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THE QUEER ART OF THE COUNTERARCHIVE

Many of the LGBT archives currently at public libraries and universities, such as the ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives at the University of Southern California, had their origin as grassroots archives collected not only by homophile and gay liberation organizations, but by individuals who insisted that their lives and the records they left behind were history even when the rest of the world, including public archives, didn't care or didn't want to know. The "archive fever" catalyzed by the silencing, neglect, and stigmatization of queer histories is a particularly powerful force, echoing the ferocity and perversity of queer sexual desire.¹ Queer archives are often "archives of feeling," not only motivated by strong feelings but seeking to preserve even ordinary feelings, the evidence of which is often ephemeral, or embodied in idiosyncratic collections and objects such as T-shirts, buttons, flyers, matchbook covers, and sex toys.²

The new partnership between ONE Archives and USC in 2010 was thus a notable development, as is the recent formalizing of the collaboration between the June L. Mazer Lesbian Archives and UCLA, which stemmed from an effort to digitize part of the Mazer's collection. Representing mainstream institutions' recognition that LGBTQ history is worthy of research and should be preserved, the new visibility and respectability of LGBTQ archives reflects the mainstreaming of LGBTQ culture more generally. And, like mainstream visibility, LGBTQ archival visibility produces familiar tensions about how to sustain queer sensibilities in the face of conflicting desires for normalization and assimilation. The fiercely separatist stance of Brooklyn's Lesbian Herstory Archives, for example, insists that a different kind of archive is necessary to accommodate queer culture and to preserve the messiness and outrageousness of sex, histories of pain and loss, and the lives of both ordinary and famous people.

Queer archives thus stand at the crossroads of critiques of the archive and passion for the radical potential of counterarchives. Although they often display an exuberant utopianism about preserving queer lives, they are also informed by the haunting archival absences that accompany the documentation of histories of violence such as slavery and genocide. The often ephemeral nature of queer life necessitates a creative approach to archiving, an openness to unusual objects and collections, and an acknowledgement of that which escapes the archive. It demands what Alex Juhasz has called, "queer archive activism," an activist relation to the archive that remains alert to its absences and that uses it to create new kinds of knowledge and new forms of collectivity.³ The partnerships between grassroots archives and more institutional ones, such as those between ONE and USC, and between the Mazer and UCLA, suggest potential counterarchival practices, including not only new kinds of collections but new forms of exhibition and public display.

"Queer archive activism" insists that the archive serve not just as a repository for safeguarding objects, but also as a resource that "comes out" into the world to perform public interventions. Some of the best archive activists have been artists, whose creative practices and avowedly personal investments lend themselves to innovative exhibitions that bring the archive to life. Onya Hogan-Finlay, who used the art collection at ONE Archives for her recent MFA thesis show at USC, is part of a generation of younger artists—many of them born in the years since some of the earliest collections were generated by the gay liberation and lesbian feminist movements—who are delving into the archives with a passion for activism and utopian dreams that predate them. Faced with the predominantly white male focus of much of ONE's art collection, Hogan-Finlay curated an exhibition that acknowledged the value of works that have rarely been displayed while also exploring

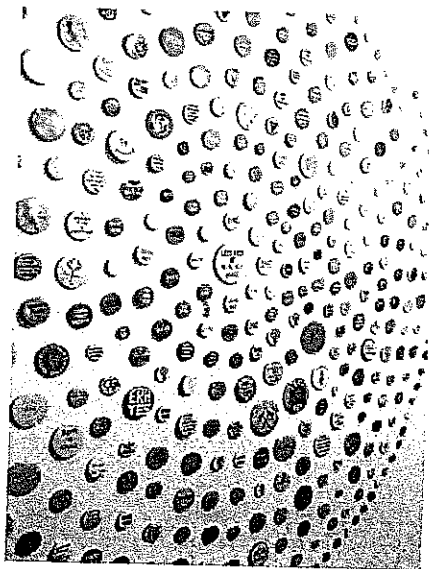
the absences in the collection, particularly in its representation of lesbians. She remedied some of those gaps by including vitrines with lesbian publications, wallpaper that honored the life history of FTM Reed Erickson, who was a major benefactor to ONE Inc., and an installation that featured an archival video interview with lesbian activists Donna Smith and Lisa Ben (editor of *Vice Versa: America's Gayest Magazine*). As the exhibition's title, "My Taste in Men," slyly announced, Hogan-Finlay's idiosyncratic and queer dykey affection for ONE's holdings allowed her to use both what is there and what is not there as a source of creative and libidinal pleasure.

For those looking for a more specifically lesbian archive, the Lesbian Herstory Archives (LHA) in Brooklyn, with its commitment to lesbian separatist values and its independence from mainstream institutions, has been a magnet for a number of recent creative projects. When invited to display a retrospective of their work at LHA in 2009, fierce pussy, the



Above: Onya Hogan-Finlay, Poster for *My Taste in Men*, 2011

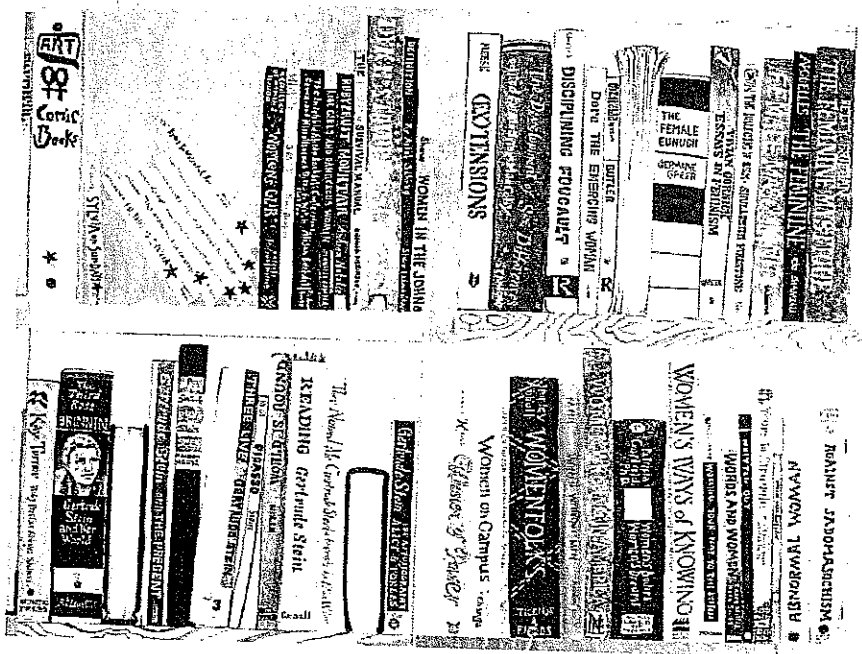
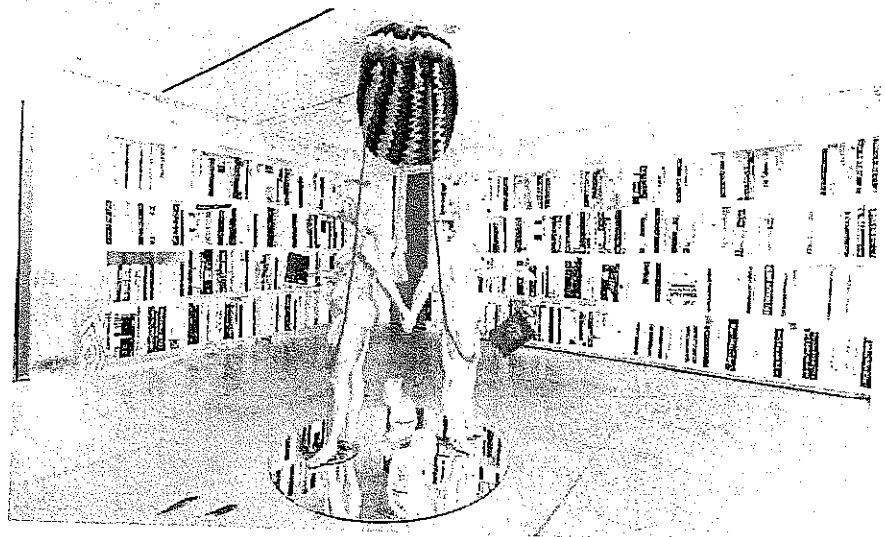
dyke art collective formed in 1991 during the AIDS activist era in New York City, decided to curate materials from the archives to further underscore the vital connections between the present and a past that has ongoing relevance.⁴ The result was *Mining the Archive*, an exhibition of works that used buttons, T-shirts, and pulp novels from the LHA collections. The displays not only affirmed the archival value of LHA's rich store of material ephemera, but the creative installation manifested the quirky humor of the objects and the artist-curators' love for them. They arranged buttons from the collection in a gynocentric spiral rather than in the more formal grid one might find in a museum display. The visual appeal of the installation added to the collective power of the buttons, which seemed to be calling out to each other from around the circle in a chorus of names - "Dyke," "Sister," "Lezzie," "Amazon," "I'm One Too," - beginning with the button that gave the piece its title: "Let's Face It We're All Queer." Eager to use the archives as a site of public culture, fierce pussy also organized two salons in 2009-10 that featured performers, writers, and artists in a combination performance event and intellectual discussion.⁵



Above: fierce pussy, *Let's Face It We're All Queer*, 2009. From *Mining the Archive* at the Lesbian Herstory Archives, Brooklyn, NY

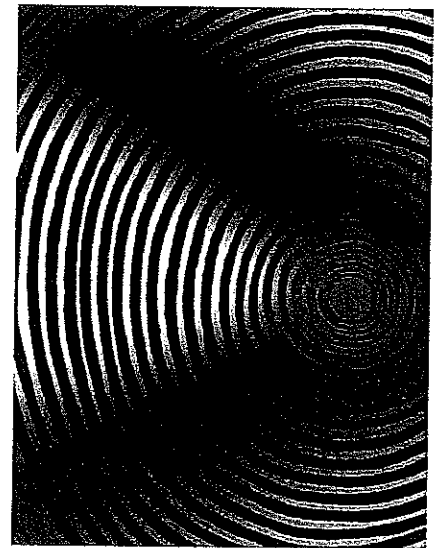
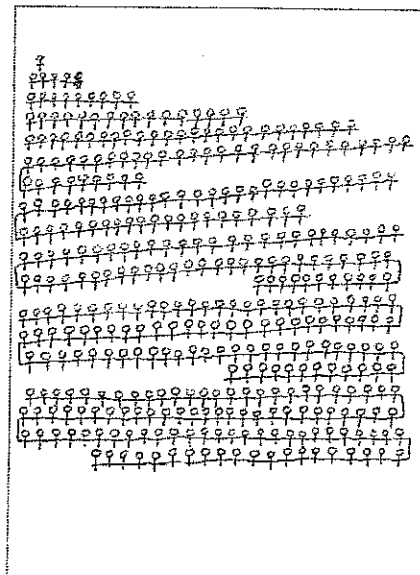
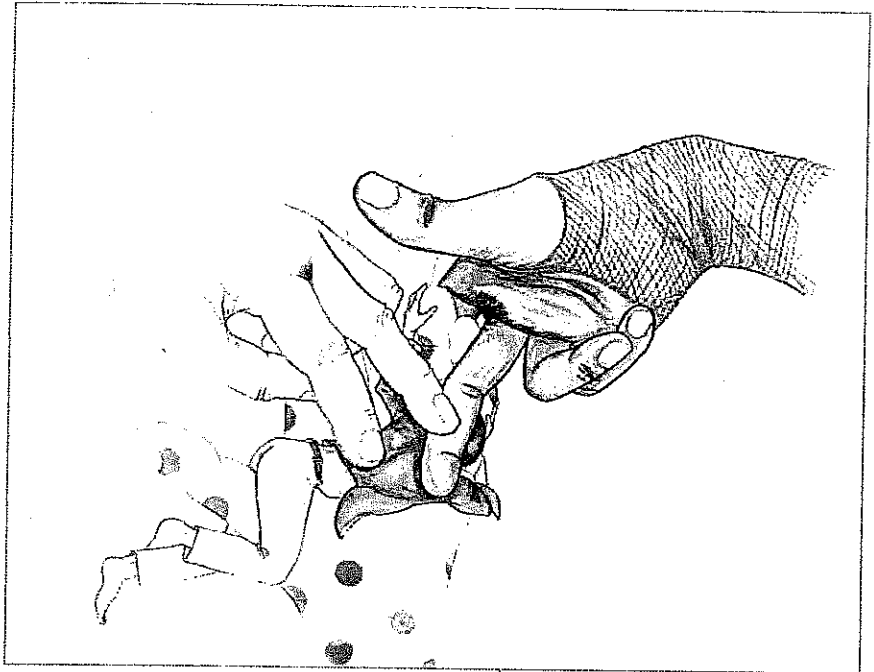
Toronto-based artist Allyson Mitchell also found inspiration in the Lesbian Herstory Archives for her 2010 installation at the Art Gallery of Ontario entitled, *A Girl's Journey Into the Well of Forbidden Knowledge*, for which she made wallpaper from drawings of the books on the shelves of the LHA reading room.⁶ The

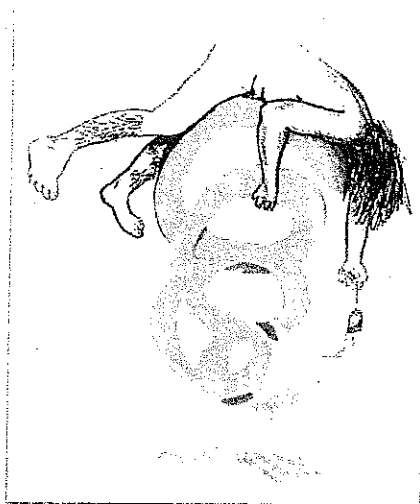
spines of the books display the titles, authors, and presses that are part of the independent public print culture central to lesbian feminist culture. Through the labor of love of handcrafting drawings of the books from photographs and installing them in the public space of the art gallery, Mitchell brought an important archive to new publics.⁷



Above (both images): Allyson Mitchell, *A Girl's Journey Into the Well of Forbidden Knowledge*, 2010. Installation shot and detail from exhibition at Art Gallery of Ontario, Canada

While fierce pussy curated materials from the LHA collections on-site, and while Allyson Mitchell's drawings transported them to another location, Ulrike Müller used the archives as a catalyst to create new works of art whose connections to the original collections are more oblique. Her *Herstory Inventory* began as a staged reading (which became an audio installation) of a list of descriptions of T-shirts in the LHA collections, a way of performing the archive that acknowledges the value of material artifacts such as T-shirts, as well as the archival practice of cataloguing that helps to preserve them.⁸ In a subsequent phase of the project, Müller has been commissioning other artists to make drawings based on the list of descriptions. Through Müller's curatorial work, *Herstory Inventory* establishes a network of participating artists, many of whom are friends and associates, which is itself an archive of contemporary queer art cultures. With the list, rather than the original T-shirts, as the project's genesis, the archive becomes a site of fantasy, an open point of departure for versions of lesbian representation that





are unpredictable and not tied to realist forms of documentation. *Herstory Inventory* establishes a connection between earlier decades and the present, reconfiguring its meanings for a new generation while also reminding us of the history that is embodied in the drawings and slogans found in everyday objects.

These Lesbian Herstory Archives projects not only preserve a lesbian feminist history, they also bring new communities into being by seizing on the affective connections that archiving can facilitate. Approaching the task of curation with a queer and creative sensibility, these artists highlight the archive's ephemeral cultures and contexts, and they offer sophisticated forms of lesbian representation that eschew conventional documentary strategies. Like *Cruising the Archive*, their projects suggest how a radical archival practice might sustain a queer future by reminding us of our queer pasts.

1. See Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998). Although Derrida's text is frequently cited for its archive theory, it does not directly address the concrete specificity of LGBTQ archives and their contributions to archive theory.

2. See Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).

3. See Alex Juhasz, "Video Remains: Nostalgia, Technology, and Queer Archive Activism," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 12:2 (2006), 319–28.

4. For more on fierce pussy, see Ann Cvetkovich, "Fierce Pussies and Lesbian Avengers: Dyke Activism Meets Celebrity Culture" in *Feminist Consequences: Theory for the New Century*, ed. Elisabeth Bronfen and Misha Kavka (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001) 283–318, as well as the republications of their posters from the early 1990s, such as "I AM A lezzie butch pervert girlfriend bulldagger sister dyke AND PROUD!" and "Lesbian Chic My Ass," that accompanied their retrospective exhibition at Printed Matter in 2008. In its current revival, the members of fierce pussy are Nancy Brooks Brody, Joy Episalla, Zoe Leonard, and Carrie Yamaoka.

5. Salon participants included filmmaker Barbara Hammer, dance/acrobatic performer Sarah East Johnson (of LAVA), visual artists Ginger Brooks Takahashi, Emma Hedditch, and Linda Matalon, and archive scholar Kate Eichhorn.

6. For more on this project, see Ann Cvetkovich and Allyson Mitchell, "A Girl's Journey Into the Well of Forbidden Knowledge," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 17:4 (2011), forthcoming.

7. For another example of an artist working with material ephemera, see Tammy Rae Carland's "An Archive of Feelings," which consists of photographs of ordinary but affectively charged objects, including the cassette tapes of Riot grrrl culture and the dedication pages of lesbian and queer books, that document subcultures not through portraits but through the objects that they leave behind. Through the archival practice of photographing objects, Carland insists that they are meaningful. See Ann Cvetkovich, "Photographing Objects as Queer Archival Practice," in *Feeling Photography*, ed. Elspeth Brown and Thy Phu. (Durham: Duke University Press, forthcoming).

8. For the audio installation version of *Herstory Inventory*, whose performers included fierce pussy members Zoe Leonard and Nancy Brooks Brody, see Ulrike Müller's website: <http://www.ensemble.at/um/works/herstory-inventory>.