that these artworks were sending me towards, but which were not necessarily physically present for me to access, and the kind of contradictions that emerge from that. The spiritual archives gesture to forms of relation – of being with bodies with spirits, bodies with bodies – and I wanted to



Figure 10.8 Rita Keegan in front of *Red Me* (1986) in *Women In Revolt! Art and Activism in the UK 1970–1990*, Tate Britain, November 2023.

All rights reserved © Gina Nembhard (Rita Keegan Archive Project).

think about what that meant during HIV/AIDS in Britain and internationally, but also work with their invisibility and intangibility rather than wrenching them into legibility. They caused me to reflect on the frameworks and assumptions that I was bringing to the artwork, and the archives to which I was being sent.²⁵ I was thinking particularly, from my perspective, about sexuality and desire and personhood: which of these assumptions were useful to me and which of those assumptions were things that I was going to have to put aside. I think I've been responding to this by placing more of an emphasis on interruption than on continuity, when thinking about our relationship to artworks and archives from the past. I've been trying to think about how I speak and write and think about artworks without trying to resolve them into terms that I might desire, or that I might be looking for.

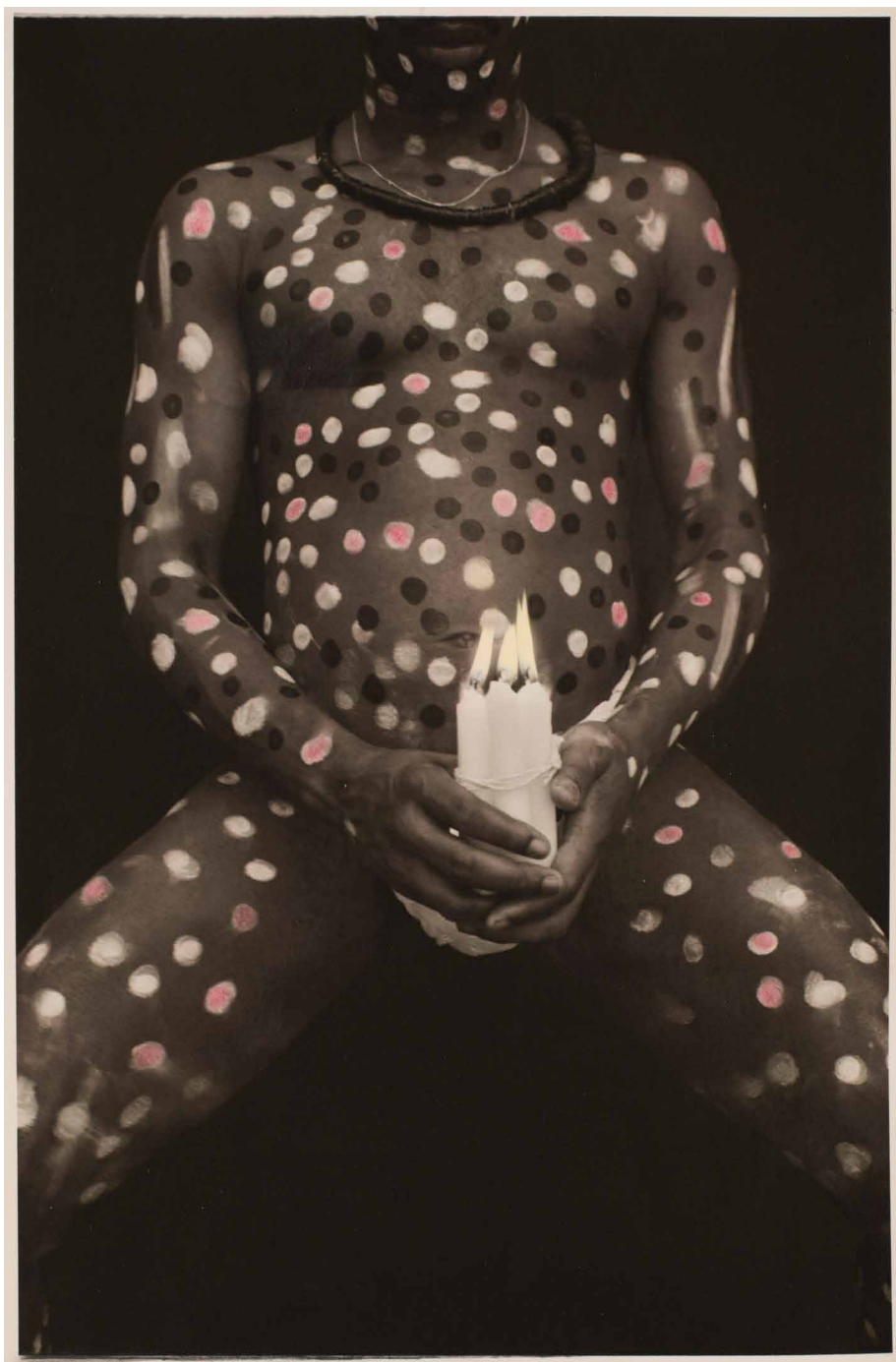


Figure 10.9 Rotimi Fani-Kayode, *Sonponnoi*, 1987. Gelatin silver print on paper with graphite and coloured pencil. Courtesy of Autograph ABP, London and Tate Images. Purchased by the Africa Acquisitions Committee 2015.

All rights reserved © Estate of Rotimi Fani-Kayode.

I am drawn to these artworks because I'm interested in kinship, family and relationships. Kinship and family structures are significant topics at this moment in queer studies. I've also tried to forget those things, or de-idealize them in some ways. That's about historicizing, in a very simple way, what kinship and family meant in the 1980s, and questioning if they meant something different to what I would like them to mean now. I've tried to think about responding to artworks and their archives by not naming and not resolving, if that doesn't sound too ridiculous. It's tricky because you could end up just talking about nothing, but it could also be a way of reanimating or resurfacing some of the material possibilities that are present in these artworks, which were being gestured to in the past. I've been asking whether a sense of loss might turn into a sense of abundance if we, or if I, divest ourselves of contemporary queer hopes and expectations when engaging with artworks and the archives they point us towards.

EW-I: I really like that. It makes me think about how when you encounter something in an archive it both is and isn't an artwork anymore. It's something else. You know that it was and is an artwork, but it's also part of something bigger all of a sudden, and it tells a story, so it becomes an object and then it can become something else again. This is especially true from a curatorial perspective. It has all the baggage of artwork or history, but it also has this potency in the present, reflecting what we're projecting onto and what we're looking for as well. We get to have this very intimate relationship with something – an immediate relationship with something – but it has so much history and weight at the same time. I find myself grappling with both what we want and what the history presents when engaging with archival materials. Trying to know everything about something in order to root it properly is also about wanting it to be lots of things that need it to be. Also knowing that it will mean something else to somebody else when it's shown.

I love when people come to the archive that I know really well, and they see something totally different in a piece of work. Archives, as opposed to a gallery space, are a different place to encounter an artwork. To hold some of that archival energy as it leaves the archive is, I find, really exciting. Especially with the work that Catherine [Grant] was talking about – much more marginalized work or forgotten work, in some ways. That feels even more important to do.

GS: I think it can be done in tandem with learning from archives. There's also – I think your work does this Ed – mobilizing and animating archives. What we write about them as well makes them mobile in certain ways.

EW-I: Archives can take multiple readings. We should care about them, but we should also know that things are in an archive for a reason, and we can grapple with them maybe a bit more and be playful as well. I really like how the archive can play. Talking about archives can reframe an artwork to become many things. In a way, it may have a different impact if it was outside an archive.

CS: We've touched briefly on questions of both digitization and loss. Would anyone like to speak to these in greater detail?

NK-E: If I may pick up on the idea of loss, in relation to the materiality of the archive and working with digital archives, which I find myself doing a lot. On the one hand, there's such

a vast range of material accessible now, whether it's on the the *leftove.rs* digital archive (a collaboration with MayDay Rooms) digital archive (a collaboration with MayDay Rooms) or the Internet Archive (like the digitization of *Spare Rib*, which used to be the BL library). But again, so much is lost in terms of the possibility for conversation, the materiality of the object, the actual visuality – sometimes even the colour changes. I'm wondering how

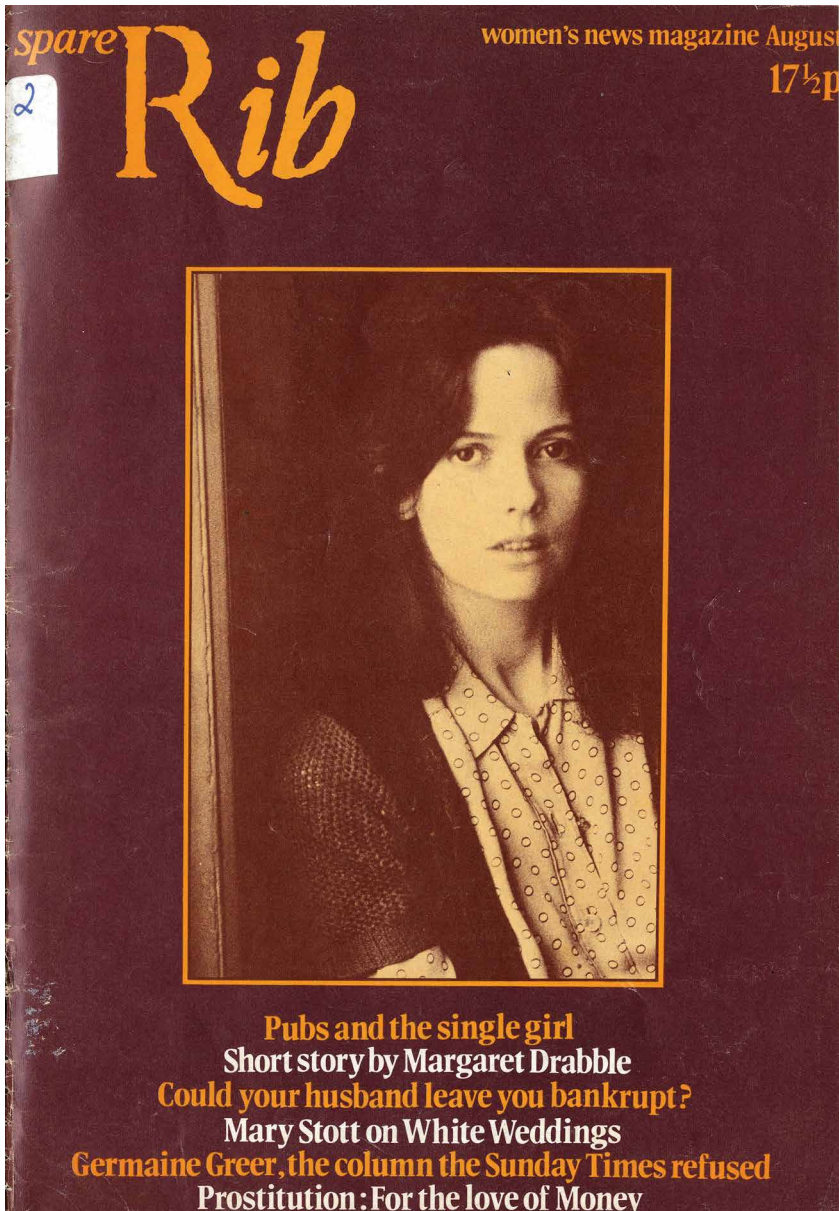


Figure 10.10 Bob Mazzer, *Louise Ferrier*, cover of *Spare Rib*, issue 2, August 1972. Courtesy of Bob Mazzer and Feminist Archive North.

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much fantasy projection comes into this work, in writing a history of objects that I cannot touch, when I cannot really converse with someone who was there. So much of the network is lost. What kind of research does this produce? Ultimately, what kind of history do you write?

EW-I: I think we've all had experiences of that, right? Where the archive hasn't been enough, and then we've had to find other ways to fill that gap. Whether that's reaching out to a maker, an archivist or a historian, you find yourself building networks around archives when there isn't enough. I think what this maybe roundtable speaks to is how important those informal networks are that exist around archives – not just the archives themselves. That's how archives work: they invite these dialogues outside as much as within them. There's maybe a misconception that archives offer really private, personal experiences, but I find them very public, involving historical sharing with lots of people. You can't help but interact with people when you're in an archive, because you also meet people who are doing similar research.

A-AdeS: Despite or perhaps even more so because of the deluge of available information on the internet and the growing use of AI, we need access to primary source materials and the means to situate and interpret them. AI is accelerating an existence within a dehistoricized, continuous present, to a qualitatively different 'end of history' than the one envisioned by capitalism's advocates. Archives of peoples' actual experience, grounded in place and time, are increasingly needed.

I've mentioned digital archives and AI, and I'm interested in a parallel commitment to the handmade and to the physically tangible, with both as markers of the 'human'. There's a kind of renaissance of interest, at least within formal institutions – academies, museums, etc. – of craft-associated and vernacular production, of storytelling, of artist books, zines, risograph printing, textiles and weaving, nineteenth-century photographic technologies and so on. Part of this interest is nostalgic, celebrated as a kind of retro chic, as well as melancholic about loss, and possibly luddite, but these processes are also archives of shifting as well as enduring desires, anxieties and values. The materiality of these techniques, their touch and texture – the sensations that are absent from digital and machined production – mark our tangible experience in the world. As I've mentioned before, my interest is not in materiality itself, and I'm not nostalgic for it, but I'm interested in how material production can be read as archives of feeling, thinking, criticality and evidence of the desire to be less governed by dominant values, whether that takes forms of alliance, negotiation, autonomy or resistance.

Notes

- 1 Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).
- 2 Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1998); Julietta Singh, *No Archive Will Restore You* (Montreal: 3 Ecologies Books/Immediations, 2018).

- 3 Other events have also charted this process, such as *Hands Off: LGBTQ+ Cultural Heritage and Ethical Stewardship* at the V&A Dundee, 2 February 2024. See *Perverse Collections: Building Europe's Queer and Trans Archives*, accessed 2 February 2025, <https://percol.wp.st-andrews.ac.uk/>
- 4 See Lily Evans-Hill's chapter in this volume.
- 5 See Rita Keegan, Matthew Harle and Ego Ahaïwe Sowinski, *Mirror Reflecting Darkly: The Rita Keegan Archive* (London: Goldsmiths Press, 2021).
- 6 Althea Greenan, unpublished talk at the Courtauld Institute of Art, 2008. See also Althea Greenan, 'Feminist Net-Work: Digitization and Performances of the Women's Art Library Slide Collection' (PhD, University of Brighton, 2018), <https://research.brighton.ac.uk/en/studentTheses/feminist-net-work/>.
- 7 Founded in 1988 by Shaheen Merali and Al-An deSouza, in consultation with Bhajan Hunjan, Symrath Patti and Shanti Thomas. Originally based in Hoxton, East London, Panchayat moved in 1997 to the University of Westminster, and in 2015 was donated to the Tate Library, where it remains available for public research. See 'Panchayat Collection', *Tate*, accessed 9 September 2024, <https://www.tate.org.uk/research/panchayat-collection-research-resource>
- 8 The exhibition took place at the Bronx Museum of the Arts, the Studio Museum in Harlem and the Franklin H. Williams Caribbean Cultural Center/African Diaspora Institute. The catalogue has proved to be a crucial resource for many subsequent projects. See Mora J. Beauchamp-Byrd and M. Franklin Sirmans, eds., *Transforming the Crown: African, Asian & Caribbean Artists in Britain 1966–1996* (New York: Franklin H. Williams Caribbean Cultural Center/African Diaspora Institute, 1997).
- 9 Mora J. Beauchamp-Byrd, 'Hogarth's Progress: "Modern Moral Subjects" in the Work of David Hockney, Lubaina Himid, and Paula Rego' (PhD, Duke University, 2011); and Mora J. Beauchamp-Byrd, 'Cut-outs and "silent companions": Theatricality and Satire in Lubaina Himid's "A Fashionable Marriage"', *Burlington Contemporary* (2019): <https://doi.org/10.31452/bcj2.himid.Beauchamp-Byrd>
- 10 Mora Beauchamp-Byrd, '"Black People Dressed Up Is What I Knew": Rita Keegan's Performative Self-Portraiture', in *Mirror Reflecting Darkly*, 44–7.
- 11 Aneka Lee, Armet Francis, Neil Kenlock and Charlie Phillips, *Roots to Reckoning: The Photography of Armet Francis, Neil Kenlock, Charlie Phillips* (London: Seed Publications, 2005), 17.
- 12 See Maryam Ohadi-Hamadani's and Anjalie Dalal-Clayton's chapters in this volume.
- 13 The current iteration of the Black Cultural Archives at 1 Windrush Square reopened to the public in 2014. The founders describe it as an 'archive-museum'. See Black Cultural Archives, accessed 2 February 2025, <https://blackculturalarchives.org/>; and 'Interview with Armet Francis', 2014.
- 14 Medalla's African liberation drawings appeared in *Black Phoenix*, co-published by Rasheed Araeen and Mahmood Jamal. Copies of *Black Phoenix* can be found in the Iniva Stuart Hall Library, London, another important repository of resources focused on African, Asian and Caribbean diasporas.
- 15 Aubrey Williams, 'A Glimpse of Caribbean Art', speech at CAM's First Symposium of West Indian Artists at the West Indian Students' Centre, Earls Court, London, 2 June 1967.
- 16 Mary Mansfield, 'Reflections on the Closure of the Moda', *Museums Journal*, 20 March 2024, <https://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-journal/opinion/2024/03/reflections-on-the-closure-of-the-moda/#>

- 17 'The Jo Spence Memorial Archive', *The Image Centre*, accessed 9 September 2024 <https://theimagecentre.ca/collection/jo-spence-memorial-archive/>. See also Jackson Davidow's chapter in this volume.
- 18 'London Community Video Archive', accessed 9 September 2024, <https://the-lcva.co.uk/items?splash=true>
- 19 Jennifer Sarathy wishes to thank Adam Nankervis for generously enabling a virtual tour of the archival collection in Berlin, and for recounting the difficulties involved with assembling and maintaining Medalla's immense archive.
- 20 Many thanks to Aram Moshayedi for sharing materials and experience curating the exhibition *David Medalla: In Conversation with the Cosmos*, Hammer Museum, 9 June–15 September 2024.
- 21 See the interview with Lynn MacRitchie in this volume on Medalla's role in Artists for Democracy and artist organizing; and Wing Chan and David Morris, eds, *Precarious Solidarities: Artists for Democracy 1974–77* (London: Afterall, 2023).
- 22 Araeen founded and edited the independent *Black Phoenix: Journal of Contemporary Art & Culture in the Third World* (1978–9) and the influential periodical *Third Text* (established 1987). He has self-published *Making Myself Visible* (London: Kala Press, 1984) and *Art Beyond Art: Ecoaesthetics: A Manifesto for the 21st Century* (London: Third Text Publications, 2010). See 'Archives for *The Other Story*', *Asia Art Archive*, accessed 31 October 2024, <https://aaa.org.hk/en/collections/search/archive/rasheed-araeen-archive-the-other-story-afro-asian-artists-in-post-war-britain>
- 23 Jess Baines, Susan Mackie, Anne Robinson and Prudence Stevenson, *See Red Women's Workshop: Feminist Posters 1974–1990* (London: Four Corners Books, 2016). 'See Red Women's Workshop', accessed 9 September 2024, <https://seeredwomensworkshop.wordpress.com/>
- 24 Jennifer Sarathy, 'Interview with Susan Mackie and Pru Stevenson', 7 April 2021.
- 25 See Theo Gordon's chapter in this volume.