

Lisa Darms: From Hauser & Wirth Institute, this is Conversations in the Archives, a podcast about artists' archives and the people who create, care for, and are inspired by them. I'm Lisa Darms, Director of Hauser & Wirth Institute, a nonprofit devoted to transforming the field of artists' archives. In this series, I speak with some of the most exciting thinkers and practitioners in the field.

For today's conversation, I spoke to the visionary writer and curator Tempestt Hazel. Tempestt talked to me about the family collections that inspired her, how she came to study art history, and how her disagreements with the discipline moved her to co-found SIXTY Inches from Center, a collective of editors, writers, artists, curators, librarians, and archivists who publish and produce projects about artists, archival practice, and culture in the Midwest.

Tempestt Hazel: [excerpt] *A kind of grievance of the art history curriculum led me to a place of archives and understanding what the root of knowledge production is, and that it's these primary materials. And that kind of got me started asking questions about if I have this grievance with what's being taught or was being valued, then how do I actually impact that?*

LD: We also discussed the creativity that comes out of collaborations between artists and community archives, and ended by talking about the shifting relationship of archives to the past, the present, and the future.

So, Tempestt, thank you so much for joining me from Chicago. I'm really interested in starting off by hearing about your personal journey with archives and kind of how you first encountered ideas around preservation that interested you—and that could be at any point in your life, from childhood to adulthood.

TH: Yeah, I really love that question, because I think there are so many answers. And I think what this conversation and this question coming from you allows me to dig into is a deeper history or an earlier history of my relationship with archives, and ask myself, when did I really start to understand it? And I think it's a story that almost has little or nothing to do with what I do now, other than the fact that I actually can identify and recognize the ways that my family recorded things in very particular ways, or documented or collected things. And that makes me think about very specifically my father, who is just the biggest sports fan that ever existed. And, you know, I'm an '80s baby, came of age in the '90s, and VHS was the big thing. So my dad has just a massive VHS collection where he recorded every single championship game, like championship and finals game of the NBA in the '90s. He has VHS of all of them, all of his favorite teams. They're just boxes and boxes in my child... well, not actually my childhood home, but my parents' home now, that have just this documentation of the NBA in a way that's pretty incredible.

And additionally, I will say that I found kind of a full circle connection because my family, like so many Black families, had subscriptions to *Ebony* and *Jet*, so we have a pretty massive collection of *Ebony* and *Jet* magazines too. Those two things—my dad's NBA VHS collection and our family's collection of *Ebony* and *Jet* magazines—are probably the first things that gave me an understanding of what it's like to love something so much that you want to keep it in your own kind of way. And with the *Ebony* and

Jet magazines, we still have them, and there was always a spread of almost like a year's worth of issues spread on the coffee table as like the coffee table book....

LD: How did you sort of get from childhood to deciding to study art history?

TH: I always thought that I would do a couple of things, like in childhood. I thought I would either direct music videos—because I loved music videos and storytelling through music videos—I thought I would start and publish my own magazine, and I thought I would do fashion design, but very... In particular, like, a redesigning of fashion design, kind of like the environmentally conscious... I mean, I wouldn't have spoken about it like that at the time, but as a childhood thrifter and somebody who really liked going to thrift stores and things like that, I loved altering clothes, so I thought that I would do that. But when you tell your parents, who work at Caterpillar—I'm in a union family, you know, I'm from Central Illinois, Peoria, Illinois—and you say, "I want to go into the arts in any of these areas," it's not quite.... there isn't precedent for that. So there weren't, like, artists in my family. There wasn't a very clear picture, I think, for my family, of what a successful life and a stable life in the arts looks like.

When I graduated high school, I was kind of pushed into the logic of, well, if you want to go into the arts, you have to have a business mind, so why don't you study business? So I ended up going to school for entrepreneurship and business administration, and I took a series of economics classes, and my Economics professor, like, pulled me aside in her office and was like, "Tempestt, you know, you're really good at this. You really have a handle on this. Like, you're naturally good at this. If you put a little bit more effort, you would just excel in economics." And that was the moment of clarity for me, because, one, I didn't—what do economists do? I didn't know. And two, I didn't necessarily... Just because you're good at something doesn't mean you should necessarily pursue it. And it was a moment of clarity for me in understanding that I really need to redirect—I needed to change direction. So I ended up moving to the West Coast and actually started working in fashion design.

There was a point when I realized that I wanted to be closer to my family. So I ended up moving from California to Chicago because it's close enough to Peoria and there's—you know, it's an art city, it's a cultural city. So I knew I could maybe continue doing the pattern-making and design work while here. And then I started back up with school and went to Columbia College, and was planning on going back into fashion. But I think I quickly also realized that with the work I was doing in fashion, it was a supportive role. It was helping other people realize and kind of manifest their ideas. And there was something... I was in a class, I think it was [in] an art history class or some kind of visual arts management class that it clicked for me that that's the role that I was interested in. I wasn't necessarily interested in being the maker. I was interested in... I was more interested in the ways that I could support makers or create containers for makers to make. And so I ended up shifting into art history and visual arts management, because those were the ones that made sense at the time. And I think it was my time at Columbia—you know, I just had really great mentors: Amy Mooney, who's an incredible art historian; Dawoud Bay, who's a really profound photographer; Cecil McDonald, who's also a profound photographer, who helped me to understand and build a relationship with the art historical canon in a way that...they helped clarify things. Them, and also an art dealer and artist named Madeline Murphy Rabb. I think them, combined with a kind of grievance of the art history curriculum led me to a place of archives, then, and understanding what the root of knowledge production is. And that it's these primary

materials, and it is what research and information is available for us to create knowledge, create curatorial practices and exhibitions, write books, write articles. That's where the root was. So it was there that I made that connection and understood just the power that was held within archives, and the people who were essentially the curators of those spaces. So that kind of got me started asking questions about: If I have this grievance with what's being taught or what's being valued, then how do I actually impact that? That really led me to archives.

LD: Can you talk more about specifically the grievances and what you felt was missing?

TH: Yeah. I mean, you know, once I realized—to go back to what I mentioned about wanting to support artists rather than be the artist—at that time I really dove into and focused my attention on figuring out ways to support my friends and peers who were making work. And what I realized was the disconnect between what the curriculum was, and the art that was happening amongst my own peer network. And also the difference between the curriculum and me not seeing myself in that, and actually the toll that that was taking on my understanding of my own self-worth and my different communities and different identities, the self-worth of us, of me. That became a serious grievance, because I also realized that what it was causing was a conflict between what I was being taught and what was being expected in my program or in my classes or coursework, and what I was interested in writing about or researching. And there was a resistance, and often a pushback or lack of understanding of the ideas that I was bringing to the table. And it took a toll—when you're a baby art historian, it takes a toll on you when you're being kind of told that what you're interested in researching... And it's not even just about the research, and it's not super personal solely to me, it's also personal because it feels like a rejection of my communities and the people I love and the cultures that I love and the art that I love, and...you know, all of that. There was a way that I... In order to regain my confidence, I needed to figure out, I needed to create some kind of outlet, some kind of way to address that. Some kind of vehicle for me being able to develop my voice and my interests amongst folks who I knew understood and aligned with those interests. And I was finding that in very mixed ways within school.

LD: It sounds like the origin story for SIXTY Inches from Center.

TH: That's exactly what it is. It was the origin story. I credit my grievances with school with SIXTY existing in a lot of ways. I imagine it would have come to be in some way, shape, or form, but I think when it did and how it did was very much in reaction to that experience. And so I and one of my classmates, both in the art history program—her name is Nicolette Caldwell—we started SIXTY out of several things. There were several things happening. Originally, it was a graffiti and street art exhibition that was curated at Columbia, that she curated with another friend of ours, and had that name SIXTY Inches from Center. And after the exhibition, we just found ourselves in these conversations saying that we want to write differently. We want to write about different things. We want to be able to talk about graffiti and street art and the apartment galleries and the artist-run scene in Chicago, and also talk about some of the things that we were learning in class and some of the wider movements and themes and different things within this kind of mainstream cultural canon, we want to...

For me, I think in particular, I was seeking out a platform for being able to write in a way that wasn't alienating. I think if I were to define or try to articulate what my intention with my writing is, now, it's to

write in a way that my family could read it and not feel like they're reading some kind of, you know, something that is just so far outside of their legibility. I take that into my curatorial practice as well. I want something that the people I love most and who have been with me all my life can experience and not feel like an outsider. So, SIXTY was really created in that way. It was for us to regain our voice and create and find our own and define our own footing within art history and the arts, and to create a platform where we could unapologetically highlight the art we were drawn to, we were interested in, that we loved, and also our friends—to very unapologetically be like, “Art is a subjective thing, we're all in this together.” And sometimes you just want to write about your friends, and accept that... [laughs] that bias and also embrace the relationship...the different kind of relationship that comes with having relationships within your community, and embracing the kind of writing that could come from that, and finding that to be also as valuable as the, I will say, so-called objective voice or perspective for writing about art.

And then the archiving piece came into play when—so we were founded in 2010—the archiving piece came into play simultaneously because of what I mentioned before, of just understanding the mechanics of art history and how it's created, and knowing that, if we're writing about this work... If we were writing into the, you know, just the massive container of the internet, how do we also think about the analog, and how do we also think about the physical? How do we think about a both/and approach, knowing that digital is where we are and where we're going, but physical has different benefits and qualities. You know the theory. At the same time, both are places and important sites of receiving and accessing information.

LD: You've done so much at SIXTY, it's hard to like narrow it down to any one thing, but one thing I was interested in having our listeners learn more about is the Chicago Artists + Archives Project. That is a project that Hauser & Wirth Institute funded in 2021, funded some—it was that long ago?—some residencies. And I know because of the challenges of Covid, that the festival that you had done before that wasn't possible to do for a couple of years. And so you had this idea of publishing a book instead, which we supported. But can you talk a bit more about that model of artists working with archives?

TH: Chicago Archives + Artists Project is something that started as a way to just very explicitly designate a way and a space and a program for thinking about and talking about artists and archives and archivists and their relationship to each other. Because we, coming from an art historical perspective, have, like, very deep relationships with both. So with archives, we have an understanding of research and we know the process and policies and procedures that go into accessing archival materials. And then also on the flip side, when it comes to artists, we have these relationships with artists, and are constantly having conversations around intention and process and all of these kinds of things. So Chicago Archives + Artists Project really was created as a way for us to create programs and initiatives and events and a residency that would really be focused on how we can help nurture relationships—and to also not just nurture relationships, identify the fact that those relationships already exist. They are already there.

LD: Could you give an example of one of the pairings of artists and community archives?

TH: We choose artists who we know have strong practices, strong themes within their practices, strong voices, and there's a clarity there that will allow them to go into that archive and be both inspired and somewhat critical, like lovingly critical. And as they seek out their interests and their research interests within their work, they're going to these archives to seek things that support and fuel and inspire them within the realm of the work that they already do. So what sometimes happens and what we are often ready for is the point when it's revealed that there are parts of these archives that don't fully represent these artists, or there are like gaps in these archives to where significant parts of these artists' identities are missing. An example of this is Ivan Lozano, who creates these beautiful, or created these beautiful installations based on film stills. And part of the challenge was Media Burn overall... you know, Media Burn is such an incredible video archive, but what Ivan found is that there wasn't a lot of Latinx representation within those archives, and what there was, what did exist, was pretty problematic. And that's not to say that that's a criticism of Media Burn. You know, you are digitizing materials that were produced by other people. So you're not—it's not as if your repository is producing it, but you still have it. And it was so...the scope and just the story of Latinx artist communities during the height of the VHS era was just so lacking that it became a central concern of Ivan's research and residency. And I think what it ended up helping to do is just open up space for a conversation with the folks at Media Burn, who are fantastic. We continue, and have multiple times, worked with them, and they're super willing to have that conversation. Just have a conversation with the artists about how things like that happen, why it happens, and maybe plant a seed for them to kind of think toward how they can actually expand on those stories within the archive. So I think that happens.

I think that something similar happened with Aay Preston-Myint in the Leather Archives, because there has been a lot of, over the years, criticisms of the Leather Archives, because it is very...it has historically tended to be very white and also not very embracing of trans communities. So I think having Aay in there, and then also having H Melt's pieces displayed that were very much so like trans flags, it was a way to just insert these stories or, you know, create an opportunity for intervention that would hopefully spark conversations that would maybe plant some seeds or spark some discussion around how to change that.

LD: Yeah, I love the idea that not only the individual artist is going into the archive and things are igniting from that, but you're talking almost about like cross-pollination between the different residents. Is that something that happens at the festivals?

TH: I think so. Again, slow work. We don't know. I think our hypothesis is that if we put people we admire and who are doing really interesting work and work that is aligned with our communities together in a space, things will come of it eventually, even if we don't know what that is. So I think the cross-pollination does happen.

LD: Could you sort of talk us through like what happens at the festivals?

TH: The festival is a multi-day gathering where we invite folks like us—artists, curators, archivists, community preservationists, anyone interested in memory work and archives and history and research—to come together and kind of get nerdy around all of these things. So we curate a series of discussions. We also curate a series of kind of archive digs and invite different people with their own

personal collections or institutional collections to bring their materials for folks to look at and for them to do some storytelling from those materials. And we also work on or offer things like...we have a rapid-fire resource session that just kind of shows the breadth of archival resources that exist, especially as it aligns with SIXTY's communities of Indigenous, diasporic trans, queer, disability communities. So we curate a list of archival resources to share so that artists can come and kind of take note of the different places they might want to just explore for inspiration or to fuel and support their own work and research. You know, in some years we've done onsite digitizing for folks. We've also had it where folks can come and donate their own ephemeral material that they're willing to let go of, and we then donate it to the Chicago Public Library's artists' archive. It's a mix of a lot of things, but it's really meant to be a space for essentially, like, SIXTY and our folks to nerd out and to have conversations and to meet each other and to hear what each other's doing and to be inspired and to make connections.

LD: Yeah, I think we need more of these, because the archive has traditionally been seen as something unattainable, that you need some sort of specialization to be able to access or even to create. And even just physically, so few people have the opportunity to just get their hands in or look at the sorts of collections that are held institutionally—and in that process, they may also realize that they actually do create and have their own archives, right? We all are creating our own archives.

I think I've heard you talk about sort of the importance of ancestral knowledge, which I associate with, you know, what comes to us through family and community. And I'm wondering how the role of family archiving factors into your thinking or your practice or just your personal life.

TH: That's a really great question. I think family archives—you know, and I keep saying this—things all always come full circle. But when it comes to family archives, I see parallels between those materials and the relationship that I have to art, this mainstream or Western art historical canon, and the value systems that are created that archives kind of are a manifestation of, or very much so evidence of. And for me, when it comes to family archives and collections, I think that it's very easy for us to understand how valuable and important they are when it comes to our own families, of preserving those photos or those materials for generations that come after us within our own lineages. But when it comes to trying to understand the value of that within a much larger context...

A lot of our work is similar, and a lot of my work has been on both the individual and family level, and also when it comes to artists understanding the value of their legacy within a larger context it's been about finding value or understanding the connection of why you should preserve things for yourself and, in some cases, also for a wider public in some way, shape, or form. We can have a very kind of expansive conversation about the ego involved in that kind of understanding—"I'm worth preserving." You know, like even making that statement of like, my materials, what I've done, my existence in the world, that is worth preserving and being given to this place to keep so that other people can access it in the future. Because I'm important. There's a fine line, but I think it's important to have that, you know.

I think, especially from the communities that I am of and in and come from, and the communities that SIXTY serves, there's a resetting or re-establishment, or just—period—establishment of value within a larger context that needs to happen. So when I think about ancestry, there is the familial piece, but there's also, I think within the arts, there is an ancestry that happens. We are creating along a

continuum, and in order to really continue to make and develop our ideas and our projects and our work and have it rooted and connected to and be pushing forward the things and the people and the ideas that came before us, like that ancestry, we have to understand ourselves and our connection to our ancestors. Whether it's our family, or the artists whose work, whether we know it or not, we're continuing through the work that we do. So I think about that a lot, and I think there's very much so a relationship between how I understand archives for myself, and perhaps within a family and on a more personal level, and how I understand archives within a community, whether that's an arts community or Black communities or like a wider community, queer communities. And the value in that, and the varied ways, just the multitudes of ways that we have to understand that.

LD: Something that you and I have talked about is actually a phrase that Josh Franco, from the Archives of American Art, has said a couple times in meetings that we've been in, where he really thinks about being an artist as thinking of yourself as becoming a future ancestor. And I really like this idea of... We think about the ancestry in terms of the people who've come before us, but also we think of ourselves as future ancestors, and that is a kind of service.

TH: Yeah. I love that idea, because I also think that it helps those of us like myself who tend... My life is really driven by being of service to other people, so centering myself is really hard, but when I think about what it means to become a good ancestor, especially within the context of the work that I do within the arts and with archives, it helps me to ground it in something bigger and still be along the lines of a service that I'm doing that's not just self-serving. The work that I'm doing is a part of something bigger than myself. You know, what does it look like as an artist, to become an ancestor? It is a very grounding question to ask.

LD: I feel like when we've talked and in things I've read, or the keynote address that you did for the Society of American Archivists in 2020 (which was incredible), you really talk often about the future, and particularly about, you know, how we can develop "future canons." And I think it's so interesting that one of the shifts I'm seeing in archives is—when I started in the field almost 20 years ago, it was always about the past, and more and more I think we're focused on the present and the future. And I guess I'm interested in, like, how you think about that tension.

TH: I want to credit—very much so—this concept of "future canon" to organizers...you know, organizers, activists who call us to have radical imagination and radically imagine the future that we want to see. We can't work to create and dismantle the systems and the things that perhaps don't serve us or are harmful to us, without also simultaneously imagining what our ideal situation would be. Like, if not this, then what? And so the concept of future canons within my work and within SIXTY's work is really meant to ask the question of, what is the repository that exists in the world that organizers are imagining, you know, and are fighting for? I think there are many conversations to be had about how the world around us has changed so much that has forced us in generative and also very challenging and hard ways to have to rethink what archives mean now and in the future. And in a way that, perhaps in the past, some of the archivists and preservationists and memory workers that I looked to for inspiration—just understanding that the context that they were working in, it was so vastly different than what we're dealing with now, and how much that impacts our relationship to archives and to memory and to material. So right now I have a lot of questions, and I think Kate, Christina, and I, as we're co-

curating this festival, that is very much a through-line and a thread of a theme within the festival of just thinking about what kinds of conversations do we have to have now about the future of archives, and how does our past thinking have to shift in the present for the future? I'm in a very... [laughs] Just in a very...not necessarily nebulous, but very wide-open, constantly questioning space when it comes to being situated in the past, in the future.

LD: We're moving through it right now.

TH: Yes.

LD: You know, the last question I had actually maybe ties into this in a weird way. I was going to ask you, you know, for any particular writers, artists, practitioners that you are particularly inspired by or look to, to guide you in this field of memory work.

TH: [chuckles] This always feels like such a cliché answer, but she's so good that I can't... Like, what other answer is there? One of the defining texts for me in understanding what I wanted my writing and my curatorial practice and my work to do is a talk that Toni Morrison gave when she was invited to speak at this conference around memoir. And she gave this really amazing talk called "The Site of Memory." And she just talks about, you know, one: she kind of grapples with the fact that they brought her in to talk about memoir, when she doesn't write memoirs, you know? But she really beautifully lays out the way that—in my interpretation, and what I get from it—the understanding that when you're dealing with histories that were very intentionally distorted or neglected or erased, there is a kind of speculation that has to be infused in the crafting or the memory, or the remembering of history. Which means that, you know, technically, you will find Toni Morrison in the fiction section. But to me, I read a lot of her work as, you know, a hefty dose of nonfiction, of like, truth. And so I think Toni Morrison just continues to be a writer who, one, is just such a beautiful writer and profound... You know, I read her books and I'm transformed, and I re-read them and I'm transformed. But I think she put into words something that I had been struggling to articulate. She put into words what was really at the heart of some of the grievances that I had in school and when I was building my relationship to art and art history, it is because a lot of that has been neglected or erased or distorted or is missing, and my desire to engage in it in a way that is very creative and that also harnesses a kind of ancestral technology and methodology of a Toni Morrison, of like the creation of a story and the creation of memory, and thinking about the ways that our memory is flawed. But it's a healthy dose of truth and fiction, you know? So I always go back to Toni Morrison in this work, because I think it's archival, it's creative, it allows for the kind of radical imagination that's necessary for survival. I mean, there are so many other folks like Schomburg or like Vivian Harsh and librarians and folks who have done really incredible work historically that keep me inspired, but there's something about Toni Morrison and the intersections that she sits at and that her work represents that feels like it was that "Aha" moment for me that I think I didn't know I was seeking until I read that speech. And I know exactly where I was, I was in Banff, Canada, and was reading it in 2015 or '16, and my whole world was rocked.

LD: I think that's a beautiful place to end our conversation. So, Tempestt, thank you so much for your time, and I know we'll talk again soon. Good luck with the festival, which will happen before our

listeners get to hear this. But maybe we'll have you back and you can talk about what you learned about the future of archives.

TH: Thank you so much, Lisa. It's always a joy to be in conversation with you, I could talk with you all day.

LD: Thanks, Tempestt.

This episode of Conversations in the Archives was recorded at Gotham Studios and edited by Lisa Darms. Our theme music is Afterglow by Growing, courtesy of Joe DeNardo and Kevin Doria. Technical support was provided by David O'Neill.