

Art

Reviews

Weekend

Collecting Themselves: The Archives of Afrika Bambaataa and Bob Mizer



by Lisa Darms
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Installation view, "The Afrika Bambaataa Master of Records Vinyl Archive," Gavin Brown's Enterprise, New York, July 11–August 10, 2013 (photo by Thomas Müller) (courtesy the artist and Gavin Brown's Enterprise)


Last summer, at *The Afrika Bambaataa Master of Records Vinyl Archive* at Gavin Brown's Enterprise, New Yorkers had the unprecedented opportunity to participate in the cataloging of one of the world's most historically significant record archives.

Gallery visitors wandered through the aisles between long trestle tables stacked with white archival boxes, all filled with vinyl from hip-hop pioneer Bambaataa's monumental collection of over 41,000 records. They could

browse the collection, listening as invited DJ's spun records, and watching as a team of volunteers organized, catalogued and documented the collection before it was transferred to its permanent home at Cornell.

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Calling the process “open archiving,” curator Johan Kugelberg likened the experience to “an archeological dig or a group of students viewing biological research in a museum, an important and rarely seen part of the process of documenting history.”

The art world’s preoccupation with the archive is far from new. Conceptual artists appropriated the archive’s bureaucratic aesthetic in the 1960s and ’70s (aptly illustrated in last year’s *Materializing “Six Years”: Lucy R. Lippard and the Emergence of Conceptual Art* at the Brooklyn Museum). More recently, curators and critics have tended to describe all things traumatic, historical or memorial as “archival” (as in Okwui Enwezor’s *Archive Fever* exhibition of 2008, which included Felix Gonzalez-Torres’s “Death by Gun,” Hans-Peter Feldmann’s collection of newspaper covers from September 12, 2001, and an Eyal Sivan video featuring Adolf

Eichmann). But as an archivist at NYU's Fales Library, I've seen the mode of this preoccupation shift over the last few years, as artists and curators like Kugelberg engage more directly with the *stuff* of archives, rather than simply their aesthetic or symbolic aspects.

It's not unusual to see letters, sketches, or journals displayed alongside artworks in museums and galleries. Surveys of performance, like the Whitney's *Rituals of Rented Island* or the traveling exhibition *Radical Presence: Black Performance in Contemporary Art*, rely heavily on documents, often out of necessity. More interesting to me is to see artists adopting the archivist's selective role, exhibiting and re-presenting so-called "forgotten" archives.

Akram Zaatari's long engagement with the archive of Lebanese studio photographer Hashem El Madani, or Carol Bove's recent presentation at Maccarone of items from the Lionel Ziprin archive (including some by artist-anthropologist Harry Smith), are just two examples of this trend. But lately, I'm seeing a new curatorial tendency, as represented by Kugelberg and others: In addition to the material of the archive, we are increasingly presented with the process of *archiving*.

Though I was excited about the transparency and participatory aspects of Kugelberg and Brown's "open archiving" process, *The Afrika Bambaataa Master of Records Vinyl Archive* left me with some questions: What was actually happening? How were the volunteers trained? Would their work end up having any value for the Cornell archivists who would have to finish the job? What steps were being taken to ensure the safety of the records as they were handled and played? And what about that stack of boxes in the corner marked "mold"?

These are some of the questions that the exhibition *DEVOTION: Excavating Bob Mizer* attempts to engage with directly. Currently on view at 80WSE Gallery, the ambitious show — the first under director Jonathan Berger's tenure — mines photographer Bob Mizer's massive personal collection of negatives, documents, props and costumes.






Bob Mizer, "Charles Butler (Still From Film Witch Boy), Los Angeles" (c. 1955) (via steinhardt.nyu.edu/80wse)

To the degree that Mizer is known at all, it is primarily as a beefcake photographer via his commercial photography studio the **Athletic Model Guild** (AMG) and as a publisher of the magazine *Physique Pictorial*. In 1954, Mizer was convicted of distributing obscene material through the mail, but thereafter was able to creatively conform to the laws governing male nudity. In his long career, he shot thousands of male models (including Arnold

Schwarzenegger and Warhol muse Joe Dallesandro), but simultaneously created an enormous body of over two million non-beefcake images that remained largely unprinted and unseen. It is primarily from the archive of this work that *DEVOTION* draws.

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Forty-seven photographs have been selected and printed from Mizer's negatives for the show; they include some astonishing portraits and tableaux, often featuring costumes or DIY cinematic sets, that convey a deeply American form of tender campiness: a leather-jacketed "JD" unthreateningly poses with a switchblade; an apparently nude man in a wizard cap kicks back with a book in what looks to be a suburban garage draped with a little velvet and accented with some skulls.

But *DEVOTION* doesn't merely select from and re-present the archive through these photographs — like *The Afrika Bambaataa Master of Records Vinyl Archive*, it brings the actual archive into the gallery. Costumes and boxes of negatives shipped from California are displayed not as static objects but as items in flux, in the process being archived. Students from NYU's Department of Art and Art Professions, recruited and trained by Mizer's archivist and by a professional costume

conservator, itemize, re-house, scan and describe the archive during the gallery's open hours. Each day, they add some of the images they've discovered to those on display.

Student volunteers and visitors to the gallery will be the first to see the negatives since Mizer shot them. The majority of the images on view are thus effectively uncurated, in the process of being discovered. The possibility of failure is omnipresent — the failure to unearth interesting images, but also the failure to properly care for and preserve them.

And yet, it is this very unpredictability that strikes me as particularly true to the nature of archives. They are unstable, seemingly infinite. It is impossible to name and preserve every item. This indeterminacy is what keeps me up at night, but it's also what makes the archive so appealing.

Much has been said by artists, curators and academics about “performing the archive”, but rarely are archivists asked to participate in these conversations. Archivists' roles in building collections and making archives accessible have been largely invisible to the art world. In a sense, in their commitment to objectivity, this invisibility is the goal.



Installation view, “DEVOTION: Excavating Bob Mizer” at 80WSE Gallery, New York (photo by Jeffrey Sturges) (click to enlarge)

And yet, the archive without the archivist — without *archiving* — can present a naive view of how meaning is created and history shaped by institutional, or even individual, decision-making. Similarly, contemporary artists' re-presentations of archival materials too often reassign authorship, giving the starring role to the artist who selects the work, rather than the one who created it.



Shows like *DEVOTION* and *The Afrika Bambaataa Master of Records Vinyl Archive*, in their shift from archive to “archiving,” represent collaborations with artists and their estates in which the creators of the archive retain their authorship. “Archiving” rather than archive foregrounds its own instability; it allows the process to expand in real time, in public, and without the selective pre-framing of curator or curator-artists.

“Archiving” risks failing to preserve, and failing to entertain. In 2004, Hal Foster wrote *An Archival Impulse*, identifying an archival trend in art. This art was, like any real archive, “indeterminant,” serving as “promissory notes” and “enigmatic prompts for future scenarios.” Ten years on, perhaps it is the *archiving* impulse that most closely acts on these prompts and promises.

DEVOTION: Excavating Bob Mizer continues at 80WSE Gallery (80 Washington Square East, Greenwich Village, Manhattan) through February 15.

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