

ALVIN BALDROP

Queer Photography as a ‘Counter Practice’ in the Archive

Leslie Wooden

ABSTRACT

Alvin Alvin Baltrop (1948–2004), a queer African-American male, was a Bronx-born photographer who persistently documented men, women, and trans people on New York City’s Hudson River piers from 1975 through 1986. This essay considers Baltrop in the category of contemporary post-black queer artists. I examine the importance of Baltrop’s works through the archival concepts of value, representation, and provenance. I argue that Baltrop’s artistic practice is what scholar Brent Hayes Edwards recounts as a black practice of the archive, or, a counter-practice, formed by a desire to contend the particular way that the art world portrayed queer histories in the late-twentieth century.

ABSTRAKTI

Bronxissa syntynyt afroamerikkalainen queer-mies Alvin Baltrop (1948–2004) oli valokuvaaja, joka määrätietoisesti kuvasi miehiä, naisia ja transihmisiä New Yorkin Hudson-joen rantamilla vuosien 1975–1986 aikana. Rinnastan Baltropin nykypäivän ”post-black”-taiteilijoihin ja tutkin hänen työnsä merkitystä arkistotutkimuksesta tuttujen arvon, representaation ja provenienssin käsitteiden kautta. Baltropin taiteellista toimintaa voi kuvata tutkija Brent Hayes Edwardsin sanoin arkiston ”mustaksi” käytännöksi tai vastakäytännöksi, joka pohjaa haluun haastaa se tapa, jolla taidemaailma kuvasi queer-historiaa 1900-luvun loppupuolella.

Introduction

In the late 1990’s, the term ‘post-black’ was coined by curator Thelma Golden and multi-media artist Glenn Ligon “[to name] a new generation of African-American artists, who [...] were adamant about not being labeled as “black” artists, though their work was [...] deeply interested in redefining complex notions of blackness” (Copeland 2010, 78). In the early 1970’s, prior to artists such as photographer Lyle Ashton Harris, documentarian Marlon Riggs, and multi-media artists Glenn Ligon, and Iké Udé – who explored themes related to gender and sexual discrimination in the 1980’s and 1990’s – Alvin Baltrop’s work was informed by sexual politics (Murray 2016, 26).

As a queer African-American male photographer, Baltrop persistently documented men, women, and trans people, on New York City’s piers located on the Hudson River from 1975 through 1986 (Crimp 2008). Inspired by personal experiences and the surrounding unstable social and political climate, he contested demeaning and objectifying representations of homosexuality, and amended the erasure of queer people of color in late twentieth-century visual art.

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Baltrop's work was dismissed by galleries and museums for decades. Scholar Brent Hayes Edwards explains, "the archive, as an institution and as a 'social construct,' seems to enact a foundational violence: the constitutive definition of blackness in terms of dispossession" (Edwards 2019, 1). His obscure trajectory exposes the prevalent obstacles, such as inadequate exposure, representation, and funding, that many African-American artists face in the art industry (Crimp 2008). Even so, Baltrop countered the absence of people of color in contemporary art by meticulously recording, cataloging, and protecting images that now permeate the art historical canon.

Accordingly, this essay examines Baltrop's works that portray diversity, pleasure, sexual and artistic experimentation, and destruction in Manhattan's queer community in the 1970's and 1980's. Drawing upon 'post-blackness,' I consider Baltrop in the discussion around contemporary artists such as Glenn Ligon, Kehinde Wiley, Mickalene Thomas, and Kalup Linzy, whom art historian Derek Conrad Murray examines as post-black queers (Murray 2016, 14, 29). Examining the importance of Baltrop's works through the archival concepts of value, representation, and provenance, I align his artistic practice with other well-known photographers who also documented Manhattan's underground gay scene in the late-twentieth century.

Lower West Side Waterfront

Alvin Baltrop was born in the Bronx, New York in 1948. Yashica twin-lens reflex camera in hand, Baltrop started photography as a teenager and continued while serving in the Vietnam War as a Navy sailor and medic from 1969 through 1972. He studied at the School of Visual Arts New York City in Manhattan, New York from 1972 through 1975, following an honorable discharge from the Navy. As a student, Baltrop began shooting

sunbathers, creatives, voyeurs, illegal drug users, and sex workers who frequented the abandoned warehouses located on the Lower West Side piers. He worked temporarily as a cab driver and eventually a self-employed mover for the financial support and a flexible schedule that permitted more time at the piers north of Christopher Street (Oliver 2013, 67; Crimp 2008). Baltrop may have been drawn to the waterfront by his experiences as a Navy serviceman documenting the daily routines of sailors at sea. In the preface to an unfinished collection, the artist wrote:

Although initially terrified of the piers I began to take these photographs as a voyeur [and] soon grew determined to preserve the frightening, mad, unbelievable, violent and beautiful things that were going on at that time. To get certain shots, I hung from the ceilings of several warehouses utilizing a makeshift harness, watching and waiting for hours to record the lives that these people led (friends, acquaintances, and strangers) and the unfortunate ends that they sometimes met. [...] The rapid emergence and expansion of [AIDS] in the 1980s further reduced the number of people going to and living at the piers, and the sporadic joys that could be found there. (Crimp 2008.)

Baltrop captured exceptional and audacious images of Manhattan's unpredictable gay sub-culture in the 1970's and 1980's. Determined to preserve ephemeral happenings on the piers, the photographer practiced as a spectator who carefully observed transient occupiers and commonly avoided self-portraiture, with the exception of works such as *Untitled* (1966–1967), which portrays Baltrop in the nude and in a private domestic space, posing from behind with a towel hung from one shoulder (Oliver 2013, 67). Other queer artists such as David Wojnarowicz, Peter Hujar, Rotimi Fani-Kayode, Robert Mapplethorpe, Nan Goldin, Lenard Fink, and Miron Zownir also documented the underground gay scene from the 1970's through the 1990's – some who were also personally affected

by the AIDS epidemic that surfaced in 1981. Baltrop's photographs are compelling because they communicate particular stories about queer people, especially those that precede the epidemic.

The desolate Lower West Side waterfront emerged as a territory for gay cruising following an economic decline in the mid-1950's and changes in transportation, the labor force, and migration in the 1960's (Anderson 2019, 1–2). This new playground provided spaces for anonymous sexual exchanges that were also targeted with violence and homophobic attacks (Anderson 2019, 3). Baltrop explained, “[t]he casual sex and nonchalant narcotizing, the creation of artwork and music, sunbathing, dancing, merrymaking, and the like habitually gave way to muggings, callous yet detached violence, rape, suicide, and, in some instances, murder” (Crimp 2008). Although many gay venues in or nearby Greenwich Village provided some protection for homosexual and transgender groups from authorities, these venues were also discriminatory as they restricted entry to specific groups based on skin color and gender (Anderson 2019, 24). Policing same-sex cruising in public subway stations, bathrooms, and parks, and the repeated raids of venues by authorities relocated cruising to the waterfront in the 1970's (Anderson 2019, 2–3). Consequently, the waterfront became a complicated place of opportunity, pleasure, vulnerability, and threat that attracted regular people and creatives alike (Anderson 2019, 3–4).

In contrast to Polish-American artist David Wojnarowicz, whose liberated experiences on the piers from the late 1970's through the early 1990's inspired works like *Arthur Rimbaud in New York* (1978–1979) (Carr 2012, 131), Baltrop's experiences as a Black gay male influenced a practice that was sometimes restricting and onerous (Oliver 2013, 66; Bessa 2020, 55). The

photographer covertly zoomed in on other people, indicating the fashion in which some groups, especially people of color and women, cautiously roamed the waterfront because they were not equally uninhibited in gay spaces, either public or private.

Architectural destruction is the subject and backdrop in many photographs taken by Baltrop and American photographer Peter Hujar. In *Pier 52 (four people sunbathing near Gordon Matta-Clark's Days End)* (1975–1986) Baltrop captures four African-American and White or Latinx men partially nude and sunbathing on a wooden shipping dock with the Hudson River below. [Fig. 1.] Because the intimate scene is photographed from a



Fig. 1. Alvin Baltrop: *Pier 52 (four people sunbathing near Gordon Matta-Clark's Days End)*, 1975–1986. Photo Credit: Courtesy Alvin Baltrop Trust, Galerie Bucholz, and Third Streaming LLC.

distance, the men are relatively miniature, and the abandoned warehouse in the background surrounds the men like a protective wall. The small figures among architectural disarray are described by art curator Antonio Sergio Bessa as Baltrop's "trademark compositional style" (Bessa 2020, 55). Previously operated for the purpose of industrial labor, the structure resembles an enclave or exclusive resort. Both artists discovered beauty in the disintegration. In many works by Hujar like *Pier - Four Doors* (1981), the queer body is absent. Baltrop's images of interior and exterior spaces, however, broadly combine the ruin with people whose lives and pleasure are grounded in this world. As explained by art historian Joan Kee:

defiance of property norms resulted in the production of spaces that a vilified queer community used in nonnormative and nonpejorative ways. As chronicled so eloquently by the photographer Alvin Baltrop, the pier looks less like a forbidden no-man's-land and more like a domestic space (Kee 2019, 118).

An opposition to normative spaces that allowed gay men to congregate freely, Baltrop's *The Piers (River Rats III)* (1972–1975) captures two African-American men posed in the nude and sitting in a composed manner on stacked wood, with one man wearing reading glasses and colored socks. [Fig. 2.] Glaring sunlight is apparent by the posterior shadows on their bodies, and in their squinting eyes as they stare into the distance. Because the men are sitting in close proximity, unclothed, and "cool," with their vision compromised by the sun, the scene was perhaps staged by the artist. It's not possible to know if the men are conscious of the camera or passersby. Either way, this composition transforms the public space into a private one.

Contrary to American photographer Robert Mapplethorpe's controversial work *Black Book* (1986) that published exploitative images of Black men, and on a par with *Untitled (Techniques of Ecstasy)* (1986–87) by

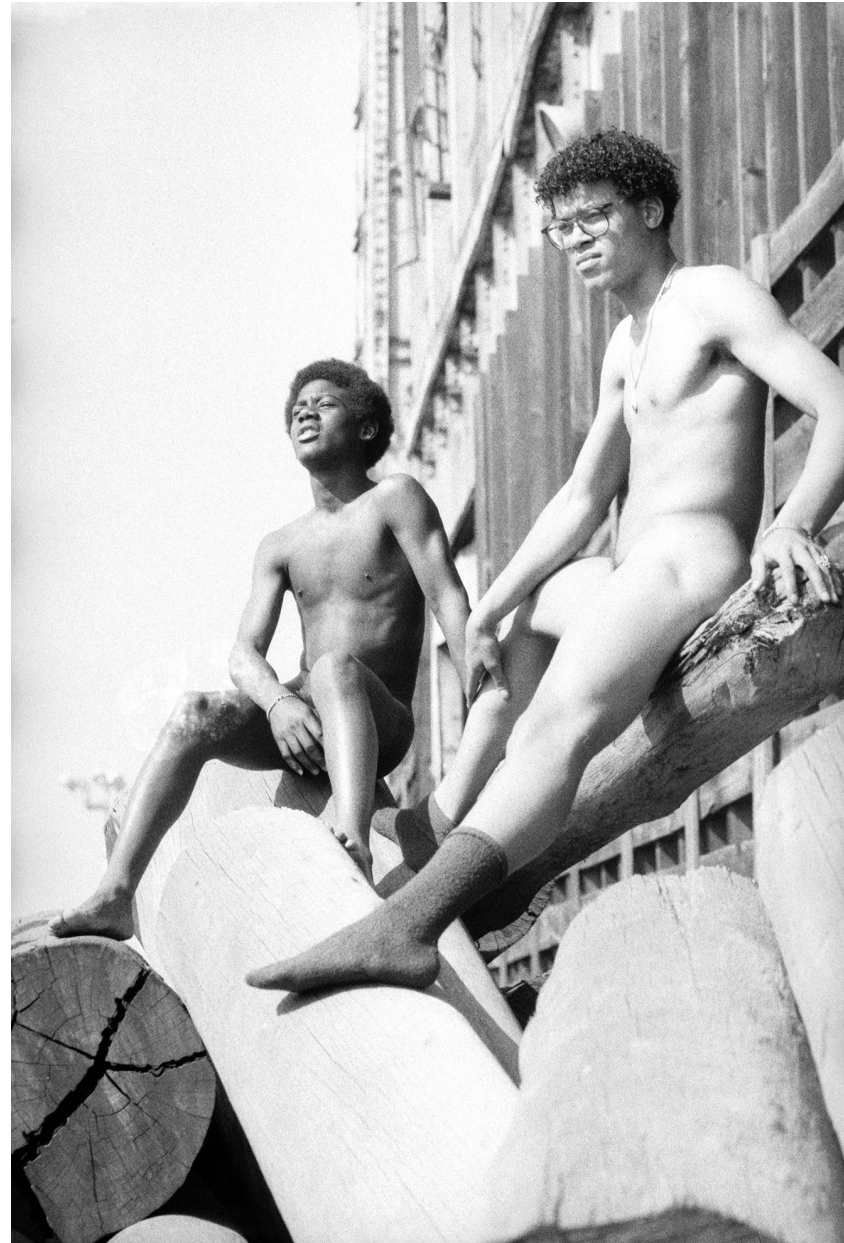


Fig 2. Alvin Baltrop: *The Piers (River Rats III)*, 1972–1975. Photo Credit: Courtesy Alvin Baltrop Trust, Galerie Bucholz, and Third Streaming LLC.

Nigerian-British photographer Rotimi Fani-Kayode or *Femme Piquee par un Serpent* (2008) by American painter Kehinde Wiley, Baltrop's works depict Black men as desired subjects as opposed to objects of ethnographic study (Bourland 2019, 4; Enwezor 2009, 218; Murray 2016, 108). They encourage the viewer to discover "a voyeuristic pleasure in its spectacle and to contemplate the intimacy and eroticism of black masculinity" (Murray 2016, 109).

Archiving the Black Practice or the 'Counter Archive' as Value

How do the concepts of value, provenance, and representation used in archival studies work when taking into account Baltrop's presence within 'the archive'? Scholar Michelle Caswell explains, "like 'evidence,' 'value' exists for someone in a particular place at a particular time" (Caswell 2016, 7). Archivists determine value by appraising collections based on their evaluations, selected according to their abiding value proposed to a repository. Not accessed monetarily, but by their relationship to history, and contribution to current and the future generations (Caswell 2016, 7).

Archives are socially constructed spaces of power that include the stories of some and exclude the stories of others (Schwartz and Cook 2002, 3; Carter 2006, 216). Accordingly, archivists have the power to select materials based on personal discretion, constructing historical and social memory (Caswell 2016, 7; Cook 2006, 170). Materials created or collected by Black queer people have been doubly devalued in archival appraisal because their identity resides in a racial and sexual intersection that traditional archival practice has not valued, or has found threatening, and thus not kept.

Baltrop's personal experience with rejection impelled an unconventional practice or "black practice of the archive" (Oliver 2013, 66; Edwards 2019, 1). Scholar Brent Hayes Edwards explains:

It should be apparent that such a black practice of the archive must be understood as necessarily a sort of *counter-practice* [...]. To call it *counter* is to say that it is shaped by an ambition to contest the particular way that the archive constructs and authorizes knowledge about the past (Edwards 2019, 2, 4).¹

Like Edwards, I am not using the term counter-practice to consider Baltrop's archive contrary to, or a substitute for, the canonic archive. Rather, I am using the term counter to describe Baltrop's archive, which is embedded in blackness and entangled in intersectionality and queerness, and was created with an equivalent objective to "authoritative documentation, classification, and preservation" (Edwards 2019, 3–4).

Following a cancer diagnosis in the late 1990's, Baltrop worked on a publication of his photographs (Crimp 2008). This practice was executed with the intention to redress the art worlds' exclusionary methods, in particular, the way contemporary images of Black queer bodies photographed by African-American artists were rarely collected and exhibited in the late twentieth-century. Today, Baltrop's archive reinforces Black queer histories, and accounts for Black queer representations as they circulate in the contemporary art world now, and in the future (Edwards 2019, 2).

Archiving Queer Black Representation

In the late 1970's, Baltrop sought to exhibit alternative representations of blackness in galleries around the city, yet his photographs received little interest from galleries, even those that exhibited homoerotic art, and were rarely shown to the public. In 1977, the Glines (a non-profit organization

¹ Emphasis in original.

that supported gay-themed art) was one of the only art spaces that agreed to show Baltrop's work in a solo exhibition (Crimp 2008). Murray also explains:

post-black is not about post-racialism. It is on the contrary a term that signifies a desire to question constructions of African-American identity that negate forms of difference, particularly the subjectivities of women and those who are queerly identified. For many in the African-American community, the visual and ideological emblems of normative blackness have not spoken to the complexities of their experience. (Murray 2016, 2–3).

Through the concept of representation, the subjects of collections are described by archivists, producing descriptive points of entry, stored in collections for researchers. However, a researchers' accessibility to collections is dependent on the accuracy of those points that support the material's subjects or 'aboutness,' in which archivists maintain physical and intellectual authority (Caswell 2016, 8). Archival description is inherently subjective, so researchers may access collections that may not be described correctly (Jimerson 2007, 278; Caswell 2016, 8). Because the vernacular associated with lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning (LGBTQ) communities is constantly evolving, a continuous collaborative process between archivists and the public, or community members which these collections describe, is required to ensure proper interpretation (Caswell 2016, 9).

Oftentimes, same-sex or sexually ambiguous materials are omitted, selectively disclosed or exhibited to the public, or obscured because they are problematic for some archivists to comprehend. However, an intentional approach to preserving material that is indefinable is described by Edwards as a "queer practice of the archive" (Edwards 2012, 970). I argue that Baltrop's practice was also queer. Not because he was a queer

artist, or observed or participated in same-gender sexual behavior, but because he recorded, catalogued, and protected images of people in peculiar places and in circumstances that are not easily interpreted, explained, or categorized (Edwards 2012, 970).

In the decade following an *Artforum* article about Baltrop's life and work published by art historian and critic Douglas Crimp in 2008, a number of galleries and museums featured the photographer's work in temporary exhibitions (Bronx Museum of the Arts, n.d.). Now recognized in the international art world, Baltrop's photographic images are housed in private and permanent collections and reproduced in several publications.

Archiving Ethnicity as a Form of Provenance

Through the concept of provenance, archivists search for the source, origin, and/or possession of an item or collection (Caswell 2016, 5–6). Scholars such as Joel Wurl, have suggested community-based structures like 'ethnicity' as a form of provenance, to preclude erroneous and destructive presumptions about ethnic identities and community experiences (Caswell 2016, 6; Wurl 2005, 69). As Baltrop's archive becomes more dispersed throughout repositories for international audiences, grounding ethnicity as provenance would situate it as a starting point for researchers interpreting his work, considered beyond a mere "theme" for categorization Wurl 2005, 69).

Many collections are distorted to compose particular ideologies that ignore existences and histories outside the boundaries of whiteness and masculinity (Caswell 2016, 9; Brown 2020, 30). While the growing attention on Baltrop's work is commendable, many art scholars, critics, and curators have not decoded the cultural language rooted his work. When archivists leave out the "ethnic dimension" of subjects in the 'aboutness'

of collections, researchers are incapable of accessing those collections for valuable information regarding specific communities, which in turn, marginalizes their existences in history (Caswell 2016, 8; Wurl 2005, 69).

Conclusion

Baltrop's gritty, provocative, and appealing images of people participating in explicit sexual content, relaxing, sunbathing, and reading, among other things represent the gender, sexual, racial/ethnic, and socioeconomic diversity of the piers' sub-cultures in the 1970's and 1980's. His practice succeeded an ethnographic shift in contemporary art since the early 1960's (Foster 1996, 172, 184). Yearning to understand the existences of queer people through photographs that "resemble the material collected by an anthropologist rather than objects of fetish," by compulsively observing the piers as a form of site-specific art; where conditions like desire, addiction, AIDS, prostitution, leisure, violence, and poverty, and pleasure laid out sites for art (Bessa 2020, 56; Foster 1996, 184–185).

Throughout this essay, I have considered the archival concepts of value, representation, and provenance to examine Baltrop's archive within the nuances of post-blackness. Baltrop's experiences as a queer African-American male photographer prompted an artistic originality that exposed the beautiful and ugly realities of the piers. Creating not merely queer photography, but photography that commanded the viewer to closely consider the dismantlement of normative African-American identity (Murray 2016, 9).

Like 'the archive,' blackness is composed of many assemblages and narratives (Edwards 2019, 4). Baltrop sought to "escape the limitations imposed by race" (Murray 2016, 25). Moreover, his existence as "the artist and the other" allowed for unrestricted access to the Black queer

community (Foster 1996, 173). Consciously documenting their existences to capture them beautifully, even amongst the debris, to challenge gender and sexual stereotypes – which distinguishes Baltrop from other queer artists in the 1970's and 1980's.

Baltrop's career lays bare the biases in art history and archival science. The now grainy images in his archive demonstrate today's technological advances, yet, are also reminders that social stigma and discrimination continues to be experienced by queer people and people of color. Baltrop's archive continues for the purpose of inclusion and visibility, for people who are misrepresented, ignored, forgotten, and silenced (Opotow and Belmonte 2016, 447). Fundamentally, Baltrop created a Black queered visual chronicle of personal experiences and memories, and a message for equality that if given the opportunity early on, and without prejudice—could have been valued and communicated to the world during his lifetime.

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