Multimedia

Architectural Association Archives' Video Collection

https://www.aaschool.ac.uk/PUBLIC/
AUDIOVISUAL/videoarchive.php

Three pranksters dressed in gorilla costumes walked into a conference on conceptual architecture in London in 1975. The moderator, Robert Maxwell, continued to speak as if nothing were happening, straining to keep the audience's attention while the gorillas roamed the room. After five minutes, Colin Rowe, who was more amused by the performance than was Maxwell, spoke out: "I think a super-abundant illustration of conceptual architecture has just walked into the room." The three visitors, as Rowe put it, were clearly embodiments of what "Dr. Johnson described as the unexpected copulation of ideas" (Figures 1 and 2).[1] While not physically aggressive, they were clearly antagonistic to the event and singled out one participant in particular, Peter Eisenman, barking and growling at increasing volume each time he tried to speak.

Like the hominids in Stanley Kubrick's then still-recent *2001: A Space Odyssey*, whose movements the London

pranksters mimicked, these gorillas carried a symbolic primitivist and latent political meaning: they were the opposite of the artificial, advanced, civilized, or conceptual. Designer Alessandro Mendini had something similar in mind when he chose a gorilla for the cover of *Casabella* in 1972, suggesting that "Italian Radical design" liberated designers from academicism and technology and returned them to a more primitive way of life. Rumors persist that students from London's Architectural Association also donned gorilla suits to protest the proposed merger of their school with the Imperial College of Science and Technology ca. 1969. Even Eisenman, speaking on the matter later during the conference, saw in the event a symbol of the geopolitics of knowledge, remarking that the entry of three gorillas had reminded him of his first meeting with Rowe, who treated him as "that funny primitive that has wandered in from America."[2]

The gorilla incident is one of the many obscure historical oddities to be found in the video collection of the Architectural Association Archives. Many of the items in the collection raise important historiographic questions. For example, in spite of Maxwell's desire to will the three costumed pranksters into invisibility, their very conspicuousness signified the political nature of their intervention. Psychologists Christopher Chabris and Daniel Simons speak of invisible gorillas, which signify something so unexpected as to be hidden in plain sight.[3] The material in this archive invites a new copulation of ideas: between,

on the one hand, the idea of the political subtext and ideology inscribed in the discursive field and, on the other, the idea that there is a level of communication, partly nonverbal, that has gone unnoticed by historians accustomed to texts and documents—a "silent language," as the anthropologist Edward T. Hall called it, composed of gestures, body language, pregnant pauses, tone of voice, and cultural habits.[4] The AA Archives' video collection, like so many video archives currently being made available online by schools and other institutions, has captured for posterity these two intertwined dimensions of discourse.[5]

The AA video collection is part of the archives of the Architectural Association, the first independent school of architecture in the United Kingdom, founded in 1847. The Slide Library, which became the Photo Library before becoming the AA Archives, began to acquire video recordings of school lectures in 1982. In more recent years it has become the home of other material, most notably from TVAA (a closed-circuit television network launched at the school in 1974 and run by the its Communications Unit) and architect Dennis Crompton (who assembled a vast collection of recordings of Art Net events; more on Art Net below).[6] The earliest material dates back to 1968 and includes recordings of a wide range of formal events and informal situations: interviews, conversations at studio tables, school-wide meetings, jury reviews known at the AA as "tables," experimental student films, and

Figure 1 A gorilla interrupts a 1975 symposium on conceptual architecture and waits to see if Charles Jencks notices him ("Conceptual Architecture Symposium 1/7," Art Net, London, 17 Jan. 1975, https://www.aaschool.ac.uk/VIDEO/lecture.php?ID=2342).

informal discussions among participants sitting on various soft furnishings. Today the collection stands at more than 2,000 videos, the majority resulting from the exhaustive documentation of school happenings since the early 2000s; watching the collection in its entirety would require ninety days of around-the-clock viewing. Among these thousands of videos, of greatest interest to architectural historians are the nearly 800 recordings made between the late 1960s and the late 1990s. These are still only the tip of the iceberg, as 250 open-reel films, including recordings of lectures by Reyner Banham, Rowe, James Stirling, Eisenman, Rem Koolhaas, Manfredo Tafuri, Philip Johnson, Denys Lasdun, Anthony Vidler, and others—a veritable who's who of the international architectural establishment from the 1960s to the 1980s—have not yet been digitized. The AA is currently seeking funding to make these materials available online.

Some of the more fascinating videos among the earlier materials currently available online include Banham's multipart 1974 lecture in preparation for *Megastructure*; Koolhaas's 1976 lecture on New York as he prepared *Delirious New York*; the conference on postmodernism organized by Charles Jencks in 1977, the year in which *The Language of Post-modern Architecture* was published; a series of four lectures from 1987 by Robin Evans in preparation for *The Projective Cast*; Daniel Libeskind's 1989 lecture "The Edge of Fire," in which he announced the death of architecture (just three months before winning the Jewish Museum competition); Sylvia Lavin's 1991 response to the work of Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown; the 1993 conference on "The Fold," aligned with Greg Lynn's guest-edited issue of *Architectural Design*, "Folding in Architecture"; Francesca Hughes's 1994 lecture series Reconstructing Her Practice, including lectures by Diana Agrest, Beatriz Colomina, and Elizabeth Diller; and Koolhaas's 1995 lecture on *S,M,L,XL*, the year after its publication.[7] Even this short list shows how important this collection may prove to be for our understanding of architectural discourse over the past half century.

Figure 2 At the 1975 symposium, a gorilla mocks the idea of rational thought in front of Robert Maxwell ("Conceptual Architecture Symposium 1/7," Art Net, London, 17 Jan. 1975, https://www.aaschool.ac.uk/VIDEO/lecture.php?ID=2342).

Most revealing of the gorillas of architectural history, however, are the nearly one hundred videos documenting the events of Art Net, particularly the 1975 symposium on conceptual architecture and the 1976 lecture series called The Rally. Art Net was a temporary art gallery run by Peter Cook at 14 West Central Street, London, a short walk from the Architectural Association, where Cook, a leading figure in the group Archigram, had been running the Diploma School until 1973. He had secured funds from Baron Alistair McAlpine, who offered him, in Cook's words, "six years—no more, no less—to hold exhibitions, rallies, symposia, lectures, by anybody that amused me at the time."[8] From 1973 to 1979, Cook brought the leading avant-garde, theoretical architectural thinkers of the 1970s together with audiences in one double-height room, furnished with palms and deck chairs. Among the participants were Joseph Rykwert, Eisenman, Bernard Tschumi, Stirling, Alvin Boyarsky, Cedric Price, Koolhaas, Dalibor Vesely, Léon Krier, and Rowe. The films of these events, which include lengthy question-and-answer sessions with the audiences, show in condensed form a landscape of ideological conflict—alliances, debts, grudges, and antipathies—revealed through the simple reactions and counterreactions to audience questions and the ways in which what people say is understood or misunderstood.

These films do all of this through the subtleties of communication that video is uniquely equipped to convey: a knowing smile, the pace of delivery, the length of a pause, the pitch and agitation in a voice. In short, we see in these videos the subtext and context in which the words and statements that formed the written discourse of the period were uttered. We see Eisenman laugh after describing the moment "when I stick a column in the middle of his bedroom." We hear the verbal exclamation mark in Rowe's voice when he responds to Eisenman's presentation of House VI, saying, "If this house lies

outside culture, and yet it comes on looking as though it is in some way affiliated to Van Doesburg, *this is a problem!*" We see the rattled reaction of the otherwise charming and entertaining Eisenman as he responds to Rowe's pointed critique. We hear the impassioned tone of an audience member piling on after Léon Krier's attack on Venturi and Scott Brown. We see Koolhaas, leaning back in his deck chair with his arms behind his head in confident relaxation, attacking Rowe's vision of the city as being that of "a cynical invitation to simulation." We see the grin that lights up Jencks's face when he says to Koolhaas of his "Captive Globe," "you're just producing the same snake pit that Le Corbusier is producing, except that yours comes in thirty-five styles," and the quickness of Koolhaas's reply: "Of all the people, to hear you say that yours comes in thirty-five styles, Charles, I mean."[9] In all of these cases, the nonverbal dimensions of the discourse conveyed by video make clear the subtext and context in which and for which the speakers wrote their texts.

Some videos in the collection also occasionally cast an unflattering light on the clubby atmosphere of the neo-avant-garde of the 1970s. Events at Art Net were seen by some as exclusive: when Cook hosted an Art Net event in Edinburgh in 1976, one audience member commented, "The trendies from the AA take the circus out around the provinces every now and again and they peddle the latest self-indulgence."[10] In a dispute following a talk that Jencks gave in December 1976, we hear him say, "I don't have anything against elitism at all," to which Rowe replies, "Nor do I. Elitism is usually used as though it is a term of abuse."[11] One wonders if the kind of generosity of debate that was open to contestation depended on that elitism. If it did not, there are lessons here for the future concerning fruitful modes of debate, if those can be untangled from the elitism of the time.

Among the most vivid and curious of the conversations captured in the Art Net collection must surely be the one that took place between Jencks and Rowe as they were standing at the Art Net bar after the 1975 conference on conceptual architecture. Here, we see Jencks knock back drinks and spar intellectually with Rowe, sharing a heady mix of references: Edmund Burke, internationalism and patriotism in the Russian and French Revolutions, the U.S. Constitution, the inevitability of historicism, Francis Yates, Saint Teresa, the necessity of evil in Thomas Aquinas, Jefferson versus Hamilton, the literary ignorance of most people, the distraction of talking about elitism, T. S. Eliot on Henry James, the Hegelianism of Darwin, Bentham and Burke in America, Comte and Hegel in Europe, the paintings of Delacroix and their relation to Beethoven, and the lack of taste in American interior decoration—all in about twenty minutes and five cigarettes.[12] This video is typical of this series because it is unclear whether the participants know that they are being filmed, which raises questions about the nature of the evidence that this and other video archives of the period offer. The video presents a personal exchange that seems to take place in private, with Jencks as the follower to Rowe's lead in an intellectual dance. Rowe curses and makes personally derogatory remarks that one would not expect him to make on film. The camera's distant location and telephoto lens suggest espionage, and its stationary viewpoint—with Rowe and Jencks both ending up outside the frame at times—suggests that it is both unattended and clandestine. Today, copy release forms are dotted, crossed, and signed by participants who are all too aware of the potential irrevocability and misquotability of their statements once they appear on the Internet. One is struck when watching the Art Net videos by how their participants appear, at least to today's eyes, so casual and frank when speaking in

public. Perhaps, as Peter Cook once remarked, there were geographic differences in styles of debate. In contrast to New York, "London enabled groups with widely differing architectural outlooks to socialise in a manner that the necessity for polemical authenticity in other places made difficult or suspect."[13] Or perhaps our acclimation to video recording over the years, along with our ever more acute awareness of its uses and effects and heightened sensitivity to intellectual property, has made public discourse in the twenty-first century more guarded and controlled.

The metaconversations among the various actors in these films could of course be mapped from the texts that constitute the written record of the field at that time, but the historian wishing to grasp the subtext and context behind these written texts will find valuable resources in this video collection and others like it. The materials contained in this collection offer historians of postmodern architecture, and in particular those with an interest in architecture as a discursive field that flourished in and around schools and institutions, vivid glimpses into the scenes in which such metaconversations developed. Some may even shed new light on history's own methodological gorillas in the room.

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Notes

1. Colin Rowe, "Conceptual Architecture Symposium 1/7," Art Net, 17 Jan. 1975, v=7dhIVtFS-Ziw&t=2988s. To access any video cited in this review, append the suffix component of the web address given in the footnotes to the following prefix: https://www.youtube.com/watch?

2. Peter Eisenman, "Conceptual Architecture Symposium 2/7," Art Net, 17 Jan. 1975, v=4ahYjvANtsk&t=3300s.

3. Christopher Chabris and Daniel Simons, *The Invisible Gorilla: And Other Ways Our Intuitions Deceive Us* (New York: Crown, 2010).

4. Edward T. Hall, *The Silent Language* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1959).

5. Other historical video archives include those maintained by SCI-Arc and Pigeon Digital.

6. On TVAA, see Irene Sunwoo, "The Static Age," *AA Files*, no. 61 (2010), 118–29.

7. Reyner Banham, "Megastructures 1," Art Net, 15 Oct. 1974, v=ectOi0KXeus&t=235s. Rem Koolhaas and Elia Zenghelis, "OMA" Art Net, 14 Mar. 1976, v=ZXtyrp340gY&t=273s. Charles Jencks's lecture for his conference "Postmodernism: Uses of Language in Architecture," Art Net, 25 May 1977, v=MKh6nB9GBrA&t=41s. Robin Evans, "Centrality and the Right-Angle," AA Lecture, 21 Jan. 1987, v=RDpkhtv_DBs&t=1428s. Robin Evans, "Proportion: Corbusier, His Modulor and His Buildings," AA Lecture, 11 Feb. 1987, v=YL6E2C1wOCE. Robin Evans, "Abstraction in Painting, Architecture, Mathematics," AA Lecture, 11 Mar. 1987, v=VKb4cjweo8M&t=6s. Robin Evans, "Fragmentation and Ambiguity," AA Lecture, 18 Mar. 1987, v=B-PADEdsKZI. Daniel Libeskind, "The Edge of Fire," AA Lecture, 8 April 1989, v=7FPpxEerQ1M&t=839s. Sylvia Lavin's response to Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown, in "Architecture as Shelter: City as Decon," RIBA Lecture, 2 May 1991, v=r1V-aBXQAm4&t=4169s, 1:09:20; Andrew Benjamin and Greg Lynn, "The Fold 1/2," AA conference, 14 June 1993, v=dXHw2WTweO4&t=1995s. Jeff Kipnis, Andrew Benjamin, Greg Lynn, and Mark Cousins, "The Fold 2/2," AA conference, 14 June 1993, v=mDU4sDh5EGw&t=193s. Diana Agrest, "The Return of (the Repressed) Nature," AA Lecture, 2 Mar. 1994, v=Pu0_SX65ixA&t=1063s. Elizabeth Diller, "Bad Press," AA Lecture, 11 Mar. 1994, v=xDxH9Sar57Y&t=4376s. Beatriz Colomina, "Battle Lines: E.1027," AA Lecture, 15 Mar. 1994, v=3kUYjddSZA4&t=102s. Rem Koolhaas, "S,M,L,XL," AA Lecture, 29 Nov. 1995, v=YEGmhjouAeM&t=1981s.

8. Peter Cook, "The London Effect," in *Peter Cook: Six Conversations* (London: Academy Editions, 1993), 134–35, cited in Henderson Downing, "Between Tradition and Oblivion: Notes on Art Net and the AA Film Archive," *AA Files*, no. 55 (2007), 41.

9. Peter Eisenman, "Conceptual Architecture Symposium 3/7," Art Net, 17 Jan. 1975, v=c74c0LImjFE&t=1084s, 12:16–16:49; Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown, "The Rally 4/23," Art Net, 6 July 1976, v=Ncz-vgWrPFw, 24:09; Colin Rowe, "Inside Out: Outside In?," Art Net, 18 Dec. 1976, v=lpec8JuIuz8, 43:00; Rem Koolhaas, "Salvador Dali, the Paranoid Critical Method, Le Corbusier, New York," Art Net, 18 Dec. 1976, v=HcnRzxQu27w, 1:37:38.

10. See Downing, "Between Tradition and Oblivion," 41. Recordings from the Edinburgh conference have not yet been made available as part of the online collection.

11. Charles Jencks, "The Fear, Asceticism and Suicide of the Avant-Garde," Art Net, 18 Dec. 1976, v=J75FWJpVwyI, 1:03:05.

12. Colin Rowe, "In Conversation with Charles Jencks," Art Net, 17 Jan. 1975, v=Ln_8ymrqgdE&t=302s.

13. Peter Cook, "Archigram Entr'Acte 3: Folkestone," in *Concerning Archigram*, ed. Dennis Crompton (London: Archigram Archives, 1998), 108, cited in Downing, "Between Tradition and Oblivion," 41.