Archives Behaving Badly

Leah DeVun and Michael Jay McClure

The ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archives sit a mere eight miles from West Hollywood, the self-proclaimed “center of gay California nightlife.” As the oldest collection documenting lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer or questioning (LGBTQ) culture in the United States, the archive, pointedly, focuses on the quotidian material of queer life. Newspapers, posters, letters, books, personal reminiscences, political ephemera, and clothing make up a quixotic library founded by one man, Jim Kepner, who began collecting gay-themed keepsakes in the 1940s. As the archive grew, acquiring donations and merging with other collections, it moved from Kepner’s West Hollywood apartment and was known, variously, as the Western Gay Archives, the National Gay Archives, and the International Gay and Lesbian Archives. Later, an educational wing named the ONE Institute launched ONE Magazine and founded a research center that eventually offered advanced degrees in “homophile studies.” What started as an amateur project, then, remained steadfastly so: a group of volunteers worked on the collection, it was financed by various philanthropists and activists, and it only recently became part of the library system of the University of Southern California.2

To consider this archive, born of a multiplicity of origins and communitarian efforts, we offer our own collaborative effort—by a historian and photographer (at Rutgers University), Leah DeVun, and an art historian (at the University of Wisconsin–Madison), Michael Jay McClure. Through a text and series of photographs, we propose a set of interactions and activations through which archives are both made and made to “behave.” We begin with a question: What is the difference between the archive and its environs? Indeed, in West Hollywood, the everyday

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objects of queer life—its vestments, runoff, and documentation—are on constant view. West Hollywood is a living archive, shaped by queer history and brandishing a polymorphous visual presence. Moreover, the visual qualities of the queer, as a lived phenomenon, are similar to that of the archive; rather than a hierarchical arrangement of material, a system by which we might understand items of greater and lesser importance, the visual (or visible) aspects of queer life are assembled and glimpsed by happenstance. So what is the difference? The mandates of preservation, access, structure, and circulation are the obvious and distinguishing features that mark the archive. Archival objects have been pulled from the current of the contemporary by people who enforce selection criteria—what Jacques Derrida might call “the commandment”—of the collection. A visitor to the archive is made to feel the “tense” of the objects change as they are drawn from living circulation to rest in spaces that represent a historical past.

Let us, however, offer an alternative to this idea of the archive: instead of becoming encased or, more accurately, stilled in the past, archival objects circulate in ways that parallel yet differ from their previous uses. In other words, instead of being a catalog of dead objects, the archive may foster an afterlife, and it may recirculate. And such circulation inextricably depends on bodies. Indeed, the material of the archive is inseparable from the uncategorized bodies with which it engages: the touch of human hands, the impulse of the scholar, an active tide of research wherein these objects, once again, move. How do we deal with that unarchived process of use? How do we talk of the ways in which objects are touched (both tactilely and symbolically) and deployed? How can we imagine the lives that can be hinted at, but not pictured, within the representational space of the “gay and lesbian” archive? Might the archive be queered by such an imagining?

Indeed, these and other questions informed DeVun’s photographic exploration of the ONE Archives in a 2012 exhibition titled Latent Images. DeVun and curator David Evans Frantz exhibited a series of her photographs in the ONE Archives Gallery and Museum, displaying them alongside historical photographs and albums from the collection. DeVun’s original photographs engaged with materials from the archive, but rather than merely document the documents, she emphasized use over information, image over text. Key to her method was using archival items in the “wrong” way, that is, by interpolating materials from radically diverse time periods and sources. While some of the items pictured in her photographs are drawn from ONE, others are from DeVun’s own personal collection or from the collections of friends, highlighting the highly affective nature of archival engagements. This method of subject selection mirrors the ad hoc formation of the archive, in which there is no discernable difference between what is worthy of preservation and what is “merely” personal. This misuse counters the logic of what we usually do when we consult archives, when we treat cataloged objects with reverence, reconstructing narratives that acquire the weight of history. We might characterize this typical
sort of archival practice as “good behavior,” inasmuch as it is dependent upon and constitutive of the hierarchies approved by historical authority. In contrast, DeVun removed contexts and rephotographed objects, turning them over, placing archival objects against bodies, courting anachronism, and exposing the ways that an archive might have been (or might still be) activated by proximity to flesh, by the tactile currents of unseen bodies, unseen lives.

For instance, in Womanist Pin (fig. 1), DeVun presents the back of a political button and reveals its slightly menacing side: the pin that punctures and the distorted mirror of its silver back. Instead of reading the button’s outward-facing words or marks, we are asked to stand in the place of the wearer, to understand the button as a portable, personal item, whatever its intended message. Thus, instead of communication, the image emphasizes dynamic use, movement, and the unarchived being onto whom this button might attach. Further, because this image is about
(front and back) sides, it may also suggest a special relationship between the visible “face” of the archive and its unseen agents: the hands that touch it, have touched it, and the intelligences that retrieve the objects from their supposed arrest. No matter its message or trajectory, the photograph of the pin evokes the stickiness of these bodies and the tension between what is archivally seen and unseen.

Both the photograph of the pin and this essay, then, advance a double argument about the archive. The pin seems less important for its unifying slogan, its message for and about the LGBTQ community, than for its trajectory on the body that might wear it. In that way, the archive becomes inseparable from that to which (or to whom) it might attach. Might we see these qualities as an alternative proposition for “the archive” writ large? In this way, the photograph and this essay echo the work of scholars who have agitated for an enlargement of the notion of the historical, from the “history from below” movement of the 1960s and 1970s to the work of social, feminist, and postcolonial historians who have critically explored the production of knowledge and its attendant hierarchies. These writings have foregrounded unofficial and DIY histories forged by the “invisible hands” of collectors, preservationists, and other nonacademics, through which they champion both dissonant temporalities and affective links between past and present that render the historical imagination promiscuous, multiple, and beyond finite reckoning. We begin, then, to dream of archival work that reveals the archive as a discontinuity of temporal, visual, tactile, and affective planes from which a subject, and a queer subject, might speak.

This attentiveness to multidirectionality and multiplanarity is evident in both the assemblage of unlike materials in the Latent Images exhibition and the content of the individual photographs. For instance, Thumbs Up (fig. 2) also features a number of competing forces. Most obviously, the photograph pulls simultaneously downward and upward. This is perhaps most clear in the tie itself, a hanging object that nevertheless suggests an upward thrust in its patterned thumbs-up. The central body that stands upright against the pull of gravity also echoes this downward-upward divide. In addition to these opposed directional forces, one witnesses within the frame the turbulent semiotics of sex. Indeed, the most obvious incongruity appears when the masculine, even phallic, signifier of the tie meets a body that is decidedly feminine. Yet this photograph does more than reclaim the masculine signifier for the female body. Indeed, the tie is overdetermined—even hilarious—because of its facile conflation of the thumbs-up with an erection. It comically turns a sign for a body part into a metonym for a “sex.” If the tie makes the signifier of sex ridiculous, what does its juxtaposition with the body do? The body, headless, is its own kind of signifying machine. Indeed, sex might be “located” genitally on the body. However, if the tie exaggerates the masculine to make its easy equivalencies laughable, how can we trust the body itself to be a reliable representation of sex? Indeed, we see here the ways in which sex appears, or at least how we locate it semiotically, whether within a sartorial or biological system of signs. In the elision of these two orders of
signs, the coded and contingent qualities of sex might at last be “seen.” Thus the emphatic affirmation of the thumbs-up is shadowed by a kind of doubt that haunts the signs of gender, of sex.

In her photographs, DeVun emphasizes the archive’s wearability and its relationship to the body as the sleeve of the self. With visual concision, the artist presents layers of signifiers that sit over bodies—bodies that, in and of themselves, are rich sites of signification. Ties cover torsos, buttons and patches affix themselves to fabric that dresses members of the LGBTQI community, whatever that might look like. One emerges from this photographic project at times feeling as if one has walked through a series of overlays, of curtains that suggest a body, that move with bodily movement, but still conceal the person or persons behind them. Most poignantly, the body itself often appears as mere curtain, smooth as a photograph.

The photographic quality of the body, as well as the appearance of mass-produced objects such as the pin or tie, evokes the reproduction so readily associated

![Figure 2. Leah DeVun, Thumbs Up, 2012](image)
with the medium. In that formal rhyme between mass-production and the body, one might intuit an infinite standardization of both commodities and beings, or ways in which difference is leveled even within the expansiveness of the LGBTQI community. Yet against this omnipresent repetition, there is a concurrent sense of bodies that, or who, in their very material presence suggest something beyond sameness.

In Everywoman (fig. 3), two women sit behind a newspaper that obscures their figures even as its very title claims to represent them. Yet more than another visual representation of the inadequacy of a signifier to represent a person, a gender, or a community, we note how this object is tended to and transformed by its readers. It is no coincidence that the newspaper rests, intimately, against fingers and breasts. In many cases, to touch is a transgressive act in an archive: the handling of fragile documents often occurs through the mediation of gloves (fig. 4). Even when unmediated touch is permitted, contact can feel taboo. We know that the residue of too many fingers erodes the surface of materials and hastens their demise. This worry about touch highlights the corrupting force of physical use, rather than the ways in
which handling and assemblage are at the heart of the archive’s construction. Unlike the gloves that limit the haptic experience of the archived object, that circumscribe and isolate the researcher, these images focus on the ways in which physical presence and communion are primary. In contrast to the researcher’s solitary use, the archive’s origins and maintenance depend upon collective work. It is this collaboration that resonates in the juxtaposition of bodies, a union that looks backward to the formation of the archive and forward to further action, the ways that old and new imaginings for queer voices, lives, and bodies might coalesce in the future. Indeed, the photograph emphasizes both obfuscation and intense engagement—after all, these figures are reading. We can even imagine them searching for themselves in an archived past.

And so the archive is something that we “do,” and our visits matter. To state that the archive is performed, or even that its authority is performative, is by now a given. Beyond this, we suggest a kind of counterarchive that the “official” archive produces. In the installation of Latent Images, a pair of personal photographic albums and protective gloves occupied the center of the gallery. Viewers are primed to think of this type of display as excavatory, the unearthing of a personal past or the exemplar of a communal politics of the moment. But we envision instead accumulation, the strata of gestures that have built up around the original object: (1) the photographic act of “capturing” a moment, (2) the act of personal collection,
the act of public release, the act of unshelving, and the act of touching and viewing. Rather than limit the archive to inevitable loss—dead people and finished histories—the most queer aspect of this queer archive might be its expanding set of reactivations.

DeVun has suggested such expansiveness in the structure of the show. Rather than limit herself to the resources at hand, DeVun’s employment of personal and extraneous materials suggests that a part of life, and of queer life, has already been excluded from the archive. The installation thus draws attention to archival borders and, more precisely, the foreclosures that its selections entail. Indeed, what comes into particular focus is a cruel paradox within the archive: that the mass-produced, commercially available, and printed artifacts of gay and lesbian life, its very visual representation, might act normatively—for lives, no doubt, resist these common signifiers. Yet, rather than mourn failure, these photographs hint at another possibility. The signifiers of queer life might be layered with use; wear might appear on their surfaces, and they might yield other objects and potentialities. In DeVun’s work, surfaces build up and proliferate. This suggests a reversal of archival activity, and even our experience of time. Rather than a site of digging, the retrieval of lost historical voices from below, the archive functions as a site where the ellipses and limits of the past might become accretive and communal sites for the present. The chain of collaborators starts with the archive; it continues with DeVun’s solicitation of photo-

Figure 5. Installation view, 2012. Photograph by David Evans Frantz and courtesy ONE Archives Gallery and Museum
graphic materials and models; its curation and installation transform it once more; and it propels this essay, given to readers and as-of-yet unknown ends. Through this active engagement with the archive, we feel that queer lives not only have mattered but continue to do so.

The title of DeVun’s show, *Latent Images*, is provocative in its mobilization of latency outside its familiar psychoanalytic and photographic definitions. Rather than a single meaning behind manifest content, or a crystalline imprint on film, we imagine layered crosscurrents of meaning that persist within archival materials, the interactive and dynamic archival space, and the collection’s name itself—the ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archives. In that strange elision of the singular (“ONE”) and the plural (“Archives”), one can imagine that from a single space of gathered material, the archive can start to split, multiply, and perhaps even misbehave.

**Notes**

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3. See Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996). “In an enigmatic sense, which will clarify itself perhaps . . . , the question of the archive is not, we repeat, a question of the past. It is not the question of a concept dealing with the past that might already be at our disposal or not at our disposal, an archivable concept of the archive. It is a question of the future, the question of the future itself, the question of a response, of a promise and of a responsibility for tomorrow” (36).
7. In this way the archives might be, in Pierre Nora’s terms, *les lieux de mémoire*, or places of memory, that can reference discourses of history without assuming that such histories are finished or real. See Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire,” trans. Marc Rondebusch, in “Memory and Counter-Memory,” special issue, *Representations*, no. 26 (1989): 23. For questions of temporality in queer archives and specifically the ONE Archives, see Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities*,