

Conversations in the Archives: Visual AIDS

Intro

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, your host and 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.

"There's like a deep, disciplinarian debate about biography, social context. Is it wrong to write about an artist through their personal life? But I think in a queer context, a lot of the work that's happening to kind of diversify and expand our histories is attending to those aspects of people's experience. Like, why aren't we talking to the artists? There's so much knowledge there."

In August of 2024 I sat down with Kyle Croft and Jacs Rodriguez of Visual AIDS, the venerable New York-based organization devoted to preserving and honoring the work of artists with HIV/AIDS. In this conversation, Jacs and Kyle discussed the reasons they were first drawn to memory work, the limitations of art historical methods that focus on documents at the expense of living artists, and the role that families play in preserving the legacies of their loved ones.

Conversation

Today, I'm with Kyle Croft, Executive Director of Visual AIDS, and Jacs Rodriguez, Community Archivist for Visual AIDS. Hi Kyle, hi Jacs.

Kyle Croft: Hi Lisa.

Jacs Rodriguez: Hi.

LD: Before we get into talking about Visual AIDS and its visionary programs, I'd love to hear from both of you about how you came to this work. Do you have a first meaningful encounter that kind of directed you towards working with artists' legacies?

KC: I started working with Visual AIDS pretty shortly after I moved to New York about 10 years ago, and around that same time I also started a graduate program for art history at Hunter College. So my coming to artists' legacies and art history was both from this kind of like academic discipline of art history, but then also this very community-based mode through Visual AIDS. And I think what really got me excited about Visual AIDS and archives and artists' legacies was just realizing, by doing both of those things in tandem, how much history hasn't been recorded or captured, particularly of the '80s and '90s and onwards, which, in our historical terms, is fairly fresh ground. Knowing how much hadn't been captured, but also knowing how much knowledge and expertise and, like, living history there was around Visual AIDS. So I was constantly encountering people at Visual AIDS events that I had maybe read about or seen in readings for school or, you know, going to panel discussions and hearing people kind of like speak back, or like, add their own perspective into what I had understood to be history. So

yeah, just really feeling kind of excited about realizing that there's this aliveness to historical work, and that I could actually engage in a person-to-person way, as opposed to this very isolated, secluded historical discipline approach.

LD: Jacs, do you have some sort of meaningful encounter that led you to archives?

JR: Not one specific one, but yeah, kind of like a lifelong sort of situation, sort of specific to Visual AIDS. I have an uncle who passed before I was born, who was an artist and had HIV and was sort of this, like, specter over my life. When I was a kid, we had his art in our house, but nobody really talked about him. And there was this sort of like weird... there was just a weird history there. And a few years ago, maybe like 10-ish years ago, my dad just started talking about him more. And he started, like, giving me all of his stuff. I have slides and papers and all of these things. And it became much more part of my life. And I have sort of always been interested in that, like within my family, being like the family archivist, keeping all of the photos, and everybody always tells me all the stories and expects me to keep it all in my head, sort of thing. So when I went to library school, I thought that I wanted to be a librarian, and then I was like, "Oh, you can be an archivist if you go to library school. And I sort of already do this on my own, and I'm interested in this, and I that's a very cool career path." So it's sort of like a family-based personal sort of experience with it. And I learned about Visual AIDS.... When I was in grad school I did a fellowship at the LGBT Center archive, so I knew of Visual AIDS from the ecosystem of sort of queer archives.

LD: I think it's so interesting how so many of us will have an engagement with archives or archival material in our family, but never really think of it as a field or a discourse. You know what I mean?

JR: Yeah. I was recently telling somebody that before I went to library school, I had never been to an archive before because I thought that they were these big, fancy academic places that I wasn't allowed to go to, and that were untouchable and I wouldn't even know what I wanted to look at, or what there was to look at. And then in library school, a lot of my work was community archives-based. So then when I went into the field, I was like, this is the opposite of what I thought archives were before going to school, and this is now what I'm interested in, because this feels more similar to my experience in life.

LD: I mean, so much of that makes it sound like you ended up in the perfect place working at Visual AIDS. Kyle, can you tell our listeners more about.... I always think everyone in the world knows about Visual AIDS and how incredible they are, but I imagine that we don't. Can you describe what Visual AIDS does?

KC: I always kind of think about Visual AIDS as two organizations that got smushed into one. So the first version of Visual AIDS was really started in 1988, so kind of a really intense moment during the AIDS crisis, a year after ACT UP started. And it was initially for curators in the art world who were like, "How can we use art to respond to the crisis? Like newspapers aren't talking about this, the President isn't talking about this." So it's about using public art to start conversations about HIV. And it continues to be that today and in that arm of our work, we really try to emphasize HIV as a contemporary crisis. So not just something that happened in the '80s and '90s, but something that continues to affect millions of people in the US and around the world today. The other part of our mission really revolves

around our archive. That started in 1994 and the idea is really like: How can we support HIV-positive artists? So that's both artists who are living and who are part of our community today, but also the legacies of artists who've passed away. That's where our archive really comes in, with the artist files that we have that collect information about, again, both living artists and artists who have passed away. And then we also do a lot of different types of programming. We give small cash grants to artists to buy art supplies and materials or address any other financial needs that they have. We do exhibitions, publications, public programs, really just trying to kind of like foster and support dialog and attention to HIV in the art world.

LD: Yeah, you do so much, and you're a staff offour?

KC: Four.

JR: So this is half of us.

LD: So Jacs, could you talk a bit about the archival piece of that, and the work that you do? I know you started in January with a Hauser & Wirth Institute grant, so I'd love to hear what you've been doing.

JR: Yeah. So the main collection is our artist files. They are boxes full of folders that are arranged by artist, and they contain mostly paper materials and 35-millimeter slides related to each artist. So it's a lot of resumes, biographies, artist statements, exhibition announcements, that sort of thing. I, over the past like four-ish months, have been creating a finding aid for it, so now it will be much more accessible ...

LD: Can you tell our listeners what a finding aid is?

JR: Of course. A finding aid is basically a list of everything that's in the collection. So it's pretty long. It's about 220 pages long, but luckily, it's very easy to click through, and it basically lists every artist who has a file, has a little biographical note about each person, and then has a scope and content note about what's in the collection.

KC: To give a little bit more context, when the archive started in the '90s, there was really no public listing of who's inside it. And, you know, Visual AIDS did a lot of programming. Like, since the late '90s, like very early internet, there's been a monthly web gallery, where curators will come and select artwork that goes on our website. So there's ways that it's always been activated and engaged, but even after we launched our first real website in 2012—which includes thousands of images scanned from the slides that we have, but not everything—there's more representation of artists online, but even then, there was like, not a folder listing of all of the artists. And so this is really the first time that there's not only a list of all the names, but Jacs has pulled together biographical information. We have files on folks like David Wojnarowicz or Martin Wong or Felix Gonzalez-Torres, but there's hundreds and hundreds of names that most art historians or curators wouldn't recognize. So I think that's really what I'm excited about with the finding aid, is it's going to help create more entry points to what's been sitting in those files for 30 years.

LD: Yeah, and the goal of the that grant program is to increase access to archives. You know, sometimes the work we do behind the scenes is pretty mundane, but it's always with that goal, right, to just make it more accessible and make there be more entry points. It kind of makes me think, Jacs, about your title as Community Archivist. I'm so interested in how you all came up with that designation.

KC: Basically, it's taken a long time to kind of clarify what the role of an archivist at Visual AIDS is, because it's always been so much also about community work. Like, we have maybe 700 living artist members we're trying to be responsive to and maintain relationships with, adding materials to their page on our website, to the physical archive. So it's a lot of just building relationships. There have been different titles and job responsibilities, but I think we've landed on Community Archivist. It's the best description. And also kind of learning that there's this whole field of, you know, in archival studies about community-based archives. And I think it was, like, a few years ago that I kind of realized that. Marika Cifor is an archives study scholar who wrote a book with a chapter on Visual AIDS. And it was kind of like, "Oh, we've been doing this the whole time. We just didn't know that that's what it's called." So it's kind of just like catching up in terms of labeling what the work is.

JR: There have been a couple of projects that we've been doing recently that have required me to reach out to people individually, to ask them about their online profile, to ask them about this collection of tapes that we're hoping to digitize, like if we can get their consent for the tapes. And you know, when we send the finding aid out, we want to send an email to everybody who's included in the finding aid or the estates associated, and just say, "Here it is, and let us know if there's anything in the biography that you have feelings about," or if there's anything like that. Or just remind some people, "Hey, you have a folder. Do you have any new stuff?" The community aspect of the actual archiving part is very present. We talk a lot about how the artist members will feel and how we can best include them without overwhelming ourselves. And it's definitely a very, a very big part of my job.

LD: So that's the "community" half of community archives. One thing I'm always interested in hearing about and talking about is just the term archives, like it's used in so many different ways in the art world, even if we just want to narrow it to that. And I think in some ways that's incredible. In some ways it can sometimes be difficult to have a conversation, because you find out after five minutes that everybody's actually talking about a completely different thing. So I'm just curious how that term resonates with what you do, or how you've come to think about it or employ it in your community.

KC: I think a response to that, but also something I had wanted to share earlier that's just important about what our archive is in terms of the art world—basically, anyone who self-identifies as an artist living with HIV can join our archive, and that was really the founding principle of the archive from Frank Moore and David Hirsch, who came together in '94 and they were like, they really wanted to it to be the archive, to be open to anyone to join, and, you know, not to have a curator who's like, "Well, is your work good enough? Have you been successful?" Because what they saw were so many of their friends who were maybe earlier in their career, or who maybe had been making work for many years but had never, you know, "won" the game of the art market and saw all these folks dying and their work being put out on the street or thrown away by their families, or just kind of falling through the cracks. I think we've always been working kind of against the grain of the art world, or the art market, which is very selective, and you know, kind of has its tendencies towards straight white men, definitely in the '80s

and '90s. And so that kind of openness has really given us a unique collection. But that also kind of dovetails with what a lot of what Jacs was saying about the community work, because the people that we work with, some of them, you know... it's like exactly what you were saying about archives also applies to artists, like, whether they're a kind of Sunday painter, or self-taught, or kind of working, you know, just in their home for their own pleasure, versus folks who went to MFA programs or who have gallery representation. So the types of concerns that people bring to us about like, "What's in their folder?" is very diverse. And then there's also the HIV side of it, which is, like, because we're only collecting materials about HIV-positive artists, being in the collection kind of is a form of disclosing your status. It's also very different to, like, have materials in our office versus to have your name pop up on Google as part of this collection. You know, when you joined in the '90s, you weren't saying that we can put your name on our website. Are you okay with us doing that now?

LD: When I was at the Fales Library at NYU building the Riot Grrrl Collection there was a similar process of, you know, young people who had written very revealing things in zines, or in even letters (because we were collecting personal papers) in the late '80s or early '90s, in a time where you cannot even conceive of an internet and with the sense that who you're speaking to is quite small, because it's your specific subculture, it's your community. And then to, you know, maybe approach those people in middle age, and say "How do you feel about this thing you wrote when you were fourteen being in a book or in an archive?" And I guess it just makes me think about how much the idea of consent comes out of this work. It makes me think there's like so much more labor that you do in this kind of work.

JR: Yeah, when we were reaching out to an initial group of people that were on the tapes that we were hoping to digitize, a lot of people responded like, "I don't even remember giving that interview. I don't know what's on there, but sure you could use it." Or people were like, "I guess I'd like to hear it first." And something that we were thinking about was that all of these interviews were mostly 1991-ish and yeah, people, I'm sure, when they were giving them didn't imagine that 30-something years later, somebody would want to put them online for researchers.

KC: Yeah, and I think it's a very different valence in terms of artists who are deceased, particularly with like, blood family. Like, I guess it is consent in a way, but there's elements of homophobia or trauma at play sometimes where it's like, what story do you want to be out there about your son or your daughter who's passed away, and how do you tell that story within your family? But also, even for living artists, there's always the kind of concern around pigeonholing. I mean, I think it's very different for younger artists who are maybe coming of age in the 2000s but this idea of being an AIDS artist, or making AIDS work, in some ways I think is often less about consent to have this or that information out there, but more like, "What does me being associated with Visual AIDS—what kind of story does that tell? And am I comfortable with that?" Which is always an evolving process, and we try to work against the kind of stereotypes or ideas that, like, everyone in our archive makes work about AIDS. You know, there's tons of artists who aren't living with HIV who are making work about AIDS and vice versa.

LD: Yeah, and, you know, going back to working with the families of the deceased, it makes me think of this panel that you'll be hosting on October 7. This podcast will come out after that, but still, I think it's such an amazing looking panel because all of the panelists are siblings of artists who passed....

KC: Yes, three sisters of artists who've passed away, and also the three artists are all included in exhibitions this fall. So, it's Miguel Ferrando who will be in an exhibition at Candice Madey Gallery with Darrel Ellis, who is his close friend, and then Ching ho Cheng and Tseng Kwong Chi, who will both be at this exhibition called "Legacies" at 80 Washington Square East, curated by Howie Chen. I think that program hopefully will kind of do double duty, in both addressing the estate work, you know, which I think is often gendered labor, kind of like, exactly what we're talking about, this navigating, like, "What story do I want to be told about my brother?" But then also kind of this idea that Howie really surfaced, of identity in the way that that can be such a kind of foot in the door to the art world or the art market. Now there's a lot of interest in revising cultural histories to be more inclusive. But then also that can sometimes be at odds with, or in tension with, how an artist might have thought of their own work in their time. So, you know, reading these interviews with Ching ho Cheng in his lifetime... His family was Chinese. They were diplomats in Cuba and moved to the US in the—I want to say, in the '50s. So he was often being asked about his Chinese-ness in his work, and seemed to be constantly navigating that, but not really finding that to be a resonant way of talking about his work. And so Howie's doing this show about Asian American legacies, art histories is, like, very conscious of the way that these artists maybe didn't think of themselves as part of an Asian American art movement. Yet, here they are in this show. So again, thinking like, what are the stories that we're telling about these artists, and how are these three sisters kind of navigating...holding these different relationships to their brother, this person as a brother, as a family member, as an artist, as a historical figure?

LD: Not to mention their own grief, or how that may re-ignite that loss, I would imagine?

KC: Yeah. I wanted to share a little bit about Teresa Ferrando, who's the sister of Miguel Ferrando, who we've had a really interesting relationship with that, I think, just kind of highlights some of what you were saying Jacs earlier about your uncle, and kind of like the time that is needed to look back. My memory, if it serves me correctly, Miguel passed away in 1996 and around that time, Teresa actually began volunteering with Visual AIDS. So she's known about the organization, for many decades has been a part of it. Miguel has been in our archive since then, since he was alive. But around the time — maybe we can back up in a second and talk about the Darrel Ellis book that we published in 2021, but kind of throughout the process of making that book, Teresa reached out to us again. She had retired somewhat recently. She was kind of ready to, like, look at this material of Miguel's. But I think it was also... I think a lot of what it was, or what she was looking for when she came to us was like a sense of affirmation that Miguel, Miguel as a person, Miguel's artwork mattered, was worth.... Like, "Yes, you should spend the next year going through all these materials. Here's how to do it, the best way we can help you photograph them." And she's really done an incredible job. And I think this exhibition at Candice Madey will be a really exciting moment for people to kind of be reintroduced to Miguel's work. I learned a lot through that process of just like realizing, having a better sense of what she needed from Visual AIDS. And again, because we're so small, it's like we can't necessarily do all of the cataloging, we're not a gallery, there's a lot that we can't do. But I think what we really can do is that kind of emotional support or labor and a way of like, really offering validation and encouragement.

LD: And then I think things like your publications also help to establish or help an artist re-emerge as well, which, you know you had mentioned the Darrel Ellis book...

KC: Yeah, we have a couple different publication series that we do, but I've been really excited about our monographs, which have focused on artists who passed away earlier in their career. The first one was, I believe, in 2008, Robert Blanchon, and then Hugh Steers and most recently, Darrel Ellis. And these are moments where we have kind of decided as an institution to really invest time and money and energy to focus on a single artist's legacy. So with Darrel, who was a Black gay artist working from the late '70s to 1992 in New York, he was a painter. He experimented with photography, and would often work with an archive of photographs that his father took of his family. His father passed away before he was born so he would kind of contend with his family history through these photographs and manipulate them, distort them, and paint them in iterative series. And his work has been held and stewarded by the artist Allen Frame since he passed away. So when we worked on this book, Allen brought definitely not all of the work, but, you know, several hundred works on paper to the Visual AIDS office. We got a lot of it photographed. We really sat with it. We invited writers to come and experience it and produce essays. I did a lot of interviews with Darrel's friends and family. That's in part how I got connected to Teresa, who I was just talking about. So it was this really kind of involved process that then produced this book, kind of in tandem, serendipitously, with a museum, exhibition, gallery representation. It all kind of like snowballed together. But I think that, again, that was a really great learning experience for me that I think showed the potential of what Visual AIDS can do for an artist's legacy when we do really focus our resources. I think what that book provides is a really strong foundation for.... it's a sense of, we're giving Darrell's legacy a legitimacy that I think it always had but, you know, it kind of gives it a weight in the form of a hardback book that then you see at a bookstore. When someone's like, "Who is that artist?" And you're like, here's this big book that will tell you not everything, but a lot more than what was out there before.

LD: And I think Darrel Ellis is interesting, too, because the work is like, doubly archival, right? Like, he's gone, so we kind of only have the archive to work from, but then within his work, he was working with a family archive to make the work.

KC: Totally, yeah. There's a lot of ambivalence in the work, I think, in terms of how he's dealing with archives and history, and, you know, that's been a big concern for me. Also kind of looping back to this idea of identity that I was talking about earlier, where I think there's so much kind of ambivalence and ambiguity in the way that Darrel works with his own history and who he is, and thinking about his identity as a Black man, as a gay man, this like family history that he's inherited. There's these ways in which I see the art world trying to kind of fix those parts of him, to be a very neat kind of narrative of how he ought to fit into an '80s, '90s art history.

LD: It kind of brings us, in a sense, back to the question of, "What is the archive?" I think—and maybe it's less so now—but that people always assume that the archive is this very rigid kind of dictatorial space, and that I myself must be, like, obsessively tidy and obsessed with order, whereas I find it as like a really productive space that's very open, and the antidote to rigidity in a lot of ways. I don't know if that makes sense to you guys, but...

JR: Yeah, I mean, I think that more than the idea of the archive, the idea of the archivist, to me, is much more expansive. Like, we had an archive event, and Teresa came and was talking to me about arranging Miguel's stuff at home. And she was like, I'm just a kindergarten archivist, like, I don't know

what I'm doing. And I said I went to school for this, and I don't know what I'm doing sometimes. I'm often Googling things or asking other people for help. This idea that the archivist is this one sort of all-knowing being who has learned everything and knows the answer to everything is something that I am, like, adamantly against. And I think that every family has an archivist, even if they don't know it. And anybody can.... I mean, yes, if you have a job as an archivist, there are rules that you have to follow. But...

KC: People do come to us in terms of estates, families, people are like, "What do I...?" They want the rules. They're like, there must be a right way to do this. And I feel like—

JR: —The rules are like, just don't put it in a leaky basement, and you're doing better than a lot of others.

KC: I feel like even when we were hiring Jacs and Kaylee, who is our former archivist, as the rest of the staff, I feel like we were like, "We need someone who knows the rules." And I feel like more often than not, it's like there are no cut-and-dry rules to how to do this.

JR: Yeah, right now I'm working on our institutional records, and almost every day I'm like, "Kyle, can we talk about the best way to arrange this certain series," or whatever it is, because I come at it from, like, the archives school perspective, and Kyle has all of this Visual AIDS history and an understanding of that sort of context. And so even though, yes, there are ideas of how things should be done, it's much more collaborative in my actual job. And, like, free.

KC: Yeah, and for me, the question of what constitutes the archive... I think I've spent a lot of time processing how to talk about, or how to describe our artist file collection, because it is both incredibly rich and broad. There's more than 550 artists represented in the boxes that we have, but at the same time—

JR: —in our 225 pages of finding aid! [laughs]

KC: Yeah, you know, I think I maybe have had in the past a little bit of, like, imposter syndrome kind of thing where, you know, you go to Fales, and the collections are like, 60 boxes, 100 boxes about one artist, and there's just an incredible wealth of material. I think the way that I've come to understand what we have, or to think about our archive in a really, like, literal "archival records" sense, is like people come to us to kind of find their clues, or the leads for their research. In terms of the paper we have, maybe it's like five sheets of paper about this one artist. But I think also what we provide as a broader sense of an archive is like, we have relationships with all these people who are in the archive or have donated materials. So even if it's someone who I have never talked to before, I found that when I write to them from my Visual AIDS email address, and I'm like, "Hi, it's Kyle from Visual AIDS," more often than not, people are like, "Oh yes, I know that organization was really important to my brother when he was alive. I would love... I'd be happy to talk to this researcher, answer your question." So in a lot of ways, it's kind of like this network of relationships that we kind of steward in a way, like we hold space for a lot of that. You know, I was joking the other day, I get stressed out about how do we download the information that lives in our community? Because, you know, there's Nelson Santos, who was the

director of Visual AIDS and worked at Visual AIDS from like 2000 to 2012 or something like that... I'll mention an artist name, and he'll be able to pull out, you know, a couple of tidbits of information that might not be in the artist files. I think there's things that we can do, like interviews, oral history recordings, but I think there's also something that will just always be a kind of embodied collective knowledge. That's a really important part of Visual AIDS that we will protect as we continue to grow as an archive.

LD: Yeah, I think when you say, "What is the archive?" it's easy to say, well, it's this kind of paper and this kind of document and this kind of tape or these kinds of functions that happen in life that are recorded in some way. But, you know, there's a reason that maybe the artists' papers at Fales are 60 or 70 or 100 boxes, and that's because they lived a really long time sometimes. So I think when you're dealing with communities whose ... the absence represents the absence of the person, or in other cases, it may be that they're just from a community that was never... their lives weren't valued or documented, then the archive has to be something that you produce, rather than just say, well, whatever still exists is what constitutes the archive. And I think you do that really well. And obviously one of the ways you do that is just community.

KC: Yeah, I love that idea of the archive as something that's produced. I think that's really resonant with our work. You know, another kind of related but different archival term that I learned a few years ago that I was like, "Oh, that's what we do; that's what we've been doing," is post-custodial stewardship, or this idea of, like, we don't store our physical artworks. That was part, again, the founding principles—we're going to be open to anyone and everyone who identifies as an HIV-positive artist. But because of that, and because we're in New York City, we're definitely not going to take their artwork, because that would just be—

JR: —no space. We have no space. [laughs]

KC:—like an impossible, you know, physical burden. And so that's where all of these slides that we have, Visual AIDS would send photographers to artists' studios. We still work with a great *pro bono* artwork photographer who produces those images. But, you know, even with like the Darrell Ellis book, there's ways that we can engage with materials that haven't been officially accessioned as part of our archive, they're being cared for by friends and family. And part of our plan for the next few years is to start taking on larger collections of artists' papers, but I think there's also... I think we will always kind of work in that way where we're not in this mindset of like, accumulation and collection and like, we have to hold everything. It's more like, how can we help make space for, provide resources for, the kind of community care that's happening around us already?

LD: I think it maybe harkens to something I've heard you talk about, too, which is, you know, what is knowledge and where is knowledge stored?

KC: Yeah. So another way we've been working to, like, produce the archive, and that kind of goes in tandem with the finding aid, the biographical research that Jacs has been doing, is our research fellowship, which is also supported by Hauser & Wirth Institute. And we give small grants to scholars to focus on research and write a text about an artist who's been lost to AIDS. And when we're selecting

those proposals, the main criteria is really like, "Has someone written about this artist before?" What we found like, over the years—it started in 2022—there's been some incredible writing that's come out of that. It's all published on our website. But what I've found in particular is the strongest research has really come from fellows who interview folks who knew these artists. And, yeah, this gets back to, I have this kind of baggage from my art history training of seeing my peers or established scholars who are writing on artists and not really talking to them, like living artists, not talking to them, or artists who have passed away, not doing interviews. I think there's a deep disciplinarian debate about, like, biography, social context, like, is it wrong to write about an artist through their personal life? But I think in a queer context, and you know, a lot of the work that's happening to kind of diversify and expand our art histories are attending to those aspects of people's experience. Like, why aren't we talking to the artists? There's so much knowledge there. Yes, your interviewee isn't going to give you an art historical analysis, but they're going to give you, like, incredible primary source information that no one else is going to know about otherwise. I don't know, Jacs, if this resonates with some of what you were doing, making the finding aid, but like, when working on Darrell Ellis, for example, before our book came out, I would be reading what's online -- you see the same little tidbits recycled over and over again, because there's, like, one review that was written in the '90s or something and everyone just kind of recycles those same bits of information. And sometimes, like, those things aren't even true. You can't just go off of what's already been published. I don't know if it's coming out clearly....

LD: Yeah, absolutely. It becomes, like, self-perpetuating, and then it becomes almost this, like authority that is more truthful-seeming to people than the living person standing next to it, saying, "No, that's not how it happened. I was there."

KC: Exactly. That's kind of, again, what I find so exciting about Visual AIDS events, is there are often moments where people are like—not even the panelists, they're just in the audience—they're like, "Um that's not what I remember." I don't want to be too doom-and-gloom but we are at an interesting moment in the organization's history where, like, a lot of the folks who survived the first wave of the AIDS crisis are now reaching the end of their natural life, or a lot of the friends and family of the folks who passed away, like our opportunity, our window of opportunity, is closing to really hear from those people. So that's again, like something I think we will really be prioritizing through the fellowship, through our archival programs, like, how do we continue to support this community, but also, like, really uplift them as experts and sources of knowledge?

LD: And how many fellows are there this year?

KC: Yeah, so we just announced our five new fellows who will be working over the next six months or so, and their writing will come out in the Visual AIDS journal in early 2025. Last year, we selected six fellows who have all published their writing already, and three of them will be presenting their research at our annual research symposium, which will be at the Museum of Modern Art on October 25 this year.

LD: Great.

Do you think there's anything else you want to say before I ask my final question?

KC: Do you want to say anything about how the David Hirsch tapes fit in? Or say...

JR: Say what about it?

LD: That you need money? [all laugh]

JR: Truly.

KC: I think it will be really the first time we're like, biting off a big, probably multi-year project to, like, deal with a new set of materials beyond the artist files.

JR: Yes, and it's also not quite as straightforward as a primarily paper collection. There's a lot more that's going to need to go into it in terms of digitizing and transcribing and making that available and making sure that they're stored properly and reaching out to everybody. Yeah, it's a little bit more of an undertaking, but it's really exciting. Kyle and I went on our little road trip to go pick up the tapes from David Hirsch. And there are probably like 200 more tapes than we thought there were.

KC: Yeah, the total is like 530... They're interviews that David recorded with gay and lesbian artists. He was writing art columns for the *New York Native*, the *Bay Area Reporter*. It's kind of mind-boggling for me to think about sometimes, but, you know, in the early '90s when he was writing there was no, like, gay art scene or movement. You know, by doing these interviews and writing these columns, he was really helping to cohere this idea of like, there are gay and lesbian artists, and this is what their work is, and this is what they're thinking about.

LD: You know, one of the great things we can do to "produce" archive when there isn't one now is an oral history, but it's also really fun to have documented what people were saying at the time, because we all know that we remember things differently, or don't remember things, or different members of a community will remember things entirely differently and disagree with each other in a way that's like, totally delightful and instructive. So it just seems like a super important thing to be stabilized and out in the world.

KC: You mentioned funding, but I think part of what we've been figuring out over the last few years is also just, like, how to navigate talking about what we're doing and getting funding for it, and kind of realizing how much of the archival funding landscape is really project-based. So I think at first we were kind of like, our project is just being Visual AIDS and doing what we've always done, because that's what we do best. And so part of what I felt excited about is not only the excitement of what's in these tapes, but as we continue to take in new collections, having these very project-specific initiatives that will be like, "For the next three years, we need money to do this thing that will have this outcome." So it's kind of learning how to frame the community work that we're doing. We've always kind of appealed to the art world, but we work so much against the grain of, like, really championing individual artists. I think there's been more and more interest and excitement and funding for archives, as people kind of realize the value of that, the pace and kind of cadence of that work, which is a very different pace than the art world.

LD: Yeah. I mean, that's our goal, right, is to bring more awareness to this work and to bring more funding to this work, and also more funding that doesn't require it to be a discrete project, but recognizes that a lot of the labor we do is very ongoing and doesn't always end up at a certain moment with a "Ta-da! Look at this thing!" And so, I feel like, you know, we obviously gave you a grant, but then the work you do helps us share with the world why this is so important. So I'm thankful to you for doing this.

Just to wrap up, I'm curious if either of you could recommend a book, a piece of writing, an artwork, or even a person that inspires you in this work of archives.

KC: I'm a big fan of Primary Information, which is a publisher that has done a lot of books, basically just like printing archives, in a way. I mean, one of my favorite books that they've done is the Godzilla book that Howie Chen edited, and it's about the Asian American Arts Collective, Godzilla. But it's basically a phonebook scale. The collection is at Fales, but, you know, particularly for these kinds of underknown or, like, niche art histories, I think it's really just about getting the source material out there. And you know, that kind of resonates with what we try to do, where it's like, here's a first pass at, like, writing, analyzing, contextualizing this, but also here's all of the source material. And Primary Information, they do these huge print runs, they're super cheap, and it's really just like now that archive that's been at Fales that's been accessible is now just way more available, right?

LD: And they tend to print in what we used to call facsimile, which is the reproduction of the object itself, of the document itself, which I think gives you so much more information than just something that's been transcribed and printed.

JR: I'm trying to find the thing that I wanted to reference. It's a quote from something that's in the archive. I don't know if I can find it, so I'll do it as best I can from memory. But also, I feel a little bit like I might cry.

LD: Okay, let's -- you can take a moment.

JR: There is an artist in our artist files named Becky Trotter, who has this piece, I believe it's called *Support Group*, and it is a piece that's... or what we have in the archive, at least, is these little quotes from people that had passed when the project was made, and it was about how Becky was in all of these different support groups, and was the only one who outlived everybody in all the support groups. And there's a quote that's about taking care of each other when they were really sick at the end of their lives. She basically says, everybody in the support group took care of each other, it never occurred to us not to. That little quote is like, kind of what archives mean to me, and like, when I think of archives, and particularly community archives, it's like, yeah, of course you keep these things, and of course you want to share them with people, it would never occur to me not to share these things. But I think about that quote a lot, and it's just like, it's about taking care of each other in your community and I think that that is like at the core of what I want to do as an archivist. Even if it's not my community, in the sense that I'm not an artist, or I'm not living with HIV or I wasn't around in the late '80s, but it's just like instinctive to me to keep things and share things, and maybe that's because of my family connection, or

that there were years where things weren't talked about, or maybe I just love people's old stuff that much. [laughing and choking up] But... Sorry.

KC: I love that.

LD: Yeah. I mean, I think one of the things you're saying is, you know, we do this out of love, and that's something that you just do instinctually. It's not something you need to intellectualize or defend, and I think that's probably a really beautiful way to sort of sum up our conversation. So Kyle and Jacs, thank you so much for speaking with me today.

KC: Thank you, Lisa,

JR: Thanks for having us.

Outro

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.