

**Architecture after the Asylum: Hannah Hull, Agata Mrozowski, Maria-Saroja Ponnambalam and Rupali Mozaria, ariella tai, Joe Wood**  
Trinity Square Video, Toronto  
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by Hiba Ali

I met Sajdeep Soomal, curator of the exhibition *Architecture after the Asylum*, at Toronto’s Trinity Square Video, as he gave a tour and discussed architecture and psychiatry. “Psychiatry decides if you are sane or insane based on your ability to produce a coherent narrative,” Soomal explained as he invited me in. “I knew that this project about psychiatry needed to be situated in the contemporary art world because that is where people have long refused and subverted traditional narrative modes in favour of imaginative, non-narrative takes on living in this crazy-making world.” The exhibition proposed a new concept to understand the relationship between space and mental health: mad building syndrome (MBS), which plays on the term sick building syndrome (SBS). Just as SBS is a condition where buildings make people who live or work in them sick, so MBS is a condition of a broken world, with madness as a normal bodily reaction to unhealthy living conditions, architecture designed to contain and control, and toxic environments. The five projects featured in the exhibition expanded our understanding of MBS by considering public ideas around safety, infrastructure, legibility and freedom.

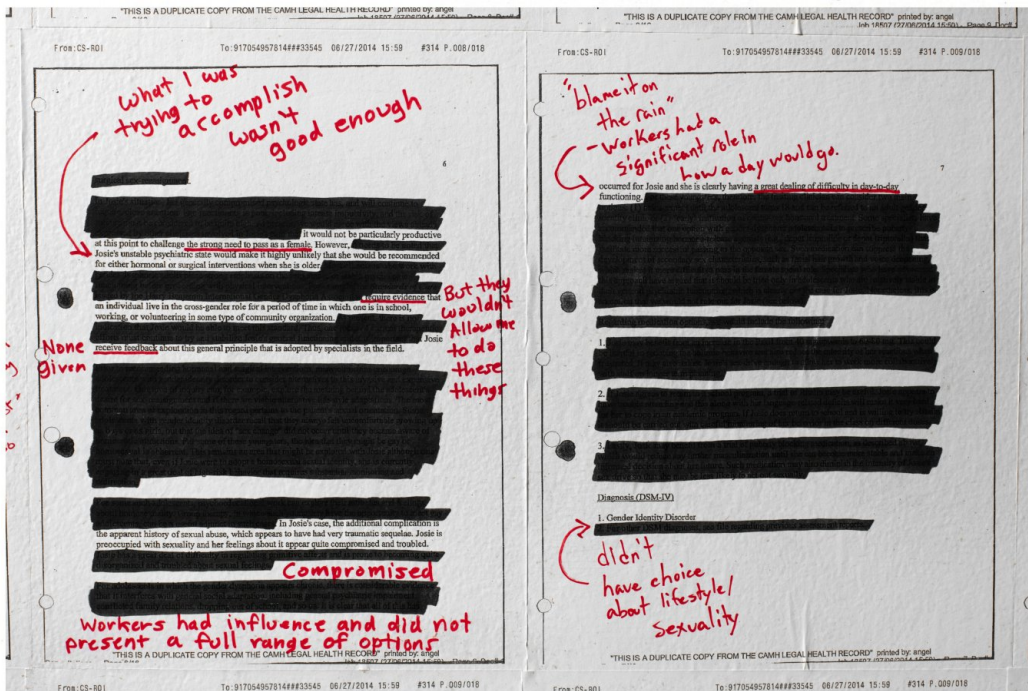
I began with *Madlove: A Designer Asylum*, which featured a series of comic book profiles that showcased “what a good mental health day looks, feels and tastes like” for a few people with varying mental-health experiences. The comic book profiles came out of workshops designed by UK-based duo Hannah Hull and James Leadbitter and featured drawings of participants such as Iris, who describes her perfect day at the asylum as meditating, watching TV, hearing a motivational speech and going on a shopping spree with her best friend. Importantly, in order for Iris’s perfect day to materialize, she cannot be locked in an asylum. Addressing the limits of carceral psychiatry, *Madlove* calls for an end to asylum walls. At the same time, it is an easy entry point for viewers to consider

the legitimacy and legibility of madness, and to see how the perfect day for the sane and insane don’t look so different.

Joe Wood’s two-part installation, part of a two-part project called *d’<U>C’r’Δ’> | kohpâteyitâkosiwin – the act of being thought of as contemptible*, filled a wall to the left of *Madlove*. Here, tiled, wheat-pasted documents featured Wood’s psychological history of being diagnosed with gender dysphoria, and her challenging adolescence spent in abusive, transphobic foster care as part of the Sixties Scoop, a Canadian genocidal policy from the ’50s to the ’80s that stole Indigenous children from their communities and placed them in foster homes. Asserting her agency and rebuking the institution of settler psychiatry, Wood marks up and redacts comments in medical documents obtained from Toronto’s Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) that belittle, mitigate, control and attempt to make legible her trans identity. During her time in foster care, Wood remembers climbing trees to seek refuge, and at the centre of the gallery there was a sculpture of cupped paper hands that looked like branches, onto which was projected footage of leaves rustling in the wind—holding us in witness of Wood’s experiences as she moved through different psychiatric institutions and foster care.

Maria-Saroja Ponnambalam and Rupali Mozaria’s video installation *How We Cared* paid homage to Ponnambalam’s uncle, Pandi Kumaraswamy, who encouraged Ponnambalam to become an artist. In the work, effectively a moving digital collage appearing in fragments, there were three sites of care: forced care (psychiatric institutions in Canada and India), natural care (Kurthalam Falls, a sacred healing site in South Asia) and creative care (Kumaraswamy’s own apartment). Images—from family albums and factory maps, and of South Indian Bollywood star Aishwarya Rai—serve as a mental map of spaces that

Joe Wood, *d’<U>C’r’Δ’> | kohpâteyitâkosiwin – the act of being thought of as contemptible*, 2019, mixed media; installation view from *Architecture After the Asylum*, 2020, Trinity Square Video, Toronto  
PHOTO: YULIA BENOUSHKI; COURTESY OF TRINITY SQUARE VIDEO



link Ponnambalam and Kumaraswamy, illustrating psychological spaces of migration, labour and British colonialism. At one point, we see Kumaraswamy, who was diagnosed with bipolar disorder and gender dysphoria, turn the camera on himself in the solace of his apartment to document his domestic surroundings against the Toronto skyline. The apartment becomes Kumaraswamy's site of freedom, where he is able to express himself as an artist. Working with Mozaria, a graphic artist, Ponnambalam stressed natural, creative forms of care within a fluid ecosystem spanning medical, spiritual and natural worlds.

In Portland-based artist ariella tai's two-channel installation, featuring the videos *not alone* and *safehouse ii*, she considered the role of architecture and Black madness. In *not alone*, tai rearranges the 2003 psychiatric horror film *Gothika*, which follows a psychiatrist played by Halle Berry who finds herself trapped in a women's mental-health hospital after she is accused of killing her husband. tai edits the film—in which a light-skinned Black woman enacts trauma narratives for the white gaze—so that Berry begins on the cold tiles of the asylum's open showers and then ends up in the privacy of her home's bathtub, thereby exorcising the ghosts of whiteness haunting her character. In *safehouse ii*, a group of people autonomously bathe, garden and cook in their domestic spaces. Centring Black, queer and trans experiences, *safehouse ii* shows its subjects relaxed and carefree, away from the colonial, psychiatric gaze. It's a much-needed intervention:

whereas institutions tend to position Black people within frames of carcerality, tai considers what healing can look like for those outside of a psychiatric lens. As part of the exhibition, tai led a workshop, "The Cinematic Archives of Black Madness," which addressed films such as *Gothika*, *Shock Corridor* (1963) and *The Caveman's Valentine* (2001), exploring Black madness through cinematic technique and opening up an interpretation of the films to a non-normative representation of Black consciousness and cognition.

I took a stack of postcards with me as I left the gallery. The postcards listed out various psychiatric diagnoses, from bipolar disorder to gender dysphoria to depression, and were headlined either "Healthy Responses to Patriarchy" or "Healthy Responses to Capitalism." Stylized like health-awareness posters, these postcards asked us to reflect on the ways that madness is authorized by our environments. While psychiatry continues to use brutal methods such as incarceration, electroconvulsive therapy, forced labour and Freudian psychoanalysis to "correct the mind," the exhibition pointed outward instead, asking us to let our minds run wild in an attempt to correct the carceral, genocidal infrastructures of settler-colonial society.

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