



DEVON DIKEOU: MAMA'S DON'T LET YOUR BABIES GROW UP TO BE COWBOYS

-Heather Pesanti



Born in Denver, Colorado and currently based in Austin, Texas, Devon Dikeou's practice embodies a contemporary Conceptual oeuvre, one that uses a diversity of materials, mediums, and forms in the interest of critiquing social practice and cultural systems. Living by example, she is not only an artist but a collector, curator, writer, editor, and publisher. Her artistic output includes installations, photographs, sculptures, signage, publications, curated projects, and music albums, and shares the consistent desire to explore the subjectivity of context, viewing, and audience. In the interaction of these elements, Dikeou observes and critiques the variable possibilities for viewing and creating art, and the synapses that occur between them.

Glasstire {Texas visual art}

Artpace 11.1: It's in the water

12 Apr 2011 / Dan R. Goddard / 0 Comments



Devon Dikeou's "Mamas Don't Let Your Babies Grow Up to Be Cowboys" (detail)

Austin-based Devon Dikeou, who has an MFA from New York's School of Visual Arts, encountered rooms named after American and Latin American jazz greats in a Buenos Aires hotel. She took photographs of the brass name tags, which she has transformed into a jazz wall of fame in "Mamas Don't Let Your Babies Grow Up to Be Cowboys" with the help of an octogenarian tenor saxophonist she met in New York, Sonny Simmons.

Though not really a jazz fan when she started the project, Dikeou was intrigued that these American artists were so highly regarded in Argentina. But any jazz fan who's traveled the world knows that foreigners are often better acquainted with jazz history than most Americans, partly because of broadcasts by Voice of America and State Department-sponsored tours by jazz musicians. Jazz transcends language barriers better than any other American art form.

"Some of these jazz names people will recognize; others less so," Dikeou says. "The project is partly a commentary on the curatorial process, where a curator puts different artists together and tries to match them up. By appearing with the well-known jazz musicians, the lesser-known ones may become better known."

But simple errors, such as the fact that several of the names are misspelled, raise niggling questions about curatorial authority. Dikeou also added a giant brass nameplate, probably created with Photoshop, for her friend, Simmons, a free jazz pioneer who recorded with Prince Lasha, Eric Dolphy and Elvin Jones in the 1960s. But personal problems sent his career into eclipse in the 1970s and 1980s following a move to the West Coast. After years of scuffling on the streets, he emerged in 2000 with a well-regarded trio album, "Ancient Ritual," that re-energized his career. As part of the Artpace installation, Dikeou collaborated with Simmons to produce a limited edition CD, "Sonny Simmons Quintet Performs the Music of Charlie Parker." Copies were being given away free when the exhibit opened. The last track features Simmons rapping about 56 jazz greats that he met over the years, including several whose name plates are on display and reproduced on a Wikipedia page devoted to "Mamas Don't Let Your Babies Grow Up to Be Cowboys (artwork)."

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International Artist-in-Residence, New Works: 11.1

Artpace, San Antonio

Through May 22

by Lana Shafer



Devon Dikeou
"MAMAS DON'T LET YOUR BABIES GROW UP TO BE COWBOYS"
2009 ongoing

Wall: 56 C-Prints of Name Plates Reserving Hotel Rooms in Perpetuity for 56 Jazz Legends Mounted on Wood with Non-Glare Plexiglas Surface
and Installed on a Wall of Wood Paneling
C-Prints: 7 3/4" x 9 3/4" x 3/4" Each

A landscape of glowing swamp water, skeletal remains of saber-toothed tigers and an homage to 57 jazz musicians are the subjects of the works in Artpace's current exhibition of artists-in-residence. Selected by Heather Pesanti (Curator at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York), the artists in New Works: 11.1 are Kelly Richardson (Toronto, Canada/Newcastle, England), E.V. Day (New York, New York), and Devon Dikeou (Austin, Texas).

[. . .]

Dikeou's *Mamas Don't Let Your Babies Grow Up to Be Cowboys*, the most conceptually rigorous of the three installations, exposes the oversights of historical classification through the lens of American jazz. As an artist, curator, collector, editor and publisher of *zingmagazine*, Dikeou has her hand in every aspect of the art world's systems of recognition, which she questions and re-presents through her artistic practice. In the exhibition, Dikeou commemorates 57 jazz legends with photographs of gold plaques bearing their names. Upsetting the expected hierarchy of museum display, household names like Miles Davis and John Coltrane land alongside those who have

fallen into obscurity, such as Illinois Jacquet and Sonny Simmons. Positing Simmons—a personal friend of Dikeou and a great forgotten jazz musician—as an authority, his photo-plaque is blown up to a monumental size (17 x 12 feet) that dwarfs the others, while a vocal track by Sonny recounting his thoughts on the other musicians permeates the space. Additionally, signaling her skepticism of the seemingly limitless amount of information available online, Dikeou undermines the Internet as an authority with the inclusion of two perfectly-rendered graphite drawings by San Antonio artist Chad Dawkins of the HTTP 404 Internet search error message. She has also created CDs, available for free, featuring The Sonny Simmons Quintet. Much like relational aesthetic artist Liam Gillick's "platform" sculptures and Andrea Fraser's exhibition tours that include the viewer as a participant in the critique of institutions, this installation implicates the beholder in the creation and dissemination of history and points to the curator's power to insert figures into the art world.

Although the three residents employ divergent approaches, media and subjects, connecting threads can still be drawn. Both Day and Dikeou deal with modes of institutional display, such as those of natural history and hall of fame museums. Leviathan and CatFight work particularly well together; both works reference prehistory, the natural world and the dialectic they have with humanity. Each artist's work can be enjoyed and celebrated on its own; however, the dialogue they have when exhibited together makes for a rich and successful installment of Artpace's International Artist-in- Residence program.

Lana Shafer is a freelance writer and an art historian based in Austin, Texas



Part of May 2011 by Leanne Goebel



Devon Dikeou, Insider, Aims to Re-Democratize Jazz History

Devon Dikeou began her art career in the basement of Tibor de Nagy Gallery. She was sent down, as John Post Lee's intern, to organize old issues of *Artforum* magazine. Flipping through one, she was struck by a six-page spread of the work of Lucas Samaras. The first spread featured a full-color painting of a skeleton with the word "Artist," the second a black-and-white image of the skull with the word "Dealer," and the third zoomed in on the skull's teeth, with the word "Collector." At least that's how she recalls it. Years later she found a copy of the same issue and realized that it was not "Artist", but "Critic" that was the word on Samaras's work.

Since then, Dikeou's art and life, have concentrated on exploring the complicated and complicit roles between artists, dealers, critics, collectors, viewers and the spaces they

occupy. Dikeou may be an insider – she’s the editor/publisher of *Zing* Magazine, an artist, an independent curator, critic and collector – but she’s one insider who has made that status a subject of her ongoing interrogation of that system.



At Artpace in San Antonio, guest curator Heather Pesanti features Dikeou in IAIR 11.1. Dikeou titled her exhibition “Mamas, Don’t Let Your Babies Grow Up to Be Cowboys” – after the Willie Nelson song – because she construes the “hard, American lifestyle of the legendary cowboy” as an apt metaphor for artists, or for jazz musicians – who are her subject here.

Dikeou’s installation features 56 color photographs of brass nameplates of jazz musicians that she took at a boutique hotel in Argentina, dedicated to telling a “history” of jazz. Mounted on wood panels, each 8”x10” photograph becomes part of a haphazardly hung row. The omissions struck her just as hard as who was included. To that end her exhibit includes a 17 by 12 foot photo-mural featuring the name Sonny Simmons.

Who is Simmons? And why is his name so much larger than the others? Precisely the point, indicates Dikeou.

“Somebody had curated this hotel of all the jazz musicians they respect. Many (names) were missing. I created a plaque for Sonny because he was the one I thought of. He’s 80 years old and he had this great jazz project he wanted to do for Zing magazine: *Sonny Simmons plays the tunes of Charlie Parker*, but we had already used our budget.” Dikeou explained that she showed Simmons the images of the jazz names she photographed – leading him to tell her his “astounding” stories about his peers, anecdotally. “After I was selected to be part of 11.1, this just made the most sense. The idea ... that I’m curating Sonny back into the history of jazz.” Dikeou also produced a Sonny Simmons jazz CD that is given away free to visitors. The voice of Simmons talking about each of the jazz greats is audible throughout the show.

To reflect her interest in how social media is changing the art world, Dikeou and Art Pace have included a Wikipedia page for the exhibit. It lists all 56 jazz legends and links to 54 Wikipedia pages.

"Some people don't realize they are trying to be part of the art world," Dikeou said. "But social media is converging the differences. On Facebook, a young artist can be a friend of Jerry Saltz and have a conversation with him, whereas when I was first starting out, that would only happen if you were lucky. What's most unique about the art world is that it was about an invitation and making sure those barriers are in place, but social media has destroyed those barriers."

Perhaps not entirely, but they are crumbling.

LANDSCAPE, CATFIGHT, AND ANOTHER MUSICAL

FRIDAY, 25 MARCH 2011 03:13 [REVIEWS](#)

By Sarah Fisch

[Kelly Richardson](#) entertained a notion about swamps. [E.V. Day](#) had put together two cat skeletons and caged them, and thought of it as a sort of mock-up for a future project. [Devon Dikeou](#)'s friend Sonny Simmons is a jazzman whom the world nearly forgot. Armed with impressive CVs, and the imprimatur of curator [Heather Pesanti](#) of the [Albright-Knox Art Gallery](#) in Buffalo, New York, their fingers in different media pies — and preoccupied with seemingly disparate obsessions — these three artists arrived for their Artpace residency two months ago amidst [institutional drama](#) and a bizarre, unexpected Texas [cold](#) spell.



Pesanti chose Richardson, Day and Dikeou based on their work, which she'd seen in-person, in photographs, and online. She knew none of the artists personally, and had only ever met one of the three, until today. When presented with the curatorship, Pesanti researched 20 artists seriously, and settled on these three not only for the quality

of their existing work, but because she thought the Artpace residency would help their careers the most. Honest to God, this is not a curatorial dictum I've ever heard before in relation to Artpace. Further, Pesanti (gently) insisted the artists actually inhabit Artpace AIR, leave their regular lives and homes behind and come to San Antonio and immerse themselves in person, commit fully, use all the time, all the available resources, the entirety of the opportunity.

The result is a mighty Artpace Artist in Residence show, the best in a very long time.



Also at Artpace

By Steve Bennett

sbennett@express-news.net

Updated 11:11 am, Sunday, April 3, 2011

New installations by video artist Kelly Richardson, who is from Toronto and lives in Newcastle, England, and Austin conceptual artist Devon Dikeou are also featured in IAIR 11.1 at Artpace.

With her Artpace residency, Richardson knew she wanted to do “something with a swamp.” Inspired in part by the BP spill — the environment is an ongoing theme in the artist's body of work — Richardson found what she was looking for in the tiny town of Uncertain, Texas, on Caddo Lake on the Texas/Louisiana border. “Leviathan” consists of a 20-minute, high-definition film loop of stately cypresses submerged in brackish water, Spanish moss blowing in the breeze from their limbs. The images are projected onto three 9-by-15 screens, with white noise, which gradually becomes overbearing, providing the soundtrack. It's a beautiful setting, a natural jewel, but something dark seems to lurk in the murky water, despite golden patterns of luminescence undulating on the surface.

Devon Dikeou, whose work explores the often tenuous relationship among artist, exhibitor institution and viewer, knew very little about jazz before meeting Sonny Simmons, a formerly homeless 80-year-old alto sax player. When she discovered a Buenos Aires hotel whose rooms were named for jazz players, with plaques on the doors featuring names like Miles Davis and Art Pepper, the idea for “Mamas Don't Let Your Babies Grow Up to Be Cowboys” was born. One wall is lined with 56 name-plated “plaques,” re-created by Dikeou, while Simmons plays Charlie Parker and talks about the greats on an accompanying CD. By displaying these particular musicians' names, Dikeou questions the decisions made by curators and critics, and challenges accepted ideas of how art exhibitions are organized.

— *Steve Bennett*

Jazz and Minwax: How an Artpace resident came to enshrine an unsung musical legend

By Scott Andrews

Devon Dikeou's exhibit at Artpace, *Mamas Don't Let Your Babies Grow Up to Be Cowboys*, features a room paneled with wood, the smell of newly applied Minwax stain still lingers in the air. On one wall are photographs of small brass plaques, engraved with the names of notable jazz musicians like Louie Armstrong, Sarah



Vaughan, and Lee Morgan. On another wall is a huge photograph of a similar plaque. The name reads "Sonny Simmons." A man's voice is heard coming from speakers on the floor, talking about music and the players who make it. It's Simmons. A cardboard box sits in the middle of the floor filled with CDs, free for the taking. The recording is "The Sonny Simmons Quintet Performs the Music of Charlie Parker," produced by Artpace and Dikeou's *zingmagazine*.

Sonny Simmons is a player's player. As a sideman on alto he played with Charlie Parker, Eric Dolphy, and Charles Mingus in the '50s and '60s. His later work with Prince Lasha took bebop lines into free jazz, extended with complex harmonic structures pioneered by John Coltrane. Among musicians, Simmons is legendary as both composer and horn player, a master on saxophone and English horn. Born in 1933, his command of line and pitch is still perfect, his sound distills everything you ever wanted to hear. The *Current* asked Dikeou, who is now based in Austin, how she came to create her exhibit. Here's her response, culled from a long conversation:

"The exhibition at Artpace is something I had been working on for a long time. My art really talks about the audience, and the artwork and the context that it is

showing in, whether it is the street, a museum or a gallery, or the laboratory, as they call Artpace. The piece I had been doing, *Mamas Don't Let Your Babies Grow Up to Be Cowboys*, I had done because I had been making a bunch of photographs of different things that are meant to commemorate different people, and I came across a hotel in Buenos Aires that had a number of doors leading to bedrooms dedicated to different individuals. Some like Louie Armstrong were obvious, but others like Joe Henderson could have been a million different people, but he is also a great jazz man.

“There were 55 names, and though many important jazz names were of course missing, I thought it would only be appropriate if Sonny's name were there. Through the magic of technology I created a plaque for Sonny. Then one day years ago Sonny knocked on the doors of *zingmagazine* in New York, it is part of my art practice as well, I am publisher and editor there. I had known him for about ten or fifteen years. He said, ‘I have a great idea, I would love to do a CD, Sonny Simmons plays Charlie Parker.’ *Zingmagazine* does make music CDs, but we had spent our CD budget on the previous issue, Issue 21.

“I showed him the project I had done with the pictures on the computer, and as he watched all the names I said if we did the project it would be so great because I would put Sonny Simmons on the front side of the CD and Charlie Parker on the backside. So we had this project between the two of us a long time ago. It was just a wonderful luck kind of thing that I was chosen for the Artpace residency. When I do a residency I always start with a number of ideas. It's like throwing six balls up in the air and seeing which one is right for the space. I decided the Sonny project would be best.

“For the design of the exhibit I was inspired by all of the minimalist things that have always been a big part of Texas, Donald Judd in particular, his piece where he panels a whole room and that's the only thing in the art. And so it was taking inspirations from not just Sonny, but also my inspirations from around my visual world, from somebody like Judd, to in my aural world somebody like Sonny, and trying to bring them together.

“The free CDs is a reference to Felix Gonzalez-Torres, the speakers in the space to The Chords and Christian Marclay, and all the different, great artists who have been at Artpace and are just inspiring people.

“We are hopeful to bring in Sonny and do a concert, perhaps on the rooftop or someplace like Chris Park. We have yet to work out the details, but it would be fantastic!”

In the late 1960s, the onset of Conceptual Art signaled the dematerialization of the art object, as the critic Lucy Lippard so aptly put it,¹ whereby self-referential and conceptual considerations overrode formal and aesthetic ones. Dikeou's art is not so much dematerialized as a reflection of the disintegration of traditional mediums and, by extension, holds no allegiance to any one particular form; she strives to manifest a concept in whatever manner best suits that idea. In the way in which her artistic practice infuses seemingly all aspects of her world, it is not only Conceptual but post-Warholian, an "art-as-life" practice without boundaries and divisions between artistic practice and day-to-day activity.

Dikeou's brainchild publication, *zingmagazine*, founded in 1995, is one prong of her artistic practice, an avant-garde magazine that adopts a curatorial methodology and as such takes on many forms: artists commissions, interviews, cd compilations, photographic essays, and scholarly critique. Three years later, Dikeou, along with her brother Pany, formed the Dikeou Collection, an offshoot of *zingmagazine* and a format for generating dialogue between publication/print format and real-time installation. Collecting the likes of Wade Guyton, Vik Muniz, Agathe Snow, and Joshua Smith, Dikeou consistently features the artists in *zingmagazine*, often multiple times, perpetuating the connectivity of the entire premise.

For her Artpace installation *Mamas Don't Let Your Babies Grow Up to Be Cowboys*, titled after a song by the country singer Willie Nelson, Dikeou extends her polyvalent practice into an exploration of one of the most historically "American" forms of music: jazz. She conceived of the idea based on a simple fact that her friend Sonny Simmons – a talented alto saxophone/English horn and jazz impresario that Dikeou met some 15 years ago, who played with the likes of Charlie Parker, Eric Dolphy, and Charles Mingus, and for many years slipped into obscurity and even, at one point, homelessness – was not included in the history annals of great jazz. She set about to right this omission. The project represents the culmination of an organic relationship between Dikeou and Simmons over many years, transformed into a minimalist installation evocative of the Donald Judd compounds nearby in Marfa, Texas.² As the story goes, years ago, on a trip to Buenos Aires, Dikeou came across a theme-style hotel where each bedroom was dedicated to with the name of a jazz great on a plaque, a selection curated by the hotelier. She noticed that a few were well-known, like Louis Armstrong and Miles Davis, but that the majority of names were obscure, and her friend Sonny was missing. Fast-forward to *Mamas...*, a project that, in the spirit of her practice, was just one of many that she developed during her residency. The viewer enters to a

¹ Lucy Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object, 1966 to 1972* (New York: Praeger, 1973).

² Additionally, in an email correspondence with the author on May 27, 2011, Dikeou cites a particular work by Donald Judd, his *Untitled*, 1974, in the collection of the Portland Museum of Art, "in which he wood paneled the entire exhibition space from floor to a certain height" as an influence.

wall-sized photograph of a brass plaque engraved with Sonny Simmons' name. On another wall, a series of photographs of the hotel jazz-name plaques on wood (mimicking actual plaques) are arranged on a wall in nonlinear, musical fashion. The voice of Simmons can be heard on speakers projecting into the gallery space. A cardboard box containing CD's featuring Simmons playing Charlie Parker available for viewers to take away – evoking the late, great Conceptualist Felix Gonzalez-Torres' take-away candy and newspaper pieces – sits on the floor. Like so much of Dikeou's work, the room deliberately captures a particular sensibility, manifested here in the cumbersome analog speakers on the floor and the proliferation of faux wood paneling, harking to a bygone era of wood-paneled Volkswagens and typewriters. Dikeou even collaborated with Artpace studio technician Chad Dawkins, who created two elegant Minimalist prints reflecting the absence of information that comes up in a Google search of Simmons' name. As Dikeou stated, "inclusion of Dawkins, much less the original hotelier's nameplate curation, is an extension of my curatorial activities within my art practice and, just as artwork is a multi-peopled experience, more than ever this installation tries to examine that."³

Conceptually, the installation marks a continuation of Dikeou's use of signage as an art form. Notable precedents include her ongoing series *What's Love Got to Do With It*, first seen in an exhibition organized by Kenny Schachter in 1991, whereby Dikeou has created an exhibition announcement sign for every show she's been a part of, in the dated style of black-and-white style of those found hanging in iconic art dealer Leo Castelli's gallery on West Broadway in SoHo. More recently, Dikeou replicated and then photographed monumentally-scaled versions of the plaques for Ileana Sonnabend and Leo Castelli that were installed above tables at the Soho restaurant Mezzogiorno. Using the self-referential form of the sign for the exhibition as the work itself, Dikeou suggests that such objects are not as innocuous and objective as they might seem. Context becomes the message. By overturning traditional usage of such nameplates, Dikeou's work begs the question of who decides the names that make it onto these plates, and who might be omitted in the process. Such questions of categorization and hierarchy are endemic to the art world, to museums as institutions, to galleries by nature of the commercial art market, and to the collectors and patrons who drive these markets.

Dikeou's practice questions the telling of history, and interrogates the subjective nature of classification and categorization. In unearthing and remembering stories such as Sonny Simmons', tying together seemingly disparate narrative elements and retelling them through her own lens, Dikeou touches on the potential for a very personal artistic practice to have broader resonance. In this thoughtful, poignant, and painstakingly rendered Artpace installation, *Mamas Don't Let Your Babies Grow*

³ Ibid.

Up To Be Cowboys conveys the story of a musical prodigy who lost his way and then was found again, perhaps a Wild West story of its own. As told here, Simmons becomes the metaphor for revealing humanity's basic heroism in the everyday, the forgotten, and the overlooked, and speaks to the importance of looking for history's "blind spots" and bringing them to the light of day.