

Embodying the Archive: Xaviera Simmons on Archive as Impetus

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An *Archive as Impetus (Not on View)* performance in MoMA's Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Sculpture Garden. Photograph courtesy of Xaviera Simmons

Plenty of people think of museums, libraries, and archives as stagnant and apolitical places; sites where histories are not created, but simply preserved. In her performance *Archive as Impetus (Not on View)*—presented several times per week during the month of June as part of MoMA's Artists Experiment initiative—artist Xaviera Simmons asked viewers to reconsider the role of the museum. Performing a treasure trove of documents from MoMA's Library and Archives collection, Simmons and her rotating cast of collaborators made visible a little-known history: that of MoMA as a site where struggles based on race, gender, class, sexuality, and international politics have unfolded.

Like most of our favorite art, *Archive as Impetus (Not on View)* raises more questions than it answers. Simmons sat down with us to discuss the work during the final week of performances.

JC: We're curious about the aesthetic of the performance—with the jumpsuits, the placards, the portable PA system—and were hoping you could talk about why you wanted to bring this sort of politically charged, even militant, aesthetic into the Museum. How are the performers meant to be perceived?

XS: It's interesting that you view it as militant. I wanted the costumes to be obviously proletariat, and to be really simple, uniform, and bold, because I wanted people to recognize that [the performers] were either infiltrating the Museum or were part of the Museum. I wanted it to be disruptive and uncomfortable.

JC: What did it mean for you to embody an archive? Did your identity as an African American woman affect the way in which you interrogated the archive and the institution? How did it impact your choice of collaborators and how did audiences' perceptions shift depending on what bodies were on view?

XS: That's a great question. I mean, that is what I am ... so that was not necessarily a point of reference I needed to work from. I am already that, so I didn't go digging for African American stuff. I was really interested in how I could glean the political line from the Archives by using the language in the Museum, the artwork in the Museum, and information that I found on interventions that had happened in the Museum. My main focus in the project was the body of the Museum as it related to the Archives and the collection. And depending on who was performing, I definitely feel like there were different reactions from people. Also, I think because I chose Belinda [Becker] as the second performer, she is a Jamaican woman, so there are two African American women there. It wasn't a conscious decision per se, but at the same time, I am very aware of the bodies in the Museum and the bodies that don't exist here on a regular basis [as curatorial staff and as visitors].

HE: While you mined archival material as far back as 1929, when MoMA was founded, the performance includes a lot of documents from the 1970s and 1980s, on art that was explicitly connected to activist movements in moments of political urgency like the war in Vietnam and the AIDS epidemic. People talk about this generation as being apolitical or complacent.

XS: The times are less political. I think as an overarching theme, political art is not in fashion now. In the 1960s, there was a sense of urgency for everybody. The 1970s were the same! And the 1980s, with the AIDS epidemic and a whole set of other issues. In America, we're at a point where we are being appeased by our technology ... we're not as active as a society as we could be. We don't live in as much of a free-flowing, free-spirited, ready-to-protest way. Students expect to leave art school and expect to make a living. And when you leave art school expecting to make a living, you're not necessarily going to make politically controversial works because those works don't sell to collectors.

HE: How does your selection of documents speak about the Museum and its history of political engagement?

XS: I hope that the list [of documents used in the performance] ... gives a good overview of how the Museum has or has not engaged [politically], and also has taken some risks—[for example, I see]

purchasing David Wojnarowicz's work [*A Fire in My Belly* as a] response to the National Portrait Gallery, a response to censorship. And that's huge—that affected not only the Museum but the way other institutions dealt with that work, the awareness of that work, and what communities would see [it], and that's when you see the power of an institution to affect visible change.

JC: To a certain extent it feels like you are positing yourself as a conduit between the Archives and the public, which I find interesting because the Archives *are* public. What do you think it is about the Archives that makes it something that people don't access as often as they might?

XS: I think having the time to sit and research in a physical space with physical objects is a complete luxury. The majority of us use computers. Here in America particularly, we just don't engage with objects ... so for me it's really exciting to invite people to actually engage with those papers, to go in and see them. I hope that 10,000 people go to the Archives this year. Or at least five people because of my project. [The Archive is] costs and insurance values, it's a tie that Picasso made for [MoMA's first Director] Alfred Barr, it's Joanne Stamerra's eraser—it's meaty, you know? It's alive and in person, and I would love to encourage that tactile relationship.

HE: As important as the physical Archives are, situating the performance in the Garden Lobby or in the Sculpture Garden utilizes the public spaces of the Museum in a really significant way. It ties into the larger Artists Experiment idea of activating the building, engaging visitors who aren't seeking out an interactive experience in the Museum. Whoever is in the Museum is exposed to the performance, and they're forced to think about these issues—whether they like it or not!

XS: I love that. I wanted the work to have some sense of awkwardness, which it did. It's very awkward, it's kind of annoying. I like that it's awkward and annoying! And I didn't mind [the occasional mistakes] ... when you deal with performance, you have to deal with the aliveness and the humanness of it.

HE: It seems like you were expecting a wide range of responses—if you've succeed, people are right there with you and they're excited to be jolted out of their complacent museum-going mode, and if they're angry about it then you've also succeeded because, again, you've disrupted their usual, passive museum experience.

XS: Totally ... there were people who weren't into it. There were men who said "politics has no place in art." And you would see people covering their ears. But then you would also see amazing things like people coming up and reading the Guerrilla Girls' [*Dear Art Collector*] or reading the Art Workers Coalition's *13 Demands* or looking at General Idea's *AIDS (Wallpaper)* and asking, "What is that?." They weren't afraid to get close, and those were the moments that I really loved.