2015 Vanguard Awards: Julie Ault Always Sees Beyond

April 15, 2015 By Visual AIDS

Installation view from Macho Man, Tell It to My Heart: Collected by Julie Ault

The 10th annual Visual AIDS Vanguard Awards (VAVA Voom) recognize the contributions of individuals who, through their work, talent and dedication, strengthen our communities and reinforce the mission of Visual AIDS. This year Visual AIDS is proud to honor Julie Ault, Luna Luis Ortiz and Jim Hodges.

Julie Ault is an artist, curator, writer, and editor who works both independently and collaboratively, often engaging historical inquiry. Ault's recent exhibitions include Afterlife: a constellation for the 2014 Whitney Biennial and the collaboratively organized Macho Man Tell It to My Heart (Artists Space, 2013-14), featuring works by Tony Feher, Félix González-Torres, Martin Wong, Peter Hujar, Paul Thek and many others. Ault also cofounded the NYC-based collaborative Group Material in 1979, which presented such projects at AIDS Timeline in 1989.

Marvin Taylor, director of New York University's Fales Library and Special Collections, has worked closely with Julie over the last decade. Visual AIDS interviews Marvin about their work together as well as Julie's "visionary" practice with art and archives.

You've worked with Julie on multiple projects, and the way in which you both have reconsidered and activated archives has pushed the art and archives fields in important new directions. What have you learned from Julie and her work with archives?

I first met Julie in 2005 when we were both on a panel sponsored by the Artist Spaces Archives Project (ASAP) at the College Art Association conference. I had read her Alternative Art in New York, 1965-1985 and was very interested to hear her speak. As Julie began talking, I realized that I could finish some of her sentences. As the panel discussion went on, we began a dialogue about archives, art, and theory that has continued to this day. The next time we got together, Julie proposed donating the Group Material archive to the Downtown Collection at the Fales Library. As always with Julie, however, there was more to the project than just a simple donation. She proposed that she would help process the papers as a time-based art project. We agreed that she would set up a schedule of days and times when she would be in the library, processing the collection, and that visitors could come see her and talk about the process of organizing the Group Material archive, what that meant about narratives, authenticity, performance, and verification of sources: Archival processing as performance art as critique of the structures of libraries

and archives. Julie's ideas about archives were in keeping with mine as I built the Downtown Collection. I had not thought of embodying them as an art practice, however. This project was the beginning of our now 10-year ongoing set of collaborations. Julie consistently causes me to question how the art world approaches archives, personal papers, and collections. Her recent project Tell It to My Heart pushed these ideas further, exploring the roles and embodied practices of artists, curators, museum staff, friends, colleagues, and the public. Julie pushes us all to think beyond the narratives to see what lies behind them and enforces their cultural agency.

Julie's contribution to the 2014 Whitney Biennial was Afterlife: a constellation, a "show within a show" that included works and ephemera by David Wojnarowicz and Martin Wong, among many others, from the Whitney's permanent collection and the Downtown Collection at the Fales. What was your take on the project?

Julie's room at the biennial was, needless to say, my favorite part of the show. I think her installation was a meta-commentary about the very notion of these kinds of mammoth surveys of the art world. One the one hand, she was showing archival materials from Wojnarowicz not as art, but as archival documentation that skirts the edges of art. I'm thinking of the Magic Box, the calendar, and the slide show. Just what is archival and what is art? Does the art world really understand why it is so obsessed with archival documents at this time? Julie suggests that curation is a form of art itself. The eye of the artist in choosing pieces that comment on one another is as creative an act as making a painting. Julie's inclusion of the outstanding Kinmont piece alongside Wojnarowicz's archival materials conjures up the latter's painting "Wind (for Peter Hujar)," 1987.

Now I have a pet peeve to share: "ephemera." The art world uses the term "ephemera" completely wrong. Archival materials such as letters, manuscripts, documentary photographs, etc., are not "ephemera." Ephemera is a very specific term that means printed materials produced for a specific event, such as tickets, flyers, or programs for the theater. As archives and museums move closer together, we need to start sharing a language that is mutually respectful of the materials we have in our collections.

You contributed an extensive interview with Julie to the Whitney Biennial project. What were some of the takeaways that you think are most interesting from that nuanced dialogue between the two of you?

Actually, Julie interviewed me for this piece. I was deeply honored. I knew Julie would ask all the very tough questions about the Downtown Collection, how it came about, how I envision its contours, how it resides in the realm of cultural politics. And she did just that. I hope our discussion shows how problematic archives are and is useful to artists who want to engage with them. Laurence Giffin, an archivist who worked at Fales, recently called archives "promiscuous." I'd like to think that Julie and I showed some of the promiscuity in the dialogue.

Julie was a founding member of Group Material, whose materials reside in the Fales Collection and whose work AIDS Timeline is a touchstone for us at Visual AIDS. What are some of your favorite Group Material projects? And what are some of the highlights of that collection of materials at Fales?

The Group Material archive is one of our most frequently used collections, especially the AIDS TIMELINE. We receive many, many requests from students, scholars, and curators to view the work and its documentations. Rather than select highlights from the collection, I think the most important thing about Group Material's archive is that you can see the process of collaboration; of opening up narratives to

multiple voices; a privileging of indeterminacy over didacticism. If a student reads through all the documentation about “Democracy” for instance, she will come away not only with an understanding of the project, but also with a guide for possibly creating a similarly collaborative art model.

The exhibition of Julie’s personal collection, Macho Man Tell It to My Heart: Collected by Julie Ault, included work that Julie had collected primarily as a result of her close relationships with many artists over time including work from Visual AIDS artist members Tony Feher, Félix González-Torres, Martin Wong, Peter Hujar, Paul Thek and VAVA honoree Jim Hodges. The way Julie amassed her collection, through gifting and exchanges with artist friends, is a similarly idiosyncratic approach to collecting as the Fales Downtown Collection, with its incredible archive of ephemera, journals, photographs and other objects from the downtown scene. Can you speak to Julie’s collection exhibition, as well as the ways in which you both have been able to bring together such a fascinating record of artistic circles in both Julie’s collection and the NYU Fales collection?

Wow! Your questions are hard. I was honored to be invited by Julie to participate in Tell It to My Heart. Julie explained to me what she planned to do in the broadest strokes then invited me to write a response for the first publication of the project. I’m pretty sure she did this because much of my collecting at Fales is related to her ideas about Tell It to My Heart. Art and archives are much more than just plastic objects. They are primarily about relationships. By that I mean correspondences, similarities, differences, quarrels, feuds, love affairs, one-night fucks. All these things inflect works of art with meaning that is personal, embodied, and often stripped from works when they enter institutions. How can we retain these subtle inferences? Should we? What is gained and what is lost? What is the role of time in all of this? Building a collection like Downtown is not a science, nor is it completely as personal as Julie’s collection. I was honored again when Julie asked me to write a second piece after having seen the Basel and New York installations of the show. Something very, very important for me came out of that experience. I have used place often as a collection criterion. I did not quite know its power until I saw the differing installations of Tell It to My Heart.

Describe Julie Ault in a sentence.

Julie Ault is visionary--really--she always sees beyond.

Marvin Taylor has held positions at the Lilly Library at Indiana University, the Rare Book and Manuscript Library and the Health Sciences Library at Columbia University. He has been at the Fales Library since 1993. In 1994 Taylor founded the Downtown Collection, which contains over 12,000 printed books and 7,000 linear feet of manuscripts and archives, and 90,000 media elements. He was editor of The Downtown Book: The New York Art Scene, 1974-1984 (Princeton University Press, 2006), and co-curator of the exhibition The Downtown Show: The New York Art Scene, 1974-1984. With Marion Nestle, Taylor founded the Marion Nestle Food Studies Collection in 2003. Today, the collection contains more than 55,000 cookbooks, as well as archives and ephemera. With Clark Wolf, Taylor edited 101 Classic Cookbooks, 501 Classic Recipes (Rizzoli, 2012). In 2013, Taylor was promoted to full curator, the only librarian to be promoted to this rank in the history of NYU. He continues to do research in Victorian studies, experimental writing, English and American masculinities, downtown culture, contemporary art and queer studies.

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.