



Grace Ndiritu, 'The Ark', exterior view

## Grace Ndiritu: The Ark

Bluecoat, Liverpool, 6 July to 13 October

In this archive-cum-showroom for *The Ark: Centre for Interdisciplinary Experimentation*, remnants of this experiential laboratory hint at its particularity. Craft animal masks and hand-made placards line the walls. Tie-dye costumed mannequins in the window displays sell the quirks and quiddities of this lifestyle to passers-by. Three screens form a triangular pivot for the exhibition, each with a rectangular bench emanating from the core in a triquetra formation, and silently meander through the geographies of alternative communities.

A grainy photograph of Biosphere 2 adorns a research insert that accompanies *The Ark*. While this mass of interlocking structures, space frame and glass pyramids to barrel arches and geodesic dome lungs, could be straight off the cover of a sci-fi novel, it was actually constructed in Arizona in the late 1980s. I recognised this futuristic complex, having come to it conceptually via Buckminster Fuller's 'Spaceship Earth' and more recently by visiting its environmental biomes. Biosphere 2 is fascinating in its original mission as a hermetically sealed two-year experiment for eight 'biospherians' to explore self-sufficiency in voluntary confinement, and also as a living illustration of the challenges of intentional communities.

The tensions and stresses that are part and parcel of experimentation in group living will be familiar to Grace Ndiritu. In 2012 she chose to leave the city, opting for a nomadic lifestyle that samples rural, alternative or spiritual communities. There is ambiguity as to where this decision sits, either within or outside her position as an artist. Her website biography is split into 'artistic' and 'non-rational' activities, with the latter covering experiences of a spiritual or esoteric nature, including Tibetan Buddhism, shamanism and extrasensory perception. This separation might suggest non-rational activities are not artistic, but as Ndiritu notes in her essay 'Healing the Museum', there is a

'deep need to re-introduce non-rational methodologies ... to re-activate the "sacredness" of art spaces'.

Personal trials of communal living shaped the 2017 founding of *The Ark* at Les Laboratoires d'Aubervilliers in Paris. Framed as a community laboratory, it brought together 15 participants - a biologist, economist, radical gardener, theorist, philosopher, sociologist, spiritual teacher, chef, poet and artists - in order to 'come up with radical, new ways of thinking about life'. A heavily scheduled programme drew on the diversity of Ndiritu's experiences alongside participants' contributions - spiritual exercises, academic presentations, performances - as well as making and eating together. It may seem strange to think of a community as a laboratory, but if we consider a laboratory as providing the appropriate conditions for scientific experiments, then a community can be seen as a safe space to play with new types of behaviour.

In its exhibition form, we are looking in from the other side - attempting to discern forms of experimentation. The three films offer glimpses of alternative communities at varying levels of remove: durationally, geographically and through personal experience. Two depict communities that Ndiritu joined in the UK and Argentina, while the third shows the spatial configuration of *The Ark* itself. The lack of audio produces a muted archive, a silent record of inaccessible ways of living. We are left to piece together the fragments, and to read between the lines. Each video focuses not on the people but on the architecture and how this might shape group dynamics. Looking past the clutter of materials waiting to be redeployed and the organic make-do structures, there are attempts to organise sociality, or even to produce new forms of communality.

Across the three videos there are 'workstations' that populate the architecture, often for unknown activities. In *The Ark* their functions become clear - one for working clay, another for sewing, dyeing, painting and so on. Here, we can imagine the participants making the things that they used, their clothing, paper-plate masks and sloganeering placards. This paraphernalia was employed in a street-based intervention *Party for the Animals*, which irreverently activated a Reverse Darwinism campaign to bring extinct animals back from the dead. Just as Biosphere 2 courted criticism as 'New Age drivel masquerading as science', the sight of the Ark participants parading through the streets of Aubervilliers in ad hoc carnivalesque costumes raises the question: is it for real? All attempts at visioning, divining or even fictioning the future, whether Charles Fourier's utopian Phalanstères or Bruce Eisner's psychedelic Island Foundation, are met with suspicion or even incredulity. Experimental communities can be seen to fail, having set themselves the almost impossible task of showcasing the future, now in the present. But then, it is better to try and fail than never to try at all.

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