

Finding Aid to Boy with Arms Akimbo/Girl with Arms Akimbo Records

(#1996-41)

Repository: Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Historical Society

Collection Title: Boy with Arms Akimbo/Girl with Arms Akimbo

Collection Number: 1996-41

Physical Description: 6.5 linear feet (two cartons and three oversize boxes)

Creator: Boy with Arms Akimbo/Girl with Arms Akimbo

Date (inclusive): 1989-2010, bulk 1989-1996

Language of Material: English

Abstract: Boy with Arms Akimbo/Girl with Arms Akimbo was an anonymous, San Francisco based cultural activism collective that started in the 1980's during the height of the AIDS epidemic. There was no formal leadership or spokesperson for the group, as the focus was to remain on the message they were sending, not on any one person from the group. Also known by the shortened name Akimbo, which referred to the logo of a boy or girl standing with arms bent, they used the technological resources at their disposal to print and distribute flyers, posters, stickers and faxes to promote queer, pro-sex messages in response to attacks by anti-sex rhetoric, homophobia, and AIDS fear-mongering. With their infamous Just Sex/Sex is campaign, they juxtaposed images of safe-sex acts alongside the text 'just sex' or 'sex is.' This collection contains mementos from Akimbo's most active period, 1989-2009, with documents ranging from correspondence, to press coverage, to graphics for their most popular designs (stickers, posters, t-shirts and flyers). Some materials are restricted, which have names and/or contact information for previous group members, as they wish to remain anonymous.

Preferred Citation: [Description of item], Boy with Arms Akimbo/Girl with Arms Akimbo Records (96-41), The Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Historical Society.

Conditions Governing Access: The collection is open for research with some limitations. Materials with names of Akimbo members and/or contact information will be restricted until 11/30/2046.

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Acquisition Information: The collection was donated to the GLBT Historical Society by Boy with Arms Akimbo/Girl with Arms Akimbo in November 1996.

Processing Information: Finding Aid was created by Jamie Arrambide, a graduate student in Library and Information Sciences, who was supervised by Isaac Fellman, an archivist at the GLBT Historical Society, in 2023. Processing of this collection was part of an internship through the San Jose State MLIS program.

This finding aid uses terminology for LGBTQ people that was in current use at the time of its creation. Descriptive language for queer identities evolves quickly and some of these terms may now be dated or even offensive. Finding aids are themselves historical documents; they reflect the moment in which they were written and often reflect the terms that subjects used for themselves. Please contact the GLBT Historical Society Archivist with questions or comments.

Biographical/Organizational History Note: Boy with Arms Akimbo was an anonymous cultural activist group formed in San Francisco, CA in response to anti-AIDS rhetoric and fear-mongering in 1989. Originally, it was composed of gay men, but they quickly added members of all genders. The name came from their logo, a graphic of a boy standing with his hands on his hips. Quickly after, they added another graphic of a girl standing in the same position. Boy with Arms Akimbo and Girl with Arms Akimbo were then used interchangeably. When shortened, the group preferred the name Akimbo. The word ‘akimbo’ meaning ‘set in a bent position’ or ‘at an odd angle’ also took on the meaning ‘a stance of defiance.’ One of Akimbo’s guiding principles was that the root of problems like homophobia and sexual righteousness lies in the belief of placing a moral right or wrong in the way people have sex, and with whom.

Akimbo referred to themselves as a network of cultural activists over the term ‘artist collective’ despite the prominence of artistic expression in their activism, because while their group consisted of members from artistic backgrounds there were also many members who were not. They wanted the focus to be on the group, and not any individual member, which also corresponded to their insistence on anonymity. The names of the group members have never been made public, as they wanted their messages and critiques on society to take precedence over the people doing them. Their focus was on nonviolent tactics with an emphasis on intellectual subversion and visual intervention in the form of postering, flyers, stickers, sending faxes, art installations, distributing t-shirts, and performance.

In July 1989, conservative senator Jesse Helms attempted to ban works considered ‘obscene’ or ‘indecent’ or ‘homoerotic’ from being able to receive funds from the National Endowment for the Arts. Fortunately, this bill was rejected by the House, but it was the spark needed to create the group known as Akimbo. They launched their first campaign in September and October 1989, the infamous ‘Just Sex/Sex is’ campaign in which they posted thousands of photocopied posters around San Francisco. Another campaign, ‘Safe/Unsafe’ was a mix of different images of safely performed sexual acts juxtaposed with conservative politicians or other outspoken anti-AIDS public figures, and the text “safe’ or ‘unsafe’ over them. The idea behind it was to demonstrate the constructed nature of sexuality, and challenge viewers to deconstruct their own sexual ideologies. They wanted to speak against censorship in the arts but also self-censorship in the forms of sexual oppression and prejudice. They shared these flyers with activist organizations around the world, from Boston to Europe and Tel Aviv. A ‘Just Sex/Sex is’ poster campaign taking place at Yale at the lesbian and gay studies annual conference led to nine arrests for ‘obscene materials’ and ‘breach of peace.’ Throughout their tenure, Akimbo built many art installations, participated in protests, and was a strong presence in zines and other counterculture communications.

Scope and Content: The collection contains items from Akimbo’s activism. This ranges from written documents (such as correspondence, statements to the press, gallery texts, exhibit faxes, miscellaneous records and planning documents) to graphic design images (stickers, logos, images of protest signs, posters, flyers, and t-shirt designs), and documents relating to their various projects (art installations, poster campaigns, documentary film). There are three books, *La Culture Du Désir* by Frank Browning, *American Sexual Politics: Sex, Gender, and Race Since the Civil War* edited by John C. Fout and Maura Shaw Tantillo, and the dictionary where the Akimbo logo came from. Miscellaneous items include t-shirts, magazines with Akimbo profiles or shoutouts, tapes (both VHS and for video camera), mounted text for gallery shows, and a syringe with bleach bottle that was used for a design. There are a number of restricted files, primarily those which contain contact information, financial documents, dictacted phone messages, and correspondence- anything that has names or contact information for members is not available for public viewing until 2046. The oversized boxes contain posters and art that was part of installations and screen printing images in a frame.

Indexing Terms:

LGBTQ
Gay men
Activism
Art
AIDS (disease)
Erotica
Law enforcement
Politics and elections

Container Listing

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- 1:5 Contact info. & phone messages- media, 1989-1993, *restricted*
- 1:6 Correspondence- miscellaneous, 1989-1992, *restricted*
- 1:7 Correspondence- Boston group, 1990-1991, *restricted*
- 1:8 Correspondence- Lexier, Micah, 1987, 1990
- 1:9 Correspondence- media, 1989-1993, *restricted*
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- 1:18 Print media coverage- Bloatstick interview (unpublished), 1989
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- 1:20 T-shirt designs & silkscreens- 'Just sex/Sex is,' girl logo & definitions, undated
- 1:21 T-shirt designs & silkscreens- Night of resistance, undated
- 1:22 T-shirt designs- sketches, typesetting & paste-ups, 1989
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- 1:28 'Just Sex/Sex is' poster campaign- Yale lesbian & gay studies conference arrests, 1989, *restricted*
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- 1:33 'Stop the Church' site installation, 1989
- 1:34 'Art without Ego' site installation, 1989m *restricted*
- 1:35 'Just say Know' poster campaign/ 'Pointillism' benefit, 1990
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- 1:43 'Safe/Unsafe' poster campaign, 1990-1991
- 1:44 'Safe/Unsafe' postcards & stickers, 1990
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- 1:47 'Safe/Unsafe' James Moss Yale honors thesis, 1991
- 1:48 'Safe/Unsafe: Pete Wilson, John Seymour' - AB101 veto protest signs (9/30/1991), 1991
- 1:49 'Veto Statement' protest signs (9/30/1991), 1991
- 1:50 'Helms= Death' (unofficial Akimbo signs & stickers) 1990-1991
- 1:51 'Akimbo the Video' production notes & miscellaneous documentation, undated, *restricted*
- 1:52 'Theory & Practice' site installation- visitor commentary binder, 1990-1991
- 1:53 'What's Wrong with this Picture?' exhibit (San Francisco Arts Commission gallery, September-October 1989), 1989, *restricted*
- 1:54 'What's Wrong with this Picture?' - Akimbo gallery texts, wa;; & window cards, flyers & photos, 1989
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- 1:57 'What's Wrong with this Picture?' exhibit- Billie Grace Lynn controversy, 1989
- 1:58 'Urban Scrawl' show, 1990
- 1:59 'Urban Scrawl' show-copies of work submitted, 1990
- 1:60 'Real Ways' show- Hartford, CT, Sept. 1990, *restricted*
- 1:61 'State of Siege' exhibit- Madrid, Spain, Nov. 1990, *restricted*
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- 1:63 'In a Different Light' exhibit- Berkeley, CA, Jan.-April 1995, *restricted*
- 1:64 'Police Riot '89: Remember the Castro Sweep' exhibit, San Francisco Oct.-Nov. 1999

Books

American Sexual Politics: Sex, Gender, and Race since the Civil War edited by John C. Fout and Maura Shaw Tantillo

La Culture Désir by Frank Browning

Carton 2

- 2:1 Miscellaneous background- precedents, coincidental uses, colleague groups, etc. 1989-2009
- 2:2 The Advocate, Nov. 20, 1990
- 2:3 Miscellaneous appropriations of Akimbo name, logo & graphics, 1989-2002
- 2:4 AFTERIMAGE, April 1990
- 2:5 ARTnews, December 1990
- 2:6 Camerawork magazine, Spring 1990
- 2:7 The City magazine, 1990
- 2:8 Crimes magazine, 1990
- 2:9 Diseased Pariah News, 1992
- 2:10 Freshman magazine (Nov. 1991), Frighten the Horses (Fall 1990)
- 2:11 Fuzzbox, Fall 1991
- 2:12 The Guide (July 1990), Inches C, undated
- 2:13 Ipso Facto magazine, 1989-1990
- 2:14 Journal of the History of Sexuality, October 1990
- 2:15 Holy Titclamps (Fall 1990), Homoture (April 1990)
- 2:16 Muckraker (Fall 1993), Nambla Bulletin (October 1991)
- 2:17 NYQ (Nov. 10. 1991)
- 2:18 OurStories (Fall 1991/Winter 1992), Outwrite (March 1990)
- 2:19 Invisibilities- catalog essay, Dublin, Ireland, June 1997
- 2:20 Slides: Collateral- 'Continuity of Courage', 1989-1999
- 2:21 Slides: 'Post No Bills' & 'Safe/ Unsafe', 1990
- 2:22 Book: *Thorndike & Banhart Beginning Dictionary*- source of Akimbo logo, 1962

Tapes (for video camera)

Akimbo video 6/90

BWAA Tests 9-29-9/30

Akimbo Cafe Flore footage 12/4/90

Patrick Clifton interviewed by David Lamble Halloween 1989

Akimbo #1

9/10/89 Akimbo Oral History (commentary for gallery backgrounder)

Akimbo Video- Audio 12/1990

Akimbo Thoughts
Akimbo Thoughts (2)
P.O.C. Pixelvision video. CA. 9/1989

VHS Tape

Akimbo Master 4/24/91

T-Shirts

Sex is- 3
Akimbo logo/definition- 2
Police Riot (all I got was this bloody t-shirt)- 4
Denim-1
Scrap-1

Mounted Gallery Texts

Theory & Practice description
Visitor Comments

Miscellaneous

Kodalux slides
Syringe and bleach bottle

Oversize Box 1

Book

In a Different Light: Visual Culture, Sexual Identity, Queer Practice edited by Nayland Blake, Lawrence Riner, and Amy Scholder

VHS

Akimbo Video 12/5/1990

Magazines

Frontiers (August 31, 1990 & October 25, 1991)

11 x 17 in. Posters, prints, paste-ups & make ready materials

Safe/Unsafe
Just Sex/Sex is
Urban Scrawl
Halloqueen
Valentine's Day Slumber Party

'Post No Bills' stencil

Oversize Box 2

Just Sex/ Sex is screen printing in frame

Oversize Box 3

23 x 31 in. Posters

Protest against Pete Wilson & bill AB101

Signage for rally commemorating/protesting the anniversary of the 1989 Castro police sweep. Witnesses were invited to write down their personal experiences of the sweep and where they were when the event occurred (x9)

13 x 20 in. Prints

'What's Wrong with this Picture' exhibit print mounted on poster board (x4)

11 x 18 in. Posters

Stop the TVC

'Just Sex'

11 x 16 in. Posters

'Just Sex/ Sex is' (x14)

Poster mounted on cardboard: Origins of Akimbo

Poster protesting censorship

Materials on tracing paper, including posters (creators' description: "Helms, Bush, clit licking, jerk off") and Boy with Arms Akimbo logo