

Exploring Archives: The Archive In Exhibition Making Discussion

Joshua Oduga: Hello, everyone. Thank you for joining us for this virtual program, "Exploring the Archives: --The Archive in Exhibition Making."

This program is co-organized by Art + Practice and the Getty Research Institute, and is organized in association with the exhibition, "Blondell Cummings -- Dance as Moving Pictures," which is on view at Art + Practice until February 2022.

Tonight's program invites curators Alison Burstein, Kristin Juarez, Rebecca Peabody, and Glenn Phillips, to discuss their work, working in archives and making exhibitions.

This program will be moderated by Alison. Hello, Alison.

Alison Burstein: Hello.

Joshua: Thank you for joining us.

Alison: Great to have you.

Joshua: I'll pass it off to you to lead the program, and then we'll share some images and things of everyone's work in just a second.

Alison: Great. Thank you so much, Joshua, for that great introduction and for all of your work convening this program. It's really a privilege to be here tonight in conversation with colleagues from Art + Practice and the Getty. I'm really looking forward to speaking and learning from you all today.

As Joshua said, we're coming together on the occasion of the exhibition Blondell Cummings -- Dance as Moving Pictures, to think broadly about the relationship between archives and exhibition making.

I am thrilled to be joining the three curators who organized this exhibition which draws largely from archival collections including that of The Kitchen in New York where I work.

As we are coming together to discuss our work with archives across our different institutions, we have the chance to explore something that I'm personally very interested in, which is how archives record the networks that link artists, institutions, and art workers, and the ways that those connections persist and evolve over time.

I think the Cummings exhibition and the associated programming are really wonderful examples of how research and curatorial processes can animate and extend such networks. It's something that I'm really keen to talk about with you all here today.

To start our conversation, we'll each share a bit about our work with archives, should starting with a few previous examples of projects we've worked on, and then moving more into the Blondell Cummings exhibition and thinking about archival and curatorial practice more broadly.

To begin, I'd love to open it up to the three of you, and then I'll share a bit about my work at the end. I will turn it over here to Glenn to begin. I'd love to hear if you could just share about a few of the previous projects you've worked on.

Glenn Phillips: Sure. Thank you, Alison. My name is Glenn Phillips, and I'm Senior Curator and Head of Exhibitions at the Getty Research Institute, and also Head of Modern & Contemporary Collections here.

A lot of my curatorial work, on the one hand is making exhibitions, but on the other hand is working to build our archival collections and other modern and contemporary collections at the GRI, working together with several other curators in the modern and contemporary section here.

The Blondell Cummings exhibition, it is an archival exhibition. The beginning of the research for that exhibition was in The Kitchen archive and other archives here like the archive of "High Performance Magazine." In terms of previous projects, the Cummings exhibition, it's a video exhibition, and it's a dance exhibition.

I thought I'd say a couple of words about a previous video exhibition I did and then a previous dance exhibition I did because both of them informed our thinking at least a little bit in terms of this project. We might have a slide coming up in any minute.

The first project I'll talk about, it's a show. It's from a while ago now. It's called "California Video." We did this at the Getty Center in 2008. Another collection sparked this exhibition. That's the collection of the Long Beach Museum of Art, which launched one of the first video programs in the country at a museum and, I believe, had the first video production facility as part of that museum.

This exhibition, we wanted to do a survey looking at all of California and looking from the birth of video to the contemporary work and mix that all together. There were I don't know how many hundreds of hours of video in this show. More than anyone could ever watch.

Here we're seeing an image walking in, mixing the old and the new. We have some pieces by Diana Thater, then leading you into these stations where you could sit down looking at early work.

Maybe if we could have the next slide. Here, now we're moving towards the end of the show where we're switching more to larger installation pieces, but also still having the same stations where you can sit and watch individual pieces.

You can barely see, if you look through that doorway in the back, that's a commissioned piece from Jennifer Steinkamp in our little oculus there. That room was a study room where you could sit at stations and watch the entire show that way.

We installed the show twice. Once on kiosks, where you could browse a menu and instead of having to walk through the show, you could sit and watch everything, and people did, or you could do it spatially.

We might have one more slide of this show. Here's another view walking in. In the corner there, this amazing piece by the groups, Ant Farm and T.R. Uthco, called "The Eternal Frame," as they had shown it originally at the Long Beach Museum.

We had to reconstruct this piece, but the piece itself was a reconstruction of the JFK assassination that the artists made in Dealey Plaza and then installed this living room for you to watch it in. There was a lot of reconstruction work there.

Moving on to Yvonne Rainer. This was a retrospective, and it was based on Rainer's archives, which we have here at the Getty. Dances and films because Rainer, she spent the first third of her career as a dancer. She spent the middle third of her career as a filmmaker. Then in 2000, she went back to dance again.

We were looking at those two areas, and pulling a lot from the objects in the archives that's showing a lot of scores, photographs, posters. We can see some of those on the next slide. The amazing ephemera that proliferates around these sorts of projects, especially in the '60s and '70s. We were looking at just a handful of her major pieces and showing how they were documented in different ways.

On the one hand, it might be the scores and notes that Rainer would take on a piece or what she might write in her diary. On the other hand, it might be the photographs that would capture sometimes in these canonical stills. Then we had screenings where you could see the dance, or some of them.

The early dances weren't always documented on film or video that much. A lot of the video work was looking at later pieces.

I think we have one last image here that showing the...Oh, no, we don't. I'm done. [laughs] I think we're moving on. Is it moving on to Kristin next?

Kristin Juarez: Yes. Thank you, [laughs] Glenn. I'm Kristin Juarez. I am the research specialist for the African American Art History Initiative at the Getty Research Institute.

I wanted to pick up the last thread that Glenn mentioned, which was the Yvonne Rainer archive. This is somewhere we also found Blondell Cummings. We found her in "Kristina Talking Pictures." Of course, the film is a record of her practice and her participation in the film. We also have scripts and notes that she wrote, and these are all within Yvonne Rainer's archive.

I wanted to pull that into the conversation as I move into an introduction of my work. Prior to this, I was in New York, and I worked at Danspace Project.

I was brought on to help organize the exhibition that unfolds over time, which is called a Platform curated by Reggie Wilson. It was called "Dancing Platform Praying Grounds -- Blackness, Churches, and Downtown Dance."

It is also informed by questions of the archive, questions of reconstruction, and reconstructing speculative histories, and how architecture serves as a living, breathing, concrete legacy of over time with different points of history that run through it, and also to work on the exhibition catalog.

Joshua, if you could pull up the first slide, please. Danspace Project is held and hosted by St. Mark's Church in-the-Bowery in East Village, which is one of the oldest...It's the second oldest and the oldest continuously running church in New York City.

It has this legacy very connected to Stuyvesant, the Dutch founder of New York, to colonialism and slavery, to this turning point of what Manhattan would become. It still stands after fires and everything.

One of Reggie Wilson's questions was trying to understand how this place, which is a beacon of Dutch colonialism, could also have these points of reference for the civil rights movement, for the Black Power movement, as well as be a host to experimental dance.

A lot of my work was doing archival work and understanding how St. Mark's Church existed, how it was pictured, how it was understood by New Yorkers, and its role in downtown dance now.

Next slide, please. Reggie Wilson is a choreographer. He is really interested in how the body stores knowledge. He's looking at gesture. He's looking at religious practices and movements. He's looking at histories of dance and appropriation. He is deeply driven by research.

These are two images from his personal collection that he likes to juxtapose. How are these two-gesture performed by Ruth St. Denis and by a religious service in New York in the 1800s? How can these two gestures that look very similar be put in relationship?

They have very different contexts, different origins. Still, they are visually the same. They embodied kind of same gesture. He was interested in juxtaposing this. This is an example of a spread from the catalog designed by Raja Feather Kelly.

Next slide, please. You can see that same gesture appear here. One of the kinds of research that we did, which is exploring the gaps in the archival record, particularly around the architecture of St. Mark's Church, this is a balcony that runs along the nave of the church.

We've seen renderings of this balcony and know that, alongside of it is oldest companion church, St. Augustine, that this may have been called a slave gallery, which is where people of color, free and enslaved people, would have been delegated to watch and participate in the service.

There was research in terms of how can we find out that this is what, in fact, this architectural form, actually, this was the purpose it served? Part of what we had to do is talk to people, talk to the oldest members of the church, talk to the historians who are also members of the church.

Through that, we found all of these touchpoints of the church's history, as I mentioned, in the Black Power movement, in how this church became a motivator in downtown for social justice from the '60s on, and how it became a place that's served and hosted experimental dance and experimental poetry.

What we found was that there was no answer. We couldn't definitively say this is what purpose it served. Still, the architecture mimics the church where we know this was its purpose.

This was a commissioned piece that Reggie was commissioned to do for this platform. It was called "They stood shaking, while others began to dance." Excuse me. It was called "They stood shaking while others began to shout."

That distinction is important because he was looking at the movement practices of Shakers, the religious practice of the Shakers as well as the religious practice around ring shouts of Black diaspora. He put these kinds of vocabularies into context.

As we see, that gesture comes back into the present. They're cited at the top of this speculatively identifiable architectural form of the slave gallery in this apex of the dance that brought this month-long platform to an end. It was an empowering moment, I think, for everyone who participated in the research and the dance, and viewing this exhibition.

Next slide. Finally, what I learned through this project was the ways in which dance is not just a relationship between a viewer and a dancer, but what are ways in which embodied practices can build community? What are ways in which embodied practices can remember histories?

This is a slide from a symposium that Reggie organized. This is what was called a ceremonial offering by the artist, Emily Johnson. She led us in a dance where we started off in a jumbled mass and ended up in concentric circles holding hands. There was also community-building practice around it. We learned all of the places that we were bringing into the room through our presence.

Tying that back into one of the things that I was thinking about with Blondell Cummings, was how do we bring her voice into the room? How do we bring the voice of others, and those who loved her, and those who worked with her into how we design this exhibition?

I'll turn it over now to Rebecca.

Rebecca Peabody: Thank you, Kristin. This is so interesting, seeing how our work together on the Blondell Cummings show relates in so many rich and fascinating ways to the projects we've all been working on.

Glenn, it was a pleasure to see images from California video. That show took place just a year after I started at the GRI. I had the opportunity to work with you in a limited capacity on some of the material in the book.

It's so interesting to me to think through, as you were talking about that, how my first moments of the GRI, where this immersive experience in video, and archives, and exhibitions. Now we're working together on this show. It feels like a full-circle moment. Oh, my role at the GRI is as head of a department called Research Projects and Academic Outreach.

Joshua, I'm ready for my first slide. Thank you.

In my capacity working with the research projects, I oversee the GRI's institutional research agenda, which is made up of between 12 and 15 multi-year collaborative team-based research projects, most of which are inspired by and aimed towards activating archival collections.

In that capacity, I have the opportunity to work in a larger sense with over a dozen different projects that are engaging with archives and putting them in conversation with other archives in really unique and innovative ways.

Not all of them culminate in exhibitions, but many of them do. The ones that don't culminate in other kinds of tangible outcomes to the conversation such as book projects, public programs, or new digital projects and tools. It's a fascinating opportunity to really see multiple different ways of accessing archives and activating them all at the same time.

Next slide please. In my own work, I have tended to be more involved in books than in exhibitions. I brought a couple of images to share with you here.

A book that I completed recently, co-editing with my colleagues, Dominic Thomas and Steven Nelson, called "Visualizing Empire -- Africa, Europe, and the Politics of Representation," dove deeply into one of our archival collections at the GRI which is a repository of visual, cultural images, documenting the presence of French colonialism in North Africa.

We collected an amazing group of scholars working in multiple disciplines. All of whom dug into those materials and put them in conversation with other kinds of collections around the world to see what they could show us about history in a new way, through visual culture.

Another book project that I don't have an image of, a "Lawrence Alloway -- Critic and Curator," which I co-edited with my colleagues, Courtney Martin and Lucy Bradnock, also dove deeply into one of our archival repositories.

Looking at the important and influential work of Lawrence Alloway through his papers and another collection of amazing scholars coming together to approach that from multiple interdisciplinary perspective.

The last image is one of my own projects. I'm an active scholar within and beyond the GRI. "Consuming Stories -- Kara Walker and the Imagining of American Race" is one of my individual projects. This is also a deeply archival project in a different sense, though.

Instead of mining the archives to learn more about Walker, I was focusing intensely on the work of an artist who herself goes into the archives for her source material. She looks at archives that range from traditional historical paper archives to the ever-evolving terrain of social media and the Internet, and the kinds of archives that we're constantly creating in that space as well.

That was another really interesting opportunity for me to think about archives in a different way.

Alison, you mentioned networks in your introduction. I'm really taken by that because I'm seeing in all of our projects the importance of networks and how that as a metaphor is really important to what we're thinking about today.

Alison: That's great. Thank you all for sharing that and for picking up on that, Rebecca. I think it's something that really comes through in the institutions that we're all representing, both where we currently work and where we've worked before.

The networks across the Getty Dancespace, The Kitchen, chart onto works of artists like Blondell Cummings as well as many others, which I'm excited to talk about.

Just to share a bit about my own background and my work at The Kitchen in New York. As I mentioned I am a member of the curatorial team there. I'm the curator of media and engagement. Just to say a few words about the Kitchen for those who aren't familiar, if we could get the first slide, Joshua.

It's an organization that was founded in 1971 by a pair of artists Steina and Woody Vasulka, dedicated to what was then the nascent form of video art, founded in SoHo Art space, the Mercer Arts Center in the disused Kitchen, and then later moved in 1973 to the loft space we see on the left of this slide here.

At that time, the organization became incorporated as a nonprofit, and began to expand its programming beyond video art, music performance, the forms that were initially supported in the Mercer Art space.

Then in the new space on Wooster Street, they began to do programming across a wide range of disciplines, including visual art, dance, performance music, and then later adding literature and other interdisciplinary forums.

In 1986, The Kitchen moved to the space in Chelsea that you see on the right. That's where we are based today.

We continue to focus on programming across the full spectrum of art forums, with a focus on experimentation and risk-taking, that has been central to the Kitchen's mission from the outset,

really supporting forms of expression that don't fit neatly into other institutional forums such as galleries or larger institutions like museums.

With respect to the topic of the archives, The Kitchen was very lucky in that with its focus on video art, it was able to document from the earliest days, many of the performances that took place.

The archives shows this investment, not only through these performance recordings, but also through things like installation images of the exhibitions, as well as performances and printed matter and ephemera.

Our 20th-century archive is in the collection of the Getty Research Institute. We are lucky to be able to collaborate with colleagues there around those materials. Our 21st-century materials to be maintained in-house.

Wanted to note a few of the initiatives that we've launched over the past year to mark our institutional milestone of the 50th anniversary in 2021.

Taking this occasion as an opportunity to both revisit our history and think about how we animate and carry forward aspects of the institution's legacy. We've developed programs that invite artists to engage with the archive as both material and their source of inspiration.

One of these programs that we've established is the research residency, which we launched last spring, with a cohort of four artists, Sharmi Basu, Will Lee, Nia Nottage, and Tyler Morse of Steph Christ Collective and Tuesday Smillie.

These residents have spent six months following lines of inquiry that they outlined in their initial research proposals. Along the way, they've consulted a wide range of materials.

If we could see the next slide. These include things like, on the left, a poster that was designed by the collective Gran Fury for The Kitchen as a programming calendar. On the right, you see a job description and internal administrative document.

The residents have been consulting things such as these as well as video recordings, exhibition images, oral histories, the full gamut of our materials.

Throughout the process, they've been in conversation both with one another and with members of our curatorial team at The Kitchen as well as with colleagues from other institutions, including Glenn and Sarah Cooper from the Getty Museum, receiving feedback on their process and on their research along the way.

That cohort of artists is now developing projects that will be publicly presented in the next year. Stay tuned for that.

Another initiative that I want to mention is our video viewing room series, which is an online series on our site, The Kitchen OnScreen, that presents recent and archival works with contextualizing text and media.

If we could see the next slide. One recent iteration of this series features a work by artist, Jen Liu. You see the still on the right from her new film, "Electropore," which was made through a deep engagement with a work that is represented in The Kitchen's archive.

What you see on the left is a still from the sci-fi opera, "Warrior Sisters" by composer and musician, Fred Ho, and librettist, Ann T. Greene.

This video viewing showcases videos, both excerpts of the Warrior Sisters' recording alongside Jen's new video, as well as a selection of archival documents that relate to the development and presentation of Warrior Sisters at The Kitchen in 2000.

In working with Jen, working with these archival materials became a very important way to underscore the shared labor that went into the opera's production and the ways that this labor mirrors an investment in future building and coalition that is present in both Warrior Sisters and in Jen's own work.

I will leave it there. We have many threads that will come through in our conversation, building on the ways that we've all worked both with the archive as material, bringing in artists to respond to the archive, and also drawing from the archive as material for exhibitions.

As the starting point, we can focus on the exhibition at hand, Blondell Cummings' Dance as Moving Pictures as it's currently installed in Art + Practice's space.

I was wondering, as the group of curators who have worked on this exhibition, if you could share a bit about the origins of this exhibition, and then elaborate on the processes of archival research and exploration that gave forum to what is now on view?

Glenn: Who wants to take this one?

Rebecca: I can start with some of the bigger picture origins. I'll mention that the Getty and GRI launched the African American Art History Initiative a few years back. From the beginning, we wanted very much to partner with a few different institutions in Los Angeles on research projects, exhibition projects of mutual interest that supported our shared goals.

Art + Practice was one of the institutions that we had always wanted to partner with. When this opportunity came up, it was really a perfect answer to that goal that we had in mind. Glenn, do you want to say a little bit more about how we arrived to the content and the exhibition?

Glenn: Sure, yeah. We started by knowing that we wanted to do a show and that it might be a video show, and that we probably had material in the archive and we were going to go find it. The Kitchen would be one of the big places that we would start and maybe some other collections as well.

We started by doing a survey of artists in The Kitchen and particularly wanting to focus on African American women artists. That in itself was the digitization project. Some of those

recordings have been digitized, but a lot of them have not. They need to be digitized because these are all older recordings still on tape.

In many cases, the recordings in The Kitchen archive are unique. The Kitchen heroically managed to document almost every performance that they ever did, but that doesn't always mean that anything else happened to the tape aside from going into the archive.

That's part of what's exciting, that in some cases, when we digitize these tapes, it means we're the first people to see this performance since it happened. That was amazing. We digitized...I forget the number. Between The Kitchen and another couple archives, it was maybe 70 to 80 tapes.

We started watching them. Immediately, Blondell Cummings was in the show. We didn't know what the show was, but we knew Blondell Cummings was in the show, because we found these amazing recordings. We were thinking about a group show because there were other amazing recordings as well.

As I always describe it, as the show kept going on, the group kept getting smaller. It was three artists. Finally, we had that it was two artists. Then there was this moment where it was so clear, "OK, we're doing the Blondell Cummings retrospective."

I would also say there, I think there's this magical thing because in The Kitchen archive, almost all the time, at least more than most of the time, the recordings in that archive are just the recordings that happened at The Kitchen. In the case of Blondell Cummings, there were her performances at The Kitchen, but all of these other performances and other spaces as well.

It was like a miniature archive of her work. The recordings were not in a great condition, or at least the ones from other institutions. I think Kristin was the one digging in the archive who discovered this interesting thing that The Kitchen was actually managing Blondell Cummings' touring schedule for a while.

These tapes were the screeners that would get sent out to different institutions to see examples of her work if they were trying to decide. Those screeners that had been played to death were saved. They sat there in the archive. Then the time came and we found it.

It gave us enough of an overview that we were able to know this is where we want to go. Then we could contact her family to find the better recordings.

I often refer to things like that as a time bomb that's sitting in the archive because it maybe happened in a happenstance way, but then its time comes. It was a gift to us because all of a sudden, "OK, we've got a show." We know what we need to do next.

Kristin, I don't know if you want to expand on that.

Kristin: What we needed to do next was to speak with her estate, her family. We were put in touch with her family, first with Judy Hussie Taylor. A Danspace Project put us in touch with

Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, who was good friends with Blondell, who said Elizabeth Streb has been stewarding her archive, and you should reach out to her.

Elizabeth put us directly in touch with her family. As we went to visit them in Brooklyn, we came into the basement, and we saw that Blondell had hundreds of tapes. It wasn't just the recordings that we saw in The Kitchen archives, but she was documenting and archiving all of her work.

We found what we hoped to find and more. We found some of the earliest works that we had known about dating back to 1978. We found work that predated that. In addition, we also, by happenstance, found a number of works that she was making specifically for the camera.

She was not only recording her dances and performances, but she was also making work to be screened as video art. We went in with a rough repertory that we got from The Kitchen archives that was in her notes that she was traveling. Then we were able to fill in the gaps of her practice in her personal archive.

We didn't know exactly what we were getting because it's labeled. There are all kinds of formats of video from U-Matics to EIAJ, to VHS, some 16-millimeter film, hand-labeled mostly, sometimes printed out. From that, we selected a handful with New York Public Library's blessings. That's where her archive now lives.

We had those digitized. We spent a summer of reviewing every single hour, minute of tape that we had digitized. It was...I don't know now. If I were to quantify it, maybe 100 hours or so. [laughs] Maybe more, maybe less. It was a feat. It was a moment of great discovery on our end to learn about how rigorous Blondell Cummings was in her practice and in her documentation.

Glenn: It's another way that we were so lucky at so many different times in this project. We made those selections to be digitized shortly before the pandemic. We didn't know obviously that that was coming.

We had thought that what we selected that day would be the biggest batch. I also think we thought that once we've gone through that, we could go back and choose to fill in, and we could make a better next selection. That was suddenly off the table. How lucky were we that we happened to select things from every moment of her career, so that we could cover her whole chronology.

The other amazing thing, we chose some of the better-known pieces, hoping that it would be a better copy than what was available. That's something you really could've saved till the end, but we did it the first time.

Some things we chose just so randomly because the writing on the label was just evocative and cryptic. Those actually, I think two of the best pieces in the show wound up being because of that. Then, there we had it. Just from that first selection, we had a whole show.

Also, how it's exciting is that there's the whole rest of the archive that we didn't digitize, which means there are more shows that someone else can do, that we're going to have a lot more discoveries.

Rebecca: The origins of the show and then the unfolding of the research and development stage are really interesting to think about now in retrospect because we had a lot of delays due to the pandemic. That slowed our process at times, it helped us redirect our attention at times.

It also opened up a lot of new opportunities for us that we wouldn't have had otherwise in terms of advance outreach faculty and adding a book to the project. It's a show that's very much influenced by the time of its making as well.

Alison: Yes, absolutely. As you mentioned the book, Rebecca, that makes me interested to hear more about both the catalog component and the research guide that accompany this exhibition.

Which seems to me that they are ways that you brought forward this vast amount of conversation time that you've spent with friends, family, collaborators, brought in materials that you've discovered throughout the process of developing the exhibition. In that way, compliment the experience of engaging directly with the work that you have in the gallery.

I'm wondering if you could talk about how you all think about the relationship between those three different components? Also, how you decided which aspects to bring through in which context of the project.

[pause]

Glenn: We're trying to have telepathy on who's going to go first and it's not working. [laughs]

Kristin: I wonder if it's a good time -- I'm sorry -- just to bring up the images so we could maybe use those also a little bit to guide conversation.

Rebecca: I personally, am excited thinking about the research guide and the faculty outreach that we did and the book in the context of the exhibition.

It's two distinctly different ways that we are hoping to reach out and make sure that Blondell Cummings, her legacy, and the research that we've done on her work is accessible in different ways to different audiences and users, the research guide, and the faculty open house. I hope Kristin will say a little bit more about the faculty open house as well.

It's a thoughtful, concerted attempt on our part to reach out to faculty who either are teaching in the area that intersects with Blondell Cumming's work, or could be.

To make her material accessible to them through developing modules that could be used in syllabi, through making our resources transparent and accessible, and situating them within a context of literature as primary and secondary literature.

It's our hope that this will make its way into the hands of teachers across the country or even the world's. I know that we have aspirations to do that more broadly as well with other research projects and other exhibitions to make that a major source of our energy and our time.

Glenn: I'll add to that. What you do when you do a show or a research project is you devote so much of your time to figuring out the connections, figuring out, "OK, what are all of the collections that are out there? How did they relate?"

If you're working at a collecting institution, then it's also, "What are all of the collections that we have here, and how does that relate?" You have to do that groundwork to do the show. Why aren't we sharing that groundwork? It's hard work because you can't just go to a list and find it. Why don't we make that list so people can find it? Once you say it, it's so obvious.

Moving forward, we're going to be doing that a lot more for our exhibitions at the Research Institute because we're so proud of how our collections do. Much of the curator's job is making it deeper, and deeper, and deeper, and more connected.

Then we expect people to divine that as if from heaven because we don't make it that discoverable. Just the process of doing it with this show has made it so clear that we can do it a lot more and make it a lot easier for people to see those connections.

Kristin: To add to that, in addition to transparency around curatorial process and research, there's an additional layer of canon building, canon formation, and finding gaps that can be filled. What we found with her work, and when she's making more of it work, and who she's working with, is that oftentimes we found her within somebody else's archives.

We found her at the periphery. Instead, this work and all of our work, both the research guide, the book, and this exhibition, attempt to center her practice at one of these origin moments in the '70s multidisciplinary practice.

If she is at the center of it, you still see her collaboration with Meredith Monk, Yvonne Rainer, Ishmael Houston-Jones, but then you also get this layer of threading of community work that she's doing, in addition to working with experimental poets and women of color who are working at the edges of disciplines as well.

You get this unique tapestry that forges around her practice, that is fundamentally a shift in how we understood this moment. Making all of that information available allows for more research to happen, allows for other threads to be tugged on. We have one central focus and this is the groundwork. There's so much more to be said about her work.

Alison: That's great to hear. With respect to the archive as a material, pulling out a few of the things that you have all been mentioning, the ways in which the behind-the-scenes labor lives in the archives, but it's often not made public.

These administrative documents that a researcher might find, but it's not often made part of the material, that mirrors, as you're talking about, making your own process public in the making of this exhibition, along with the catalog and the research guide.

Similarly, the work that you're doing to fill in the dots or fill in the gaps between and around archives where Blondell's presence is marked, but maybe not in a central way, is something that I'm interested in.

I'd love to hear all of you talk about that way in which archives can be both our repositories and springboards for further research and connection. I'd love to hear you think about that both in relation to this exhibition and some of the previous projects that you were mentioning. I can compare connections to many of the projects that you referred to earlier.

Glenn: One thing I would just note. The show that is at Art + Practice is primarily a video exhibition. Had it not been the pandemic, it may have been another type of exhibition.

There are interesting archival materials. There's amazing photographs. Similar to the images we saw from the Yvonne Rainer exhibition, we could have put that sort of material into the show, and it would have been very interesting.

There was so much uncertainty around, "Can we make a loan request to ship from New York, and then know that the show is going to open on time?" The video was so strong, and we had it in hand. We knew that we a hundred percent could make that show.

I'm glad it turned out that way because it then allows people to see the work first. They may not have seen the work first and maybe it's better to see the work first and then start thinking about the archive.

We're really proud and happy that we are able to put a lot of archival material into the book that's coming out. We're reproducing material from the archives. We found the most extraordinary photographs, really exciting, great photographs, and produced a lot of new stills from the videos.

Then also adding to the archive, we commissioned not only scholarly essays but also recollections from some of the most significant people who we also wanted to acknowledge, have been responsible for keeping her legacy going and stewarding that until now, and also recognizing and supporting her throughout her career.

Kristin: To jump in on that, one of the things that we found, as I mentioned, was her repertory. That became a roadmap that we could fill in. Also became a roadmap for Thomas DeFrantz who was commissioned to write the first extended biography of her practice.

These are touch points that he is able to make meaning of and to put into context of her touring schedule and how she was going up and down the Eastern Seaboard within a matter of six months. What that must have been like on her body, and the toll it took while she was making original work.

We then were also able to see how she was constantly revising and recycling work in a way that was deliberate and intentional. We see a kind of unfolding shifting of title names, of descriptions. We see her bio and how she described herself, and how she described her organization's Cycle Arts Foundation. What she meant about collaboration, what was her definition of post-modernism.

There are all of these ways in which we, in some ways, could take a step back and let her speak first. Of course, there are many gaps that we have to look to those who knew her to fill in who she was in addition to what she left behind.

Those were the kinds of elements that we're toggling between the archive and particularly within the book. We do see it in the exhibition with the wall text which foregrounds her voice as a way to put a frame around the work on view.

Rebecca: I've been struck throughout this process, coming to a deeper awareness of the generative role of curatorial practice and contextualizing scholarship. I'm thinking about then the pieces that we've shown, of course, but also the pieces that we digitized, working closely with the family in the New York Public Library.

I'm thinking about the new scholarship that we commissioned for the book, the remembrances that came together for the book. It has really impressed me that the exhibition is itself a story, but all the choices around it are also a story that impacts the scholarship on Blondell Cummings and opens up some new opportunities that weren't there before.

That's been a really interesting experience for me.

Alison: Maybe picking up on that. Something I'm interested in is the way in which the experience of a gallery exhibition is, of course, public and collective. You're in the space with others experiencing works in real-time as compared to the work of a scholarship or engaging with archives, which, while archives are typically public, the experience of being in an archive is typically very individual focused.

Thinking about a project like this and an artist's work who was engaged with thinking through questions and community holding space for conversations with peers and collaborators, I'm wondering if you could speak a bit about how you think about those two different sides of the experience of Blondell's work.

The focused individual research and the communal experience of the work in real-time.

Kristin: I might say that this project and process as co-curators has been collaborative. Everything that we hold may be individually, we discussed, we talked about, we cited, we contextualized.

It can be a solitary experience, but I think more and more there are new ways of working that don't favor that anymore. Say like the conversation is what generates the scholarship, is what

generates the idea. There's a little bit of, in terms of our process, modeling and responding to her own way of working.

We were doing similar practices of collaboration to see what can happen if we work together.

Rebecca: Something that occurs to me is the productive contrast between working on an exhibition collaboratively as we did and the work of scholarship that leads towards a book, since that's the area that I've been more immersed on so far.

That seems very solitary in comparison to working on an exhibition, even when I've worked collaboratively in other books, that there's the idea of the single scholar in the archives at their computer working on their essay.

It struck me that in my work, in books, I've thought a lot about voice. Whose voice is being shared? Whose voice is being heard? Whose voice is being prioritized?

That was very important to us in the exhibition as well, but in a dramatically different way where we were actually working with Blondell Cumming's voice in three-dimensional space that people could hear from multiple directions at once.

We're thinking about how are these different expressions of her voice coming together, interweaving? How is somebody hearing them at different moments as they move throughout the gallery? What are they encountering first? Which audio is moving through the gallery and threading through the other sources of audio?

What effect does that have? What does it mean to have audio when you can no longer distinguish the words but the vocal presence is still there, and it's still inflicting what you see around you?

That was a totally new experience for me and yet connected in some ways to the work that I have done with the presence of voice in my more solitary written work.

Glenn: I feel like the last several exhibitions that I've worked on, the process has been more like a seminar. It's really about looking at things together and talking about them, and then going off and maybe doing research and coming back.

It's that process of conversation that eventually you talk your way into the show. Eventually, you reach this point where we all now feel that we've arrived at a story and we know how to tell it. Then you can start laying that out in space. You've just incrementally, and through consensus, arrived there. You feel really good about it. It's a way that I like working.

It's not as romantic though, as pointing at the wall and saying, "Do that, my genius demands it."
[laughs]

Alison: I'm thinking about that in relation to the work of commissioning, which you've all done and spoken about in relation to your various projects.

How that conversation that you were just describing, Glenn, also leads to new work by artists developed in response to the projects that you've worked on and perhaps that have one exhibition form, and then their work is integrated.

I'm thinking in the case of the California video exhibition. Kristin, the project you spoke about, A Danspace, where the commissioned work becomes the centerpiece of the platform series.

If you could speak a bit about that experience and those conversations and collaborations that unfold and weave through these projects in different ways. If you have any thoughts in relation to this current exhibition, I'm curious as well.

Glenn: I've worked on a lot of commissions in my life and have arrived at some pretty strong ideas about them. The main one being make sure a commission is what you really want because a lot of times when someone commissions something, what they actually want is this other piece the artists made but they want it to be new and theirs.

Artists don't work that way. When you commissioned something, what you're saying to the artist is, "I want to support you in your next project whatever that is," and you need to give them that freedom.

Sometimes people aren't wanting to commission, they're wanting to give an assignment. The best commissions really just offer support and freedom. When you find yourself in a situation that you can support whatever the artist does, even if it is absolutely different, then that's great, but you have, to a degree, take yourself out of that and just allow that to happen.

Now of course, sometimes if we think about commissions for book, if we're commission someone to share their memories of someone, then that can be an assignment that everyone can understand, but when it's commissioning a performance...

It's rare that an artist gets a commission and they want to do the exact same thing they did last time because that's not a good use of the commission. The commission offers freedom.

Kristin: I'll speak specifically to my work with Reggie Wilson in Danspace. Echoing what Glenn said that is their mission, I would say Danspace's mission is to support artists in the next phase of their practice.

For the platform series, it is an exhibition that unfolds over time, over a month, with different artists, different kinds of experiences, and it takes the shape of what the choreographer's curator wants to do.

Because Reggie is so research driven and so archivally focused, both in body practice and physical archives as well, what we were there to do was to support and give the grounding, the framework, the contextualization as needed, but also to throw ideas off of him to see if that's what he wanted to do.

For example, he was commissioned to do a dance, but leading up to that, there were walking tours. There was a symposium. There were other ways of engaging the ideas at hand. We commissioned a scholar to create a dossier that told the history of New York before the 1800s.

There were all of these kinds of material support that we could provide, but we weren't shaping it or dictating it. It was a way in which we could take elements of his practice and say, "What if we did it this way? What if we extended an embodied practice into a walking tour and talking to people who did that kind of work?"

It is, as Glenn was saying, following the lead of who you're commissioning and building a trust over time. That exhibition came on in the outcome phase of it, but it unfolded over a series of conversations that took place over years. Also, time has to be baked into that process as well.

Rebecca: I've done less with commissioning artworks than both Glenn and Kristin, but I am hearing some parallels with the work I have done inviting new scholarship for some of the book projects I have worked on.

In particular, with the books that have been deliberately interdisciplinary because you're working with scholars who come from literature, political science, history, film and media studies. They all bring different disciplinary practices, histories, different kinds of questions and different ways of engaging with visual material.

There's an element again of providing that central focus, that fulcrum around which we all turn, but being open to and appreciative of the fact that that's going to come from some different directions from the fields in which I'm anchored, in which I'm most familiar.

Alison: Absolutely. I think one thing that comes through to me in all of your answers that I, too, have experienced in the process of commissioning, particularly when offering an archive as a source material or as something to work with in the process of commissioning, is how the learnings that can unfold for all of us.

The work of devout following and taking a lead from an artist can perhaps lead to new insights that we wouldn't have drawn from the archives ourselves as members of the institution, for example.

I am receiving word that we are almost out of time, so I would now want to just hear, drawing from all that you've shared and some of the interests that you've already charted across your previous projects.

We'd love to hear about what is next for each of you and whether there are particular insights or particularly rich experiences that you had in this process that you hope to carry into your next endeavors.

Glenn: Maybe we're going in the same order we went before. I'll just start. I'm working on two more retrospectives. One of them on the performance artist Barbara T. Smith. Then the other one, which I'll say more about now, is the retrospective of the artist Frederick Eversley.

That show will be presented at the Benton Museum of Art at Pomona College, formerly The Pomona College Museum of Art. Rebecca McGrew there, and I are working on this together. It'll be part of the Getty Pacific Standard Time art and science project.

Art + Practice did a beautiful Fred Eversley show a few years ago looking at his black, white, and gray works. We've been studying that exhibition.

The new angle that we're taking for the art and science theme is looking at...Fred was an aerospace engineer before he was ever an artist, and he is a scientist. He makes these amazing spun resin discs that are all functional lenses. That aspect of the work is often left out.

We're working together with scientists, with two physicists to dig deeper into his work. We had the experience the other day all looking at a couple dozen of his works together.

It was mind blowing the way a physicist looks at these works is so different because they're judging them based on the quality of the reflections. A different lens makes different types of reflections. They all have names that I didn't know.

Whereas, for art people, if the sculpture has a reflection in it you're usually trying to ignore that. If you look at all the photographs of Fred's work, they always don't have the reflection in them, but, in fact, they're such an important part.

We're developing another curatorial standard that is based on both how beautiful they are, but also how well they function as a lens, and the different types of effects of light, and of energy capture, and of fluid dynamics, and these other things that aren't usually curatorial principles. We're excited for that show. It'll be in the fall of 2024.

Kristin: I am working on a film series, "Dancers on Film." It's developed concurrently with this exhibition of Blondell Cumming's work. It explores the impact of experimental dance on experimental film. It's an extension, in many ways, of what we learned of Blondell's practice.

Thus far, I've been in conversation with Okwui Okpokwasili, Devynn Emory, and Madeleine Hunt-Ehrlich. In the spring, this upcoming spring, I also include an archival study day. We'll have an archival study day component where we can see different kinds of material, and different impacts that a Black dance has had on experimental practice.

Rebecca: Along with Glenn and Kristin, we're eagerly awaiting the book for Blondell Cummings, which, last I heard, would maybe be out in December. That will be exciting for us.

We're also hoping to travel the exhibition, which will mean an opportunity for it to move into different contexts and be seen by new viewerships, which is exciting to think about.

In my institutional work, I'm inspired by the faculty outreach that we did with the Blondell Cummings show. I'm looking forward to extending that into our other research projects.

Making that a bigger focus of our time and energy, thinking about how to take all the research that we do, and echoing the solitary nature of scholarship that we were talking about, and deliberately breaking that down and making it accessible to as broad group of users as possible.

Alison: That's great to hear. Maybe one other question. I'm curious about just building on this experience and having collaborated both as a collective within the Getty and with Art + Practice for the first time in this project, I'd love to know if there's anything that you are taking away?

We've spoken a bit about what the collaborative process for you all was like, but collaboration amongst institutions, how that might have shifted or informed the ways you're thinking about projects like this and the potential for future?

Glenn: I think we love collaborating. At the GRI in general, we actually have done a lot of collaborative exhibitions over the years, and often partnering with alternative spaces, smaller spaces, where we can have the advantage of a different location, a different audience, different types of spaces.

Hopefully, the Institution can get an advantage of the types of research resources that we have that can bring a different type of exhibition. We love doing that. There have been some productive partnerships that have been some of my favorite shows. We're continuing to want to look for opportunities like that, for sure.

Kristin: To add on to something that Rebecca was mentioning around touring this show. Something that we've been thinking about is how might the exhibition change based off of the context that it'll be in next? What are the ways that it will be more responsive to the environment that it will inhabit?

Those are some of the things, and that, I think, is really responsive also to Blondell Cummings work. She was constantly revising, recycling her practice of her dances to be of the moment and for the environment she was working in.

Rebecca: It's been such a pleasure collaborating with Art + Practice, I don't want it to end. I hope that we have another project in the works soon.

This also makes me think about the point you raised at the beginning, Allison, about networks, and how the networks that we form as we move through our lives into our practices, not only define our work in some ways, but define who we are.

The opportunity to deliberately form those networks through partnerships and through collaborations is humbling and gratifying as well.

Joshua: Thank you all for that. That's such an inspiring conversation to listen to. Thank you, Alison, for guiding the conversation, and to the team at the GRI for the collaboration on the exhibition. We are also very excited and hopeful for future collaborations.

One thing I wanted to say is that the work that you are all doing is so important on so many different levels. Thank you for thinking so deeply about the way that people can engage with art.

This conversation is going to illuminate a lot of things for people in terms of how some of the work is done, and more specifically, how the people that are doing the work, how it affects the decisions that they make, which is exciting. Thank you.