

On maintaining a personal archive



Artist and researcher Akeema-Zane discusses keeping track of your working history, being okay with saying no, and letting solitude and collaboration feed one another.

July 12, 2022 -

As told to Ann-Derrick Gaillot, 2653 words.

Tags: [Art](#), [Research](#), [Process](#), [Beginnings](#), [Time management](#), [Identity](#).

You work in so many different disciplines. How, and when, do you know what form an idea is gonna take?

I feel like what happens is I work in whatever is readily available to me, and that switches depending on what's going on in my life. An example I can think of about this is in 2020, I had a lot of time. I had my mornings, I had evenings to figure things out and make in a way that was way more flexible. I didn't have any deadlines. So I was making music; I had that kind of creative space.

Lately, I haven't had that much creative space and flexibility, but the way that I've been incorporating music is through DJing, which feels a little more accessible to me than composing. At some point, I made a commitment to myself to aim toward film because I felt like it would give me an opportunity to bring so many of the mediums that I work in into one form. I'm doing that now, but in a very haphazard way through a fellowship that I'm doing at UnionDocs.

Some of it is very chaotic. I can say that writing has been harder to reach. I think I would need, at this time in my life, a little more quiet in order for me to be able to write in a way that I would love to get back to. So music, and particularly DJing and building a filmic practice, have been more accessible for me these days.

How do you balance your creative practice with the basic things you have to do to survive, especially in a place like New York City?

It's a bit of a juggle to be honest. Sometimes I want to say no to a thing, and then I end up saying yes. A little window of time opens up. If I had an agent or someone guiding me in that way, I feel like they would be like, "Akeema, what? You're doing the most without securing all of the resources needed to do the most." But it still feels like there's way more to be done. I'm building some kind of muscle in being able to do as many things as I can, because so many of the things that I am doing are in collaboration with people that I respect and admire and am already in conversation with.

Sometimes balancing looks like not getting enough sleep and sleeping on my couch to wake up and be able to do meetings, do admin. I'm getting better with the admin; that's definitely been an area of growth that's been needed. But it's hard. The long and short of it is that it's hard. I think I'm planting the seed so that I can be able to have better reward on the back end, so that I can grow more flexibility and space to do things in a way that makes more sense.

It's not one of the sexier parts of being an artist, but what advice would you give someone just starting out when it comes to the admin and organization side of being an independent artist?

It's never too early to be saving and organizing your work in ways that make it easy to access for you as you're matriculating in your career and in the work that you do. It'll make the process a little more seamless as far as admin is concerned, because so much of the work of being an artist is just being able to track your own work. And in doing so you see how much of the work you've been doing is the work you've been doing.

I keep a folder in my drive—and it could be a bit better organized—but it's been certainly very helpful to see all of the things that I apply to. Make sure you have backup as well of the things that you're creating. I know that there are some artists that do practice throwing stuff out or burning journals or like things. But if you're not one of those people, keeping everything and maybe having seasonal cleanings is advice that I would give.

One's working history is what I've been calling it. I think it's increasingly important in a world and a culture that is not doing a very good job of retaining institutional memory. Our culture benefits from us not remembering, and so if we could do our best to at least be tracking it—I'm talking to all people, but certainly to people who are marginalized through this culture—I think it's an important practice and a radical practice to be able to have one's own working history at your disposal and within accessible reach.

Do you ever feel pressure to specialize in just one medium or practice?

I mean, I absolutely did as a young person. And I think that was the most confusing part of this journey to adulthood, that I did feel a lot of pressure to pick one thing and specialize in that. As a younger person, it was, you know, lawyer. I was being told, and I was getting a lot of feedback from my family and then in school, that my strong points were English and history and then that meant that I should go into a particular practice.

I believed that for a while, and then there would be moments when I would refute that, too. I remember in my eighth grade graduation yearbook, it lists out all of the things that I said that I wanted to be. I listed out all of those things because I think I refused to choose one. I was just like, *I'm gonna be all of it*. So then later, coming across the text, probably set me to be affirmed in where I am now, which is way less pressure to feel like I need to specialize in one thing and more necessity even to be all of the things that I could be and can be.

What environment do you need to create?

I've created in so many different conditions, you know? To think about an ideal situation in which I would wanna work is an environment where I feel like I can have like the least amount of disruption possible in the process of work making. That's probably why I live in Washington Heights versus in Brooklyn, even though there are other things the prospect of living in a place like Brooklyn could offer me.

I think what I've found is that I need to have a little more distance from the center of where so many things are happening. In the course of my New York upbringing, Brooklyn has become a hub of a creative market in the city. And I'm very mutable as a person, personality, et cetera. So for me to be my most authentic self, I need that space and the option to be able to go to Brooklyn or to go to other places where I can be in collaboration and be in conversation with others. So that's one thing that I found that I might need, but I recognize too that that need is also changing bound up with other contexts. Now that I'm juggling more, I have been wondering what new conditions could I also be open to to produce the kind of work that now I'm interested in growing and making.

In your performance soundscape rituals writing sound you mention needing time and space to create in a kind of solitude. At the same time, you collaborate and work in community with so many people. How does working in solitude and collaboration feed each other in your creative practice?

Several years ago, in a meeting for a collaborative endeavor that Simone Yvette Leigh had initiated at the New Museum, the Black Woman Artists for Black Lives Matter, she invited Lorraine O'Grady to come and speak to the group. And one of the things she said that I took away with me was, *The best collaborator has their own business*

to mind. I was like, *Oh, that's it, you know?*

To expound upon that idea, we live in a culture where our communication technology has increased in so much speed. What I see coupled with that is basically that the pace of production has increased so much in terms of the production that then is marketed. Maybe this was always the case, but I'm wondering if that has also made way for a kind of rapid exchange between makers. What has been evident to me is that work that is made without a deeper engagement of persons that are making work together I don't find interesting. There was another person who I met a while ago, Brother D, who broke down the definitions of community and self, and shared that the self is an extension of the community and vice versa. The community's an extension of the self. I think both that and Lorraine's wisdoms gave me the space to feel like, *Okay, I can hold both the poles.*

And living alone has offered me the space to be able to show up in the various communities of which I belong in the ways that I have. I think in order to feel collaboration that is transformative and that is able to have the poignancy and potency to withstand time too necessitates a relationship to oneself that is self aware, that does know what it wants, that is in a practice of care, too, with one self, that you could then show up to others with a kind of openness available to go on a journey with another person. That is what collaboration is to me, it's offering oneself up to experiencing a journey with others.

Leading up to this conversation and knowing that community was going to be one of the threads, I started thinking about how challenged we are, and have been in the past couple of years given the pandemic, to maintain community and how challenged I've been too in maintaining some of the relationship dynamics where there have been strains. And I suppose I maybe just wanted to name that and encourage some more contemplation about that.

Even going to see Alice Childress' play last night, *Wedding Band*, staged, one of the lines that stayed with me was, "War makes people mean." I'm curious to both will myself to, and learn about more ways and more tools that we can enable ourselves with in order to be able to be okay at the end of this. I mean, not that there'll be a halting end, but maybe there'll be some respite.

What about the role residencies and fellowships play in your practice? Is finding and protecting space and time part of that?

In some instances it has, and then in some instances it has been quite cumbersome. I think where I found the most, for lack of a better word, success is in residencies and or fellowships that do allow me to not be in New York, that have an aspect of being away and being able to immerse in another environment for some time to be able to gain a different kind of clarity.

It has been important. I don't know that I've made it my business to, and as far as admin is concerned, I'm still not acclimated to any of the grant cycle calendars or any of that. That is not where I'm at, but I've had really amazing opportunities in residency, in Grenada, for instance, in Wilmington where I'll be teaching in the summer. Those are two of the most transformative experiences that I've had being in residence.

Sometimes, especially in a place like New York, it can be hard to be able to celebrate in the progression of one's work because you're always really fighting to maintain your stead. And then there's so many people here doing some of the same things that you're doing or who have more visibility. It's just a really competitive market. And so getting out of here is really helpful to retain or maintain, sustain a sense of greater context for what it is that you've done, what it is that you've achieved, what it is that these skills that you have can impact other people who just may not have the similar access. Access, in some cases, might just be configuration of space and time. New York is such a specific place in terms of how we get to be able to be in community, versus a place like Grenada. Grenada's a very special place, and it's also a place that doesn't have a train system or as many people. Those become more evident being outside of here for me.

You've done so much research in archives for all the different work you do, writing filmmaking, composing, and music. Do you ever picture your archive in the future? Do you have any dreams or visions for your archive?

I do. I think I do. Having had the privilege of doing archival research and then viewing exhibitions like

Lorraine O'Grady's, I feel like I can very well imagine what something like that could look like for me in the future. I don't fixate on it though, which is great because I feel like it produces a different kind of awareness that I don't really need. I don't find it productive or regenerative for me.

As an archival researcher, what was beautiful about my experience doing research at the Schomburg [Center for Research in Black Culture] was seeing people's archives who weren't celebrities or well-known people, seeing archives of people who just had collected a bunch of material over the course of their lives and were like, or a family member once they pass was like, There's so much stuff here. This must be important, let me donate this.

It was those sort of archives that helped me to broaden the scope of what the role of keeping all of these things could potentially have. I mean, it excites me to think about all of the information that I am trying to care for so that it could have usefulness or extend to people beyond feels like a really important practice.

I'm trying to do my best to make sure that I can keep so much of it, especially in a digital era. I've already lost a lot of material. I was in Wilmington, North Carolina in 2018 doing a VR residency, but while I was there my computer was stolen. It was a psycho-spiritual event for me, because I was researching a group of people known as the Earth People in Trinidad who were very critical of the technological boom that was happening in the Caribbean at the time. And they took to the hills in protest and also in survival to live off the earth. And then I go to Wilmington, North Carolina, and my computer gets stolen while trying to do this work in VR. I was like, *Oh, Okay. I got it.* So there are different challenges I'm being met with to preserve some of this material. I don't think all of it will be preserved, but I'm definitely doing my best for my own self to be able to use my own archive for the production of work to come.

Akeema-Zane Recommends:

Go see the play *Wedding Band* by Alice Childress directed by Awoye Timp at [TFANA](#)

Donate to MWR Collection's [ifundwomen campaign](#)

Donate to Alfreda's Cinema [gofundme campaign](#)

Buy a candle for your wishes at Trae Harris' [shop](#)

Book an [Herbal Consultation](#) with Jess Turner

Name

Akeema-Zane

Vocation

artist and researcher

□