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ARTICLES

The Getty Acquires the Archive of LACE, a Grassroots Alternative Art Space in Los Angeles

The Getty's acquisition tells the story of how a once-scrappy alternative art space withstood decades of economic and cultural change and survived through the present.

Abe Ahn March 26, 2018



Installation view of *The Archival Impulse: 40 Years at LACE*, Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (LACE) (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic)

LOS ANGELES — Any art history book about Los Angeles artists since the 1970s would be remiss if it did not mention Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (LACE), the nonprofit arts space that was once a center of the early downtown arts scene and now a mainstay of emerging local and international artists. In 40 years, LACE grew from a small community access gallery to a significant institution involving thousands of artists, art workers, and activists.

In March, the Getty Research Institute (GRI) announced that it was acquiring LACE's archive, adding four decades of exhibition and program materials to its collection. The Getty's acquisition, along with an exhibition at LACE, provides an opportunity to piece together the story of how a once-scrappy alternative art space withstood decades of economic and cultural change and survived through the present.

“So many artists have passed



Installation view, *The Archival Impulse: 40 Years at LACE*

through LACE, often at formative moments in their careers,” Glenn Phillips, head of modern and contemporary collections at the Getty, told Hyperallergic. “You can think of it as taking a core sample of LA art and seeing what people were doing. You get this amazing glimpse into what LA was, with good records of what happened, like video and performance in the ’80s and ’90s. You can trace so much of LA history by what was happening at LACE.”

Founded in 1976 by a group of artists, LACE established itself on Broadway in Downtown LA’s bridal shop district before moving to Industrial Avenue in 1986. The 13 founding artists included sculptor Nancy Youdelman, alumna of Judy Chicago’s

Feminist Art Program, and Harry Gamboa, Jr. and Gronk, members of the Chicano artist collective Asco. LACE moved to its current space on Hollywood Boulevard, just steps away from the Hollywood Walk of Fame, in 1994. Throughout its history, the space fostered a diversity of art forms (especially video and performance) and artist backgrounds, representing substantial numbers of women, queer artists, and artists of color.



Slides from the LACE archive

The roughly 450 linear feet of material acquired by the Getty, comprised of photographs, letters, collateral, video tape, and other records, is the result of decades of informal and formal efforts by LACE staff members, interns, and volunteers to preserve the space's history. To put the size of the

archive in perspective, the artist Allan Kaprow's archive at the Getty — an example of a typically large archive — is about 300 linear feet.

“There was always a sense that LACE should organize the materials to a certain degree before they were handed over to the Getty,” Sarah Russin, executive director at LACE, told Hyperallergic. “And that’s a big job. Right now we have four staff members and lots of interns, but we couldn’t really organize the materials much more with the resources that we had and just had to accept that they were organized enough to hand them over to the Getty, who are professional archivists. We wanted to make sure these materials are really preserved for researchers for the future.”

Matias Viegner, an artist and critic who has been part of LACE's history for almost 30 years, got a chance to dig through the archive, which until recently was housed in LACE's attic, and curate a small sampling of materials for his exhibition, *The*



Fundraising materials over LACE's history

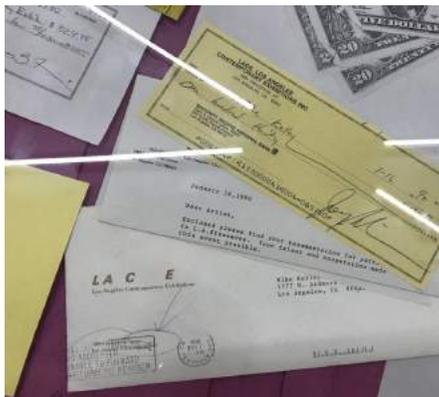
Archival Impulse: 40 Years at LACE.

The exhibition, currently on display, gives a sense of the breadth and scope of the archive, with a number of surprising objects that tell the organization's story.

“A large chunk of the archive is in the category of financial realism,” Viegner told Hyperallergic. “How does an artist-run space like this actually survive financially? I was pulling budgets and pay cards, looking at what artists were getting paid. Another part of this is all the benefits, fundraisers, and membership drives that were brilliantly created. There was just

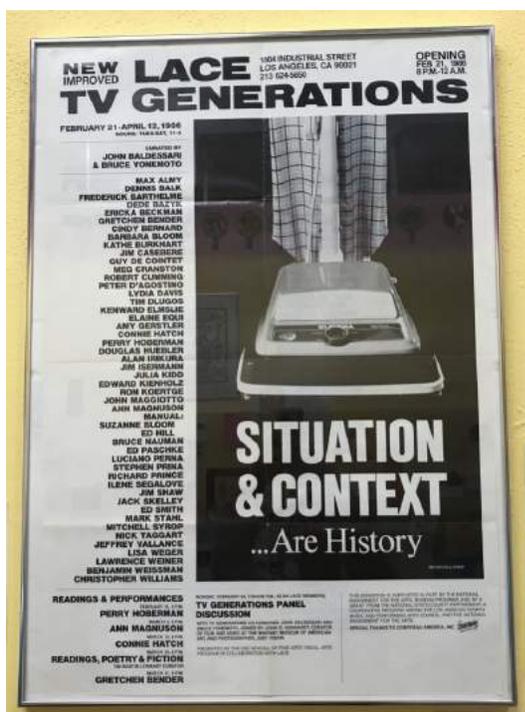
as much formal innovation and invention going on in appeals for money as in the artwork.”

Flyers, pamphlets, invitations, and calendars make up a large part of the archive, and reflect the vision of the many artists and designers who were part of LACE, like a series of printed materials from the '90s created by graphic designer Jeff Keedy. Old invoices, grant applications, and fundraising appeal letters also provide snapshots into the organization's financial history and the relationships between people that helped sustain the organization over time. A \$150 check — a small amount even in 1990 — made out to the artist Mike Kelley and later returned in the mail may amuse some visitors given his later status as a blue-chip artist.



A check to the artist Mike Kelley that was returned by mail

“I’d say about half the requests from researchers were about Mike Kelley,” Russin said about people’s past interest in LACE’s archive. “The obsession with Mike Kelley continues, and so if they’re doing anything on Mike Kelley, they would end up here for source materials, since he was very associated with LACE in his early days.”



Poster for TV Generations, LACE (1986)

A walkthrough of *The Archival Impulse* reveals other major figures and historical moments that passed through LACE, like

the *TV Generations* exhibition, curated by John Baldessari and Bruce Yonemoto in 1986, and *Against Nature*, a 1988 group show curated by Dennis Cooper and Richard Hawkins in response to the AIDS crisis. A brochure from a 1989 retrospective show for Ana Mendieta possibly marks the last time the late artist had a solo exhibition in Los Angeles.

Another show from the '80s, an exhibition of posters from liberation struggles around the world, further point to LACE's engagement with local and global politics.

“There was a lot of work that focused on LA, Hollywood, and Downtown that examined them in very different and sophisticated ways,” Viegner said about LACE's historical engagement with its place in the city. “In some instances, critical and academic, and in others, with a very strong activist impulse. This vantage point included some of the most powerful stuff I found — genuine interrogations of gentrification, the movement of ethnic groups in LA, and the crisis of the US-Mexico border.”

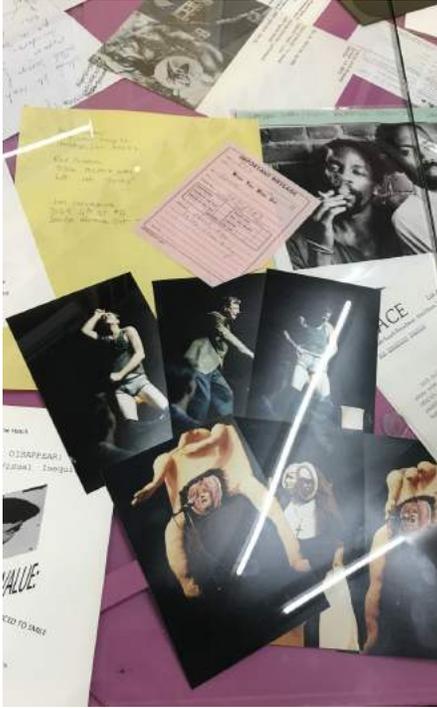


Posters of Liberation Struggles, LACE (1983)

While accounting for less than 1% of the complete LACE archive, *The Archival Impulse* reflects the diversity of forms and artists that the organization has championed for 40 years. The organization’s longevity and continuing support of emerging artists in the city may even serve as a helpful blueprint for other alternative spaces to follow.

“There’s probably more than you can take in, and that was a choice,” Viegner said. “I’ve seen archival shows where they single

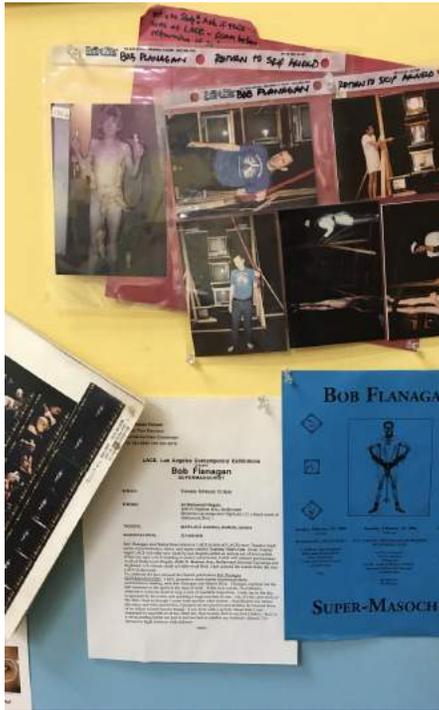
out really specific things. My approach was more accumulative. It's a bit of a treasure hunt.”



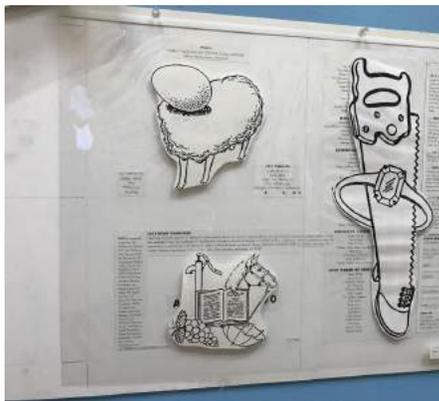
Installation view, *The Archival Impulse: 40 Years at LACE*

[The Archival Impulse: 40 Years at LACE continues at LACE \(6522 Hollywood Boulevard, Los Angeles\) through December 31.](#)

Correction: *A previous version of this article stated that a photo of a marching band had no clear provenance or purpose. The provenance has since been clarified and the observation removed.*



Selection of artist Bob Flanagan's work at LACE



Membership pamphlet (photocopy master)



Photograph of marching band in front of LACE's old Industrial Avenue location in Downtown LA