



Installation shot of *To Whom It May Concern*, a site-specific installation by Catherine Lord, 2011. ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives. Photo: Nori Minami

## Queer Archival Futures: Case Study Los Angeles

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### What Do We Want? Queer Archives!



*Lez Con*: an exhibition by onya hogan-finlay (2012). Canadian Lesbian and gay archives.  
Photo: Onya Hogan-Finlay

Ten years after the publication of *An Archive of Feelings*, I find myself amazed by the proliferation of LGBT archives that is part of the “archival turn.” The push for LGBT state recognition, civil rights, and cultural visibility has been accompanied by a desire for the archive— a claim that the recording and preservation of LGBT history is an epistemic right.

As exciting as these developments might be, in keeping with queer activist critiques of gay liberalism, they also call for some caution and for questions about *what kind* of archive we want: a traditional archive with paper documents and records, or one that uses ephemera to challenge what we mean by the archive? Inclusion and assimilation into existing archives, or a separate (but equal) archive? Or do we want an entirely different version of an archive, one that perhaps lies outside a bounded spatial enclave? What (and where) is the queer archive?

## Archive Theory: Derrida Meets the Lesbian Herstory Archives

In answer to these questions, it can be useful to keep in mind what archive theory has been saying for some time about both the need to critique existing archives and the impossibility of creating them. Theoretical critiques put the brakes on liberal enthusiasm for the archive, as do queer approaches to identity and representation, which insist that visibility is not always possible or desirable. Derrida has been the go-to person for such critiques, particularly because, using the combined example of Freud's house and psychoanalysis in *Archive Fever*, he focuses on the impossibility of archival practice—on how the desire for records escapes representation, leaving a trail of traces in place of the always-elusive real. But this same lesson is also available from the archives of colonialism, slavery, and other histories of violence in which absences are not just a theoretical conundrum but also a very practical reality.<sup>1</sup>



Zoe Leonard, *The Fae Richards Photo Archive*, 1993-1996  
(detail); Created for Cheryl Dunye's film *The Watermelon Woman* (1996) 78 b&w and 4 color photographs and notebook of typed text  
installation view: 1997 Whitney Biennial, New York, NY  
Photo: Geoffrey Clements

I have found it useful to read Derrida and the colonial archive alongside the concrete example of spaces such as the [Lesbian Herstory Archives](#), characterized by their fervent commitment to saving evidence of lesbian lives, often through very ordinary artifacts. Building a grassroots archive is a somewhat different enterprise than looking for the traces of violence or hidden histories within state or national archives created for purposes of surveillance and epistemic control. The establishment of LGBT archives, especially lesbian ones, by activists interested in creating an archive where none has existed demonstrates a fierce optimism and commitment to survival that presents a stubborn challenge to critiques

of the archive. The safe space created by the Lesbian Herstory Archives in Brooklyn, where a literal house protects the unwieldy and sprawling detritus of lesbian separatist culture, is not a nostalgic or naïve repository in any simple way. I have thus found the continued turn to Derrida somewhat frustrating when there are so many other places to look for archive theory. One of my favorite examples remains the collaboration between photographer Zoe Leonard and filmmaker Cheryl Dunye, who worked together to produce photographs of a fictional African American woman for the film *The Watermelon Woman*. The need to invent the archive when one doesn't exist acknowledges that the archive is missing (if it is a fetish, it's a queer one), and what survives in its place is not representation as positive image but representation as a complex history of stereotypes and partial and contaminated documents and traces.

## Case History: Los Angeles

The encounter between actually existing archives and archive theory suggests the value of the case history for assessing contemporary queer archives because we cannot know in advance whether institutionalization represents a domestication of the aleatory queerness that is present in any archive. As an example, I will report briefly on some recent site visits to Los Angeles, where there are two notable new collaborations between existing community-based archives and universities: the [June Mazer Lesbian Archive](#) with UCLA and the [ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archives](#) with the University of Southern California (USC). Shaped by the convergence of strong but not financially secure community-based archives with universities interested in expanding their LGBT presence, the situation in L.A. suggests a possible future for the institutionalization of LGBT archives and the potential for collaboration between grassroots and traditional archives. It also suggests models outside those of the gay metropolitan centers of San Francisco and New York that have strong independent archives, such as the [GLBT Historical Society](#) and Lesbian Herstory Archives. Although these cities might seem the likeliest places to look for the cutting edge in archival practice, the independent strength of their grassroots and public institutions has not led (at least not yet) to similar collaborations. The GLBT Historical Society in San Francisco has both the space and funding to remain independent and has recently opened a museum exhibition space. In New York, the Lesbian Herstory Archive in Brooklyn is steadfastly committed to remaining independent due to its separatist stance. At the same time, the New York Public Library and New York University have significant queer collections, including the [ACT UP](#) collections at NYPL and the very queer [Downtown Collection](#) at NYU.

## ONE Archives and USC

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Display of *One* Magazine Covers

Photo: Ann Cvetkovich

USC gave the ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archives a building near its campus in 2000. However, as this contribution included little additional material support, it remained unclear how much of a gift this would be. Space alone is not enough to sustain an archive: it must also have staff to catalogue and maintain the collections and to make them open to the public and available for research. A decade later, ONE has created a very hospitable space within a building that was formerly a residence. It includes room for collections, processing, and exhibitions, as well as a wonderful view from the mezzanine balcony of the book stacks placed in the middle of the atrium and glass cases featuring the beautiful designs of ONE covers. ONE has successfully applied for National Endowment for the Humanities grants for special cataloguing and exhibition projects, and long-time volunteers who have a deep knowledge of the collections work alongside professionally trained archivists and librarians. Most significantly, USC has officially incorporated ONE's collection into its library system, which will give it increased visibility and accessibility.

## The Mazer Lesbian Archives and UCLA



June Mazer's Birkenstocks on display at the Mazer Lesbian Archives.

PHOTO: ANN CVETKOVICH

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The June L. Mazer Lesbian Archives, the grassroots archive that provides a West Coast counterpart to Brooklyn's Lesbian Herstory Archives, occupies space donated by the city of West Hollywood (where ONE also has exhibition space) and maintained by the loving work of a largely volunteer staff. In 2009, the Mazer Archives collaborated with the UCLA Library and the Center for the Study of Women to digitize some of its collections. The Mazer's digital presence in UCLA's library not only facilitates greater accessibility but has also given the Mazer Archives a level of public visibility that encourages further research. The initial pilot project led to a larger National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) grant for the digitization of the Mazer's entire collection, and some of Mazer's collections have now been transferred to UCLA. The collaboration between the Mazer Archives and UCLA has thus far been very cordial and generative—the university's institutional support helps the Mazer to maintain its independent status and its community-based space. Meanwhile, UCLA has now established a more prominent queer collection and can use its resources to organize programming that publicizes the collections and to encourage graduate student research projects through classroom use.

## Cruising the Archive



Installation shot of *Cruising the Archive: Queer Worldmaking*, 2012

Photo: ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives

Despite these advances, the results of these collaborations are unpredictable and open-ended since they depend on how the collections are actively used. A queer influence on university archives can lead not only to new kinds of collections, but also to new ways of thinking about the archive, including new practices of research and exhibition. This potential is already evident in a number of recent exhibitions that draw on the ONE archives. Examples include [Cruising the Archive](#), a cluster of exhibitions organized by ONE as part of the citywide Pacific Standard Time initiative, which showcased art in Los Angeles from 1945-80.<sup>2</sup> Displaying ONE's art collections (which ONE had recently received a grant to catalogue) Cruising the Archive brought queer visibility to this high profile cultural event. Moreover, its multiple locations—not only in the archive itself but also in ONE's West Hollywood space and in the Doheny Memorial Library on campus—suggested the archives' wide-ranging presence both on campus and in the wider Los Angeles area. The Doheny Library exhibition, which foregrounded ONE's new affiliation with the USC libraries, was a particularly suggestive mash-up of queer archives and traditional institutional space. Here, Radical Faeries paraphernalia and lesbian baseball uniforms were displayed in ornate wooden cases in a

exhibition space whose lavish décor was transformed into camp excess.

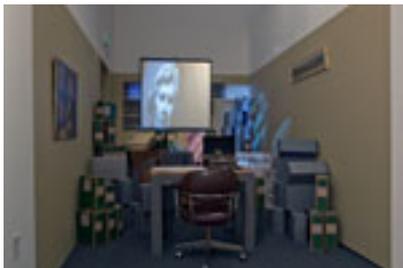
## Catherine Lord's *To Whom It May Concern* and Onya Hogan-Finlay's *My Taste in Men*



Installation shot of *To Whom It May Concern*, 2011.

photo: Nori Minami

Public exhibitions of archival collections can be given a queer twist by artists who approach curatorial practice with a creative spirit. ONE has recently hosted two such initiatives. Catherine Lord's [To Whom It May Concern](#) is a wall mural created from enlarged reproductions of the dedications in the books in ONE's collections. Exhibited alongside *Cruising the Archive*, the collection of dedications is displayed on the archive's mezzanine, below which one can see the open stacks of the books from which they were taken. Although Lord culled through ONE's books as a researcher would and collected the dedications in the manner of an archivist, she displayed the results of her work without the signs and citations of conventional exhibition and publication. Instead, her aim is to create an "archive of feelings," a collection that articulates the passions and social networks, both intimate and political, archived by the genre of the dedication, which might not otherwise be seen as an archival artifact.



Installation shot of *My Taste in Men*, Onya Hogan-Finlay's MFA thesis exhibition, March 2011, Gayle & Ed Roski MFA Gallery at USC

Photo: Joshua White

Onya Hogan-Finlay also used ONE's collections as a source for her MFA thesis show [My Taste in Men](#), in which she curated materials so as to point to and compensate for ONE's lesbian absences.<sup>3</sup> She included a vitrine showcasing lesbian feminist publications and ephemera. Hogan-Finlay incorporated video material from an interview with Lisa Ben, founder of the publication *Vice Versa*, into an installation that rendered her lesbian activism materially vivid through protest signs and a reproduction of Ben's office. But in addition to making the

archive's lesbian content more prominent, she also displayed homoerotic artworks from the collection, establishing her own necessarily queer relation to gay male sexuality. Such work takes liberties with conventional forms of exhibition by establishing the unapologetically vigorous presence of the artist-curator whose own (perverse) desires can be made visible.<sup>4</sup>

These two examples suggest that, acting as both archivists and activists, artists can use their creative powers to perform interventions that keep the archive open to critique and transformation. Particularly important is their willingness to use their affective and personal investments to queer the archive and to produce new and unpredictable forms of knowledge, including new understandings of what counts as an archive and hence what counts as knowledge. With their interest in installation, artists also reconfigure the space of the archive, opening it up to new publics so that it is not policed and protected and creating innovative kinds of “safe space” in the form of intimate sanctuaries where new socialities can be forged.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?”; Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*; Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*.

<sup>2</sup> See the excellent catalogue for the exhibition, which includes valuable profiles of a range of artists in the ONE collection, a history of the archive, and scholarly essays. See my essay, “The Art of the Queer Counterarchive,” on artist projects by fierce pussy, Ulrike Mueller, and Allyson Mitchell, all of which use the Lesbian Herstory Archives collections.

<sup>3</sup> For more on *My Taste in Men*, see Judith “Jack” Halberstam’s essay, “Unfound,” in the *Cruising the Archive* catalogue.

<sup>4</sup> Hogan-Finlay has since curated a similar exhibition for [the Canadian Lesbian and Gay Archives](#) in Toronto. Called [LezCon](#), the show once again focused on the problem of what’s missing from putatively national archives that emerge from largely gay male collections that underrepresent not only lesbians but other groups as well. The humorous reference in the show’s title to the use of the term *CanCon* to describe national

regulations that mandate Canadian content in Canadian culture points to the problem of trying to legislate cultural visibility and the need to approach archival inclusion and representation in ways that work with what is not there as well as what is or that reframe what is there so as to acknowledge its limitations.

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