

[00:00:00.310] - Speaker 1

Hello. This is the final episode of our podcast series Gaining Ground hosted by our curator and residence, Annie Jael Kwan. Annie sits down with artists from our current exhibition Future Ages Will Wonder to chat about the themes of the show and the artworks on display. In this episode, Annie spoke to artists Larry Achiampong and David Blandy, who were joined by Professor Larry Barham of the Department of Archaeology, Classics and Egyptology at the University of Liverpool. Gaining Ground and Future Ages Will Wonder are supported by Artsformation. To find out more about this series, the exhibition, or us, visit our website, fact.co.uk.

[00:00:46.590] - Annie Jael Kwan

Hello, my name is Annie Jael Kwan. I'm curator in residence at FACT and also the curator of the expedition, Future Ages Will Wonder, currently showing at FACT until the 20th of February. The project explores the advancements of science and technology in relation to our conceptions of ourselves and our histories. I'm very pleased today to welcome artists Larry Achiampong and David Blandy, whose new Moving Image work is a special FACT Commission and has premiered as part of Future Ages Will Wonder.

[00:01:16.350] - Annie Jael Kwan

Joining us today is also Professor Larry Barham from the Department of Archaeology, Classics and Egyptology at the University of Liverpool. Hello, guys. It's so nice to see you all, and thank you for making time. And first of all, Larry and David, it's been such an incredible journey getting to know you both. And just thank you so much for making this work, which is just stunning and sharing it with the exhibition.

[00:01:42.820] - Annie Jael Kwan

It is such a rich audiovisual journey, and at the same time, it's a really profound provocation, I think, and it interrogates these embedded structures of knowledge. And maybe we could start there, if you could talk about how from that time that we met when you were working on Radical Ancestry's Critical Inquiry project at Arts Catalyst, since then, how did the kernel of that idea evolved. And how do you develop the idea and concept for this project?

[00:02:20.530] - Larry Achiampong

First of all, thank you very much, Annie. Just also, in terms of right back at you, working with you over the years across platforms, across projects has been amazing. And it's quite exciting, even at this point in time and on certain future with the pandemic that we still manage to hold the tightness of what we're doing.

[00:02:41.430] - Larry Achiampong

So going back to your question, it's quite incredible, really, because I guess David and I, we've created a few works that connect with one another across this project, which is under the umbrella of Genetic Automata, which is exploring the relationship between ideas around history, archaeology, DNA, social media, cultural politics, and back again. At the moment, that's separated with three different films that focus on particular conversations.

[00:03:30.230] - Larry Achiampong

The first being a film called A Terrible Fiction, which actually like uses mine, and they did physical bodies, actually, visually speaking, we filmed one another with particular types of macro filming technology, whilst also exploring conversations regarding evolution. That then went on to a film which we created... Is it a year ago now? I think it's a year ago, right?

[00:04:11.910] - Larry Achiampong

I'm trying to remember the name of the film. We've made too many.

[00:04:16.830] - David Blandy

Lament for Power.

[00:04:17.810] - Larry Achiampong

Lament for Power, yes, which looks at the relationship of racism within science and from a medical perspective of agency. The focus is actually around that of Henrietta Lacks and the sales in her body being used against hers and her family's wishes are actually without their knowledge, which I think is even worse, to be honest with you. And how those advancements, although there are positive things to take from that the fact that her cells have revolutionised a range of medicines over the years and so on, there's still that aspect of agency, in a respect that the stealing of one's agency or one's story as it were.

[00:05:22.830] - Larry Achiampong

So that brings us from Dust to Beta, the film that we've created for the Commission, with FACT, which brings together, I guess, a range of those bubbling conversations within the other background. The film culminates the range of motor teeth factoring around that of the archive, the relationship with that of the Western construct of the archive and history, and who gets to, I guess, explain or label things within history. And at the same time, that's centred around a conversation that was had many years ago between William Du Bois, author of the book regarding race in society called The Souls of Black Folk, and then that of what is known as a pioneer of modern archaeology, William Petrie, who had quite problematic ideas with regards to race and even it centering within archaeology.

[00:06:49.370] - Larry Achiampong

But I would say what was quite even more special about the film that we created actually was the relationship that we managed to build and with the help of FACT. We were connected with Dr. Larry Barham, who is an expert within the field of archaeology himself. And across, again, this time of lockdowns and everybody having to be inside, myself, David, and Larry had an amazing set of conversations around the ideas of the work, what we wanted to produce, how we could perhaps have Larry involved in the film.

[00:07:39.410] - Larry Achiampong

And sometimes it can be a bit like nerve wracking working with experts within a particular field as an artist that wants to explore. But what was just awesome about that was there was definitely a welcoming energy from Larry which just made our conversations run so much more smooth and that general, I would hope to say, interest from all sides regarding the different projects that we were working on, really. So that culminates in a film that also even employs Larry's talent vocally speaking as well as some special 3D scans, which he allowed us to use by permission.

[00:08:31.130] - Larry Achiampong

Yeah. David, I don't know if there's anything you want to add on that. Got to approve it.

[00:08:38.070] - David Blandy

Not at all. It's really good to hear your interpretation of it all. Yeah, it's been quite a journey. I guess in some ways, it started with John Edmondson and Darwin, now has come through to Petrie and Dubois. I think, as you say, it's the conversation with Larry that's really made this one a special film. Yeah, it's been that combination of both research, but also, I guess, interpersonal understandings. Because these things aren't simple, it's important to try to understand things in a much more holistic way.

[00:09:35.870] - Annie Jael Kwan

Yeah. I think something that really strikes me is how, I suppose, you bring the intersection between the interpersonal and the personal to something that is more political, and you're looking then at also at epistemology really, the knowledge of knowledge, right? And it takes me back to when I first encountered you doing the medical assessment process, where you were doing, I think it was called Trust Me, I'm An Artist, and you're doing this DNA testing, really testing in yourselves and sending off those kits for the self-testing, which we then had this wonderful conversation about. Because that had become so popular as an industry where people were seeking to find out who they really were, as it were, digging back into the cellular notion of origin.

[00:10:29.590] - Annie Jael Kwan

But also then as we unfolded in a conversation, we realised that part of that is also trying to discover where you belong, where's your community, where is your lineage, when so many communities have

experienced ruptures in their genealogy for various reasons. So I find it really interesting that that was one of the points of investigation. And of course, then in your work, you've always had this friendship that you also showed us when we did that talk at Genetic Automata, where you were playing computer games in front of a bemused audience who was like, "Hey, these guys have Street Fighter. What's going on?"

[00:11:10.990] - Annie Jael Kwan

And then you showed us how in a way you collaborate even when you're not in the same place, because you can play together and have these conversations. And that comes through in the work that you do. I mean, very good examples, of course, the Finding Fan and Trilogy, where you're using the gameplay machination to actually make the work. And then you use those characters from I think it's Grand Theft Auto, and then you place them in the landscape and then their interactions, and you experiment with that platform to show how it could be a different narrative.

[00:11:48.960] - Annie Jael Kwan

So I find it really interesting. Of course, you're using your personal politics in your relationship as ways also to navigate through this historical investigation. So I think that's really interesting because you have this close working relationship there. I always feel so privileged to get to know you guys and hang out with you guys and talk to you, because I can really feel the warmth of that relationship.

[00:12:13.140] - Annie Jael Kwan

And so in a way, I'm also very curious now that you have invited well, actually, you've been connected with Professor Barham and you've had these conversations. How did that unfold? And I suppose if you could let our audience know a little bit more about how you actually worked with the department, that would be really intriguing.

[00:12:34.730] - David Blandy

Yeah. I mean, I saw all good things do with conversation. We just started talking and asking questions, asking questions about origins of, I guess, Homo sapiens, of humanity, but then thinking beyond that. Actually, and I think this is something that Larry is very good at is explaining how slippery our notions of what Homo sapiens is and where these strict demarcations of this is human, this is not human. It's become pretty hazy over millennia.

[00:13:18.050] - David Blandy

Once we've had that initial contact, we knew that there was something really special about this conversation we were having it. And in the context of all the work that we've been making up to that point, it felt like a real evolution of what was happening. I'm practically speaking the thing of actually getting access to the scans, the scans of various incredible hominid skulls. That added a whole different dimension to the work. I think it grounded it in a virtual reality.

[00:13:58.910] - David Blandy

And also, of course, the objects, because I think one of my favourite descriptions that Larry gave us was of the construction of some of these tools, of these axe blades, basically, where it was so reliant on one particular perfect cut at a certain point. The fact that these ones exist shows that thousands exist that didn't get to that point because it shows a whole culture in this one object. But I think this is where I bring Larry in to talk, maybe.

[00:14:39.610] - Annie Jael Kwan

Yes. Professor Barham, can you please tell us more about your work as a researcher in your department and the work that you've been doing? I suppose how do you engage with something that is from an artistic field? What was that process like for you?

[00:15:00.390] - Professor Larry Barham

My title is professor of African archaeology. And I work in Zambia, South Central Africa, and I've worked a little bit in Ghana. And my interests are really in human evolution and the development of our mind and looking at stone tools and material remains as the way into how ancestors and early ancestors thought and what was involved in learning to make these things. And I'm pleased to hear

I'm good at slippery concepts because I think archaeology can be very slippery. That's something I tried to get across the students.

[00:15:45.270] - Professor Larry Barham

I had an email from FACT saying a couple of artists are interested in finding contacts and help them deal with this concept of radical ancestry. I thought, "Okay." I looked at the radical ancestry. And you two had done your research and you had some big names you wanted to talk to. I thought, "Okay, maybe I can help you get in contact with them, but first, let's talk."

[00:16:14.490] - Professor Larry Barham

And that's how this evolved into just free flowing discussions. And in the end, none of those big names on your list were approached as far as I know. And I ended up being there and doing voiceover, which I wasn't expecting. That was a bonus.

[00:16:35.130] - Professor Larry Barham

How did I feel when working with artists? I relished this opportunity to talk to people who have a creative perspective, in this case, a creative perspective on the past and how we interpret the past. It wasn't something I was shy of doing. I thought, this is a great opportunity, because this is not something academics, especially within archaeology, get many opportunities to do, because we work within the constraints of how we think about the past and describe it to our colleagues. So for you two coming in from the outside, that was a chance for me just to open my mind and say things I've been thinking for a long time and perhaps things I shouldn't have said. I don't know. But it was just fun.

[00:17:27.670] - Professor Larry Barham

The 3D element came in and I have artefacts here on my table and at work and colleagues who are happy to help. And there we are, seeing in the video itself the cast of the skulls, but also a particular stone tool. It just occurred to me, I didn't tell you about that tool, did I? It has this label hand axe. So we're talking about labelling and how they constrain that thinking.

[00:17:58.320] - Professor Larry Barham

But that particular hand axe I excavated with colleagues from the Livingstone Museum in Zambia from a locality which had the name Messenger Compound. So I asked my colleagues, "What was this?" "Oh, this is where the messengers, the colonial administration had the messengers sending." They were runners carrying information across what was in Northern Rhodesia.

[00:18:30.110] - Professor Larry Barham

This is wild. This is weird, A Messenger Compound. And I said, "Well, can we give a different name to this place?" "No, keep it Messenger Compound. Let's recognise the reality of that place on the ground." We were excavating then this 400,000 year old artefact on a place which used to be mystically a building where colonial administrators used local people to carry their messages. Wow. Okay.

[00:18:55.210] - Professor Larry Barham

I didn't tell you this. You could have picked much more interesting looking artefacts from the ones we offered you, but you chose that one. That was great.

[00:19:03.010] - Annie Jael Kwan

I think the other thing that I really want to pick up on that you've all used this term slippery. And I just think that's really intriguing, because in the film, there are many historical and scientific references, and one of them that was raised was the name of Linnaeus, Carl Linnaeus, the Swedish botanist, zoologist, taxonomist, and physician. And in the film, you do question and critique like this use of categorisation, which has been embedded in the way our knowledge has been built over the years.

[00:19:34.380] - Annie Jael Kwan

So I think can you explain a little bit more about why that's troubling, and in a way, why that is actually not accurate if slipperiness actually exist and permeate through these categories?

[00:19:51.510] - Larry Achiampong

Yeah, I think obviously, one has to consider the two previous films in series as well, Lament for Power and then A Terrible Fiction. And the problem with a lot of terminologies that are craved with reference to the archive, archaeology, science, especially, is particularly a lot of the grounding within European concepts, which then also have a relationship with scientific racism, for example. And that, to be honest, is one of the really amazing conversations that we're able to have with Larry that I really enjoyed, because again, obviously David and I were artists, so we have interests within some of these fields. We're not experts, but we build ideas based on the research.

[00:20:50.860] - Larry Achiampong

I think one of the things that was quite alarming to us was how racism continues to this day to dictate a lot of approaches, words, meanings, and someone to certain aspects of ourselves, even just taking point reference at the whole situation of DNA tracing and heritage and so on, for example. When David and I did that, I just had a feeling that I wouldn't get as much complex information about my heritage. Although, across the African continent, it's known that the DNA within individuals across there is far more complicated than that of those within Europe, for example.

[00:21:48.980] - Larry Achiampong

Yeah. Of course, in terms of the findings, the results that I got were pretty basic. It was like I think 98 or so percent from [inaudible 00:22:02]. Whereas David had so many going across various points of the UK and then reaching into Europe. So it's really about the playing field, the lack there of levelness within the playing field of conversations around all of these types of realities.

[00:22:23.550] - Larry Achiampong

And essentially that's what the project in general is trying to pick up, really. And the fact that that really still exists even today. One of the things that we were quite interested in, and I think we're still interested in pursuing this as the project evolves, because I wouldn't say it's finished. There's still more to uncover. In some way somehow, there is definitely a relationship between that and the way that racism through nationalism, for example, is [inaudible 00:23:05] ugly head in recent years, which then related to that of the premiership of Trump, for example, via that Brexit and so on.

[00:23:15.150] - Larry Achiampong

So we wanted to perhaps try and reach as deeply into history as possible in order to create that connection with that and that understanding that so many of these problematic concepts reach historically. It's not entirely new. It's actually been here for a while. And how do we take that apart? We take that apart by going back in order to make an understanding of the present.

[00:23:43.370] - Professor Larry Barham

David had mentioned the slipperiness in relation to Homo sapiens. And I remember that conversation because I was saying that we have this term, Homo sapiens, which is a loaded term in its own right, wise man, take what you want from that. And we think there's a clear boundary around this and there isn't. We have evolved, we're constantly changing. It's really difficult. Archaeologists, particularly those who study human fossils, struggle to put boundaries on when Homo Sapien begins. And if it's a continuum, justify that boundary.

[00:24:21.350] - Professor Larry Barham

What we were talking about, there were lots of different other kinds of humans that coexisted in Africa with Homo sapiens. And so for me, we can't attribute one particular behaviour to one particular group because we don't know. We need to embrace the messiness. And in a sense, it's what we're trying. In our current lives, we're embracing the messiness, which is the variation of way people live and kinds of lives and ways of choosing of living.

[00:24:59.030] - Professor Larry Barham

I'm saying in the past that there are these multiple ways of living and we see them through bones and through stones. And the old idea of a linear evolution or progression is certainly in my field is one that's deep, bad history. We don't think that way anymore. So this is another opportunity for perhaps

reaching out outside the academic audience to a wider world where people are not quite so aware of how the science has helped us appreciate this diversity in the past. We can use it to think about the diversity now.

[00:25:44.270] - David Blandy

And I think that's the problematic point in which we find ourselves is that there's still very much a strong mythology of this linearity of progression and that the humankind is progressing towards some future point. I mean, it's embedded in Christian theology, but it's also the inside. And that's why we brought Linnaeus into it, because he's there at the bedrock saying, "Here are the separations." And not only are here are the separations, but these people are inferior because they are different.

[00:26:26.330] - David Blandy

And so if that is at the basis of a taxonomy, then it's almost embedded in that very structure, in that system, and we're still locked in that structure whether we like it or not. We can say, "Oh, it's slippery, and everyone's actually related to each other, and there's only so many points of separation." But this is the language we're using. And that same language is used for nationality, for borders, for separating peoples in terms of the haves the have nots.

[00:26:56.940] - David Blandy

And there's a whole bedrock of proto-eugenic thinking that is embedded in our political systems. You even have to think about the pandemic and the idea of these pre-existing conditions that has been used as "Well those lives mean less," because they're in this box of pre-existing conditions, no matter that the pre-existing condition has been caused by a previous infection of COVID.

[00:27:31.710] - David Blandy

It's all wrapped up in one thing. And I think that's why we wanted to really pinpoint that. And I think part of the under toe of this particular project of Genetic Automata is really a dissection of that kind of idea of pure objectivity, that there can be a thing that's outside of an authored intent, that there's always some authored intent in any type of knowledge, I think.

[00:28:07.470] - Larry Achiampong

I think just to add on top of what David said, where we rest on the current moment with technology. That explains it more than anything really brings us to that point. I think it's fair to say that there are some people who believe that technology will create a level playing field for people culturally speaking, racially in some. But if anything, the complications and the problematics and whatnot, they just exploded even further.

[00:28:43.290] - Larry Achiampong

If you even look up things like facial recognition to certain technologies that work better on White skin than they do on Black skin. Again, there's a historical connection to that and that brings us to this point. So this series of works, let alone that's today, I would say, they're very much in essence as to how David and I work, anyway, they're time travel films, really thinking about what the present moment in time means with reference to the past, because you can't separate the two.

[00:29:20.660] - Larry Achiampong

I think a very Western thing that usually has done is the past is just "Oh, forget about that. It doesn't matter anymore," where actually, really matters more than one might even care to imagine.

[00:29:35.170] - Annie Jael Kwan

Yes. And in some way, I suppose, in popular media history or the investigation of history can be very romanticised as well. Because when I first read your department, I was like, "Oh, Egyptology." And of course, it brings to mind that Indiana Jones character who finds something and that material object then becomes the clue or even the answer to something mysterious, and it becomes a point of origin. And I think there is a romanticisation that if we dig deep enough in history, we'll find the ultimate truth, which of course, I think is where we're starting to question how those narratives are being written and how they can be rewritten as well.

[00:30:17.410] - Annie Jael Kwan

So I think that is something that's really thought provoking in the project. And that makes us think about how knowledge is created, where funding comes from, where attention is pointed to. And also, when you raised earlier about how it really links up to our contemporary times, it makes me also think about how even the word as innocuous as home can be so loaded. Because now there are also some definitions around what is home and what is this categorisation of home for those settled in the UK?

[00:30:51.090] - Annie Jael Kwan

And that's slowly shifting the languages written around it for home students slowly is being redefined after Brexit as well. And so suddenly for myself, I find myself being shifted in that category, and that becomes really important when you think of access to funding. And then, of course, then graver implications, for example, from the Windrush generation. So why are certain relationships and historical relations then become rewritten in this way be suddenly cut off just because another categorisation has been imposed of it?

[00:31:29.600] - Annie Jael Kwan

So I think that coming from, I guess, thinking about this project makes us question at what time and who has the power to create these new redefinitions that in a way then becomes prejudicial to certain groups of people.

[00:31:50.750] - Professor Larry Barham

The underlying theme here is categorisation of objects, of people, of places, of time. And we're all very aware that when you label something, you exclude other things as being part of that. In my teaching, it's something I try to get students to think about. So why is this considered this tool a scrape bar? Why is that a knife? We don't know.

[00:32:21.690] - Professor Larry Barham

And it's just because there's a shape. And who's defined that shape? But historically, it's probably a male archaeologist who's used to making stone tools and using stone tools. And in fact, that Indiana Jones image is a powerful one, because for a long time, our students thought everybody who made objects, stone objects, they were male.

[00:32:44.460] - Professor Larry Barham

A lot of the experimental archaeologists that I grew up with watching, they were all male and they had macho attitude around breaking rocks. Well, breaking rocks, anybody can do it. And in the past, all ancestors had to do it because it was a fundamental thing to live by.

[00:33:04.570] - Professor Larry Barham

These categories are really important. You have to think about who's created them, and why, and what we do with them, and what constraints there are. And from my little world, it bothers me when I see an early period of the past, being effectively denigrated because they seem to have a smaller range of tools than a later period that might be associated with Homo sapiens. So therefore, these early periods, these early people were somehow less intelligent. They lived a static life.

[00:33:39.330] - Professor Larry Barham

And as I work in Zambia, where I have been for some years now, and I'm finding these very early tools 400,000 or 500,000 years ago, there's a lot more variety. And when I show them to people, I said, "Well, it's got this one label and there are about 12 different forms under that one label." We are missing what those people could do and what they involved in terms of cognitive complexity, because we have this set belief that they were unable to do these things that we could do. It's restricting on how we see the past. And what we're talking about here is how those restrictions carry on into the present.

[00:34:27.430] - Annie Jael Kwan

I mean, I suppose I'm also interested, I guess, when you've been speaking about how the field has evolved over the years, and I was wondering how much race comes into that as well. I think race has become a really central concern in both Larry and David's collaboration. And race, of course, is a really

hot topic in the last few years as well, with the resurgence of Black Lives Matter and the racism against Asian people in the last couple of years after the coronavirus. Now I wonder, does that decolonial work with regards to race, is that also happening within that field?

[00:35:09.950] - Professor Larry Barham

When I started studying archaeology as part of anthropology in the 1970s, we were taught then that race didn't actually exist as a biological concept just to get rid of it. I still carry that with me. And I think now, not in terms of race, but I think of local populations, local networks of people, people who marry each other, families that grow up together. So the differences come over time, not because of a difference in race, but differences in local histories.

[00:35:38.870] - Professor Larry Barham

And I carry on that. I guess, what I was taught, I carry that enlightened view as I see it. I carry that into my teaching now. I teach a course on African pre-history. This sounds crazy in terms of the time range, but the course starts 500,000 years ago and it goes up to about 2,000 years ago. Students come and say, "There's no way we can cover that amount of time." Yeah, just sit back, think about what we're about to see and question this.

[00:36:17.770] - Professor Larry Barham

Because they learned about the different hominins, I said, "Right, we're not talking races here. We're just talking about different populations at different times, and they interact, they're interbreeding, and all that, they're having sex." These aren't separated groups.

[00:36:32.830] - Professor Larry Barham

One of the reasons I'm doing this, one of the drivers, is that as a student, I overheard a professor who taught human evolution saying to another colleague that "Once we go beyond a certain time period in the African records, it's very early on, these early hominins, the rest of it is uninteresting because Africans have always lived in mud huts." "What? Oh."

[00:37:04.310] - Professor Larry Barham

Because that's a mindset which I thought had long since the past. If you look at some of the Enlightenment philosophers from, for example, the name Hegel, you'll find in his writings, this is a paraphrase, the phrase of his writing that "Africa had no place in modern history. It's always been static. And Africans, as you see them now, have always been that way. And they have no likelihood to progress."

[00:37:33.890] - Professor Larry Barham

That was shocking when I read it. And I give it to my students now and I say, "Have you heard any views like this?" They said, "Yeah, we do hear this still." Alarming. That's 200 years ago. Anthropology is a field, can't you feel we feel like we've got rid of this, but there's a wider world where this is still alive and even perhaps more embedded than we thought and hoped and feared.

[00:38:03.650] - Annie Jael Kwan

Yeah, I actually remember reading your article. I think it was in the '90s, this article was talking about how... I think it was publishing a Time magazine, I think. And it was talking about how they were doing a census for various people to identify themselves according to different races. But when it actually was unfolding, someone would suddenly realise, "Oh, actually, I don't think. I mean, they would just switch category."

[00:38:30.870] - Annie Jael Kwan

So it became like this exercise. It was actually quite arbitrary where people were either missed identified or misidentified themselves or they changed their minds and changed category. And I think at the root of that, Erica was actually saying exactly that there is no actual objective biological marker to define race, but it became an administrative exercise.

[00:38:54.300] - Annie Jael Kwan

And I think then it makes me think, of course, of how because of Empire, Britain had really far reaches

in terms of administration and that we're still living in the legacy of that. Because it's connected to all these different sites and therefore had opened up those channels for the flow of people both ways. But right now, we're still also tussling with administration.

[00:39:19.230] - Annie Jael Kwan

Even in the arts world, we have these categories of like DAME and you're supposed to situate yourself there despite other specificities. So I think that's really fascinating in a way that administration seems to also take over in creating these categories and demarcations.

[00:39:40.790] - Annie Jael Kwan

And I guess I just wanted to loop from there to thinking about this virtual world that you utilise in the making of film. Because I suppose in the opportunity of using VR and these imagined landscapes, you're using existing motifs, but there's an opportunity to almost reimagine them as well. Does that give you more freedom to explore new territories or are we still working also with the same notions and categories because of the way language works?

[00:40:20.250] - Larry Achiampong

I guess it depends on the approach to language or the approach to questioning, what exists, really. Because, yes, it's true. We utilise some real engine. David, I got to give credit to. He's the one who mostly worked behind the scenes on that. It's me working on the audible aspects of things.

[00:40:42.680] - Larry Achiampong

You're working with assets that have already been created, right? So even imagine the designers who have created these areas. One can only imagine that there's a preconceived notion of a particular type of ancient African environment. So for example, when people think about pyramids, automatically people think about Egypt. But what about Nubia, which is before Egypt, for example, right?

[00:41:11.190] - Larry Achiampong

But I think what's interesting for me and David is really looking at what people tend to know within the popular context or popular culture of things, establish that and then begin to break that apart or break that down. There's no point simply just trying to sell, here's this other thing, you just didn't see it or whatever. And even almost trying to virtually signal, really, because that's not what we're interested in.

[00:41:42.260] - Larry Achiampong

But really, look at the object or the label, the thing that we've been told is the standard, and begin to break that down and to question what the standard is, what that even means and how that relates to us and how it might not even relate to us. And I think really that's at the core of mine and David's relationship, as you rightly pointed out earlier, Annie, about our interests in popular culture, in video games, comics, and things like that.

[00:42:20.710] - Larry Achiampong

For us, I think in the world, those things are seen as entertainment and whatnot. For us, they're art forms. Video game is no different, in our opinion, from that of an important piece of literature. They can contain complex ideas, of course, because not all games are amazing. Some are trash, or shovel wear, as we say in the gaming world, but they contain incredible deep ideas, some of them.

[00:42:59.070] - Larry Achiampong

And long before David and I met each other, we played certain games, we travelled certain landscapes. And so we in meeting one another and then talking about some of our favourite moments, we're able to relive that with one another. So almost in a similar fashion, by taking those interests, by taking out of the other virtual landscape or even landscapes that exist, landscapes that are familiar to people, we want to, again, using gaming terminology, break beyond those invisible walls or those confines that are set up by the designers to stay within that matrix of environment in order to begin to think about and question what new or other environments that have been emitted might exist.

[00:43:50.080] - Larry Achiampong

We don't want to necessarily create them, that's for everybody to do. But we really want to question that of the state's quote. David, I'm not sure if there's anything you want to add up.

[00:44:01.890] - David Blandy

Yeah, both our practice is engaged with found objects quite a lot, thinking about things that already exist in the world, and then pulling them apart, and analysing them. The library room in Dust to Data, that's a room that was created as a library by someone, and it has these incredible statues of fusty old men all over it. And somehow that really added something to the work. You have these emblems of empire of ideas, of objective, knowledge.

[00:44:47.350] - David Blandy

That's just there because it's an incidental detail in something that someone has put together as indicating a library. But what does that say about libraries, about knowledge about all of these things? Those assumptions that are made in these pre-created things, they start to say something about the culture in which they're created. So yeah, it's a journey.

[00:45:14.600] - Annie Jael Kwan

And I was wondering, Larry, if you could also share about whether with developments in technology like LiDAR scanning and 3D printing and scanning, how has that affected your work?

[00:45:35.330] - Professor Larry Barham

I'm used to it relatively compared with my colleagues, particularly my students. So I'm learning a lot from younger generation. So actually really enjoying using 3D images of artefacts, and that's now considered just old hat. Things have moved on. So I'm just catching up a little bit.

[00:45:53.420] - Professor Larry Barham

But the 3D images are allowing me to look at artefacts in the way that I've already been looking at, in terms of the sequences of making, again, trying to understand the planning, the cognition behind it, but also to present it in a way that other people can see quite quickly, almost intuitively, by colour coding parts that are first, second, third. So that's what we're working on now.

[00:46:22.970] - Professor Larry Barham

And for this exhibition, I had help from PhD students, but I also had some undergraduate students. The University has a little bit of funding for undergraduates to let them do something practical, but also something they learned from. So we had students doing the laser scanning, structured light laser scanning of these objects and then putting them into a particular software, and that was then exported for David and Larry to use.

[00:46:57.590] - Professor Larry Barham

But once the project moves on, this 3D work will be carrying on in our labs, and students will be teaching me, and we'll be learning together on how to make more of this. Working with these two visual artists, it's actually probably helped me think more about how, in a way, get to the essence of these objects to communicate what I want others to learn from them. In a sense, I'm using this technology to control the information that's going to go out from them. But that's the nature of this piece.

[00:47:38.700] - Professor Larry Barham

We all come from different perspectives, we're all going to have different messages to send. But I'm really pleased to be able to use some of these tools to make, in a sense, communicate to generations that's so visual compared to mine. I've got the fusty library behind me. You can't see this people, but I'm almost that guy in the video. But I'm alive, and I'm moving, and I'm willing to change my ways. I don't know if that answers your question in some elliptical way.

[00:48:13.690] - Annie Jael Kwan

I think just looping back to that image of the library with those busts of mail, I suppose, proponents of knowledge. And I suppose it makes me think also of the way we think about the word artefacts, like they belong in some rarefied category. They belong in some place where they're profound holders of

secret knowledge. And in some way, I suppose that's how a lot of history has been narrated, through places like the British Museum. You think that if you go, you're going to see or you're going to experience some authoritative knowledge.

[00:48:55.350] - Annie Jael Kwan

And that really intrigues me, because when we go back to thinking about the different empires, not just Britain, but how they were very active in research in different parts of the world, and then they became people that also wrote about that research, and therefore you have certain narrative of knowledge that still have a certain weight from that project of modernisation and the beginnings of different history. Coming from an art history perspective, that always made me really curious, because, for example, the space of Gandhara in India was where they saw new kinds of statues that looked very different of Buddha. And the whole theory behind it was because that was where the different Western soldiers and their technologies met Buddhism, and therefore, enabled these so-called more sophisticated images of Buddha to be made.

[00:49:52.510] - Annie Jael Kwan

And so then there are many papers written about how is that actually true? Is that just a colonial perspective, a reinterpretation of Buddhism and Buddhist images, and so on? So it always made me realise how, in some way, history gets written by those in power. So that makes me really excited that each of you are, in a way, rewriting history in your own fields. And I just wondered whether you could maybe end today by letting the audience know as a rewriter of history in your media, in your field, what is the most important thing for you?

[00:50:32.350] - Larry Achiampong

For me, it's the space for multiple conversations to be able to exist, really. That's the complexity of the world, that's the complexity of human existence. At the moment, it becomes dictated. It creates so many problems, which then takes so much time to, not only realise, but to deconstruct and get to hopefully a better point. So I think it's about allowing multiple stories and conversations to exist and to even challenge that of the status quo. Yeah, that's my opinion.

[00:51:26.910] - David Blandy

Yeah. For me, I guess it's about trying to break down these barriers, these false dichotomies, and also the barriers that are within ourselves about how we understand ourselves and our place in society and our place in history. And I think the more we understand, the more we open ourselves up to difficulty and uncertainty, the closer we'll get to actually being able to have real conversations. So that's my aim.

[00:52:11.250] - Professor Larry Barham

I think if I'm considering a legacy, because I'm getting older now, I would think I want to look at the past knowing that I don't know how the past happened, but I'm open to interpreting it differently with different ideas as they become available. And I think about them and I scrutinise them and think, "Okay, this moves something on."

[00:52:41.490] - Professor Larry Barham

But I think the real legacy is that the generations that are coming that we are teaching to be critical, to not accept what they're told. Don't accept what I'm saying, just be aware that I'm saying. This is how I tell my students. I'm the guy standing here telling you this is what I think is happening. You asked me, then, why do I think this when I'm giving you something that looks like a fact?

[00:53:06.230] - Professor Larry Barham

Well, how do I know? Challenge, constantly challenge. And that in turn they challenge me, and then I have to challenge myself. And it becomes a reciprocal thing, and I think that's a healthy way to carry on into the future.

[00:53:23.590] - Annie Jael Kwan

Thank you so much. I think today has been just really thought provoking and thank you so much for sharing your time, and your thoughts, and energy with us. If you have not chance to visit Future Ages

Will Wonder, please go up and see the show to see this new work by Larry Achiampong and David Blandy that's made in collaboration with Professor Larry Barham. The show runs until the 20th of February, so there's still plenty of time to catch it.