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Archival Activism: Living Anachronisms and Other Unfinished Histories

STATEMENT

Mathias Danbolt



Nanna Debois Buhl, *Respect History*, 2009

In 2010 the Norwegian media declared queer theory to be history. A “queer theoretical hegemony is over”, the editor of culture in the intellectual newspaper *Morgenbladet* stated in an article. “The paradigm shift is absolute. Try to say the sentence: The war in Afghanistan isn’t happening. Or: Everything is text. Or: Biological gender doesn’t exist. You won’t have any success, I promise. The truisms of postmodernism have gone from being powerful to being slightly embarrassing.”¹ The editor in chief of the left-wing newspaper, *Klassekampen*, formulated it in similar terms, explaining that he had “shed no tears” upon the death of the “postmodernist hegemony” in Norway, “with its theoretical branches such as queer theory, where some theorists hubristically insisted that biological gender didn’t exist.”² “Now”, he continued, “the goal is to get back to a healthy and truth-seeking culture in academia and in the public sphere in general.” Furthermore, the editor of culture in the newspaper *Aftenposten* explained that he had found queer theory to be nothing but “wishful thinking”, remarking that he “couldn’t think of any queer theorists in Norway who write engaged

and understandable prose. They all use a terrible and obscure tribal language.”³

It was indeed the Norwegian comedian Harald Eia who initiated the criticism of queer theory in his popular television show *Hjernevask* (Brainwash) that ran on the state channel NRK in the spring of 2010.⁴ Re-launching himself as an investigative journalist, the show used a simplified “nature vs. nurture” debate as a starting point in order to praise evolutionary biology on behalf of poststructuralist feminism and queer theory. In response to queer theorist Agnes Bolsø’s criticism that she had felt abused by the program, Eia quipped to the newspapers, “If you are a dictator that has run the business for years, you might not be very receptive to criticism.”⁵ Finally, it seemed, Norway had freed itself from the grips of the queer “dictators” with their tribal language that nobody understood, and their far-out ideas that were nothing but “wishful thinking”. Truth would prevail.

Queer theory is history in Norway—finally dead and buried. After the “tribe” had been exposed on TV, the backwardness of its thinking and language was made obvious to all, and the anachronism had finally been cleared out of the way by the winds of progress. This is an untimely moment for those of us working with queer theoretical and activist perspectives in Norway. Not only are we told that we have ruled the country and the academy for decades (why didn’t they tell us before? We could have done something!), but we are also positioned as an undeveloped species, speaking in ludicrous, indecipherable tribal language. It is indeed an untimely moment to be at the threshold of a career as a queer-informed researcher, as it is obvious that I am too late; that my material is already dated and out of sync with the present. Over the last few years I have worked on a PhD project, preliminary entitled *Touching History: The Affective Economies of Queer Archival Activism* that explores the ways in which contemporary queer activists

1 Lena Lindgren, “Anonyme analytikere og smertelige kjønnskifter”, *Morgenbladet*, 2 July 2010. Author’s translation. [<http://www.morgenbladet.no/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20100702/OAKTUELT/707029928>]

2 Bjørgulf Braanen, “Et forsinket oppgjør?”, *Klassekampen*, 10 October 2009. My translation.

3 Knut Olav Åmås quoted in Sandra Lillebø, “–Trenger homo-grenser”, *Klassekampen* 25 June 2010. Author’s translation. [http://www.klassekampen.no/artikler/kultur_medier/57634/article/item/null/-trenger-homo-grenser]

4 See the book version of the program, Harald Eia og Ole-Martin Ihle, *Født sånn eller blitt sånn? Utro kvinner, sjalu menn og hvorfor oppdragelse ikke virker* (Oslo: Gyldendal, 2010)

5 Harald Eia quoted in Raymond Haslien, “Kaller forskere diktatorer”, *DagenMagazinet*, 28 September 2010. Author’s translation.

and artists have turned toward history in order to rethink notions of politics, progress, and action. Yet last year's events made me realize that one does not always need to *turn* toward history—often one finds oneself positioned as history; in the dustbin of history. As such, it is perhaps a timely moment to work on queering the politics of history. Positioned as I am as a *living anachronism*, my situation seems to symptomize the argument in my research on the political nature of historicizing and archival gestures: the violent act of cutting something off—metaphorically, practically, systemically—from the present.

The obituaries for queer theory in Norway made me start pondering the question: when does History begin and end? For a long time I thought that queer theory and politics were still to be properly introduced in Norway. But when I found that the queer thinking that I had thought had a *future* in the Norwegian debate did indeed reach the mainstream through a series of preposterous obituaries, I got temporally disoriented.

The intense media burial of queer politics in Norway cannot be described as a simple “backlash”. It is more complex than that; akin to the double movement that Angela McRobbie in *The Aftermath of Feminism* (2009) argues has characterized the assaults on feminism in the UK, where neo-liberal and conservative critics invoke feminism only to position it as already achieved and no longer needed—“a spent force”.⁶ The situation in Norway seems to be yet another example of what McRobbie calls the process of “disarticulation” that works to “foreclose the possibility or likelihood of various expansive intersections and inter-generational feminist transmissions. Articulations are therefore reversed, broken off, and the idea of a new feminist political imaginary is increasingly inconceivable”.⁷ The Norwegian TV show worked as a dispersal

strategy where a hysterical and monstrous version of queer theory was presented to the public only to evidence the need to put it to rest. The effects of ridiculing political movements in this way are severe, according to McRobbie: “When important historical moments of liberation become somehow no longer transmissible, or when such moments are caricatured and trivialized, if not forgotten, then there is perhaps a crisis for the possibility of radical democratic politics”.⁸ *When* is history? The question is one of political urgency. What are the effects of positioning ongoing and unfolding political cultures as history; as something one can look back on, retrospectively, from the perspective of the present?

The artists and activists I think with in my research project focus on the political effects of the disarticulation of the so-called past from the present. In aesthetic practices by artists such as Pauline Boudry & Renate Lorenz [<http://www.boudry-lorenz.de>], Sharon Hayes [<http://www.shaze.info>], Nanna Debois Buhl [<http://www.nannadeboisbuhl.net>], MEN [<http://blog.menmakemusic.com>], and others, I find attempts to think to the side of the ideologies of progression that inform the political imaginaries in the Former West. These aesthetic practices explore ways to disturb or break out of straight time frames by entering into anachronistic, melancholic, nostalgic, and desirable relations with a past that is not *passé*. By positing historical and archival practice as arenas of political dispute, works such as these highlight the importance of paying attention to the *chrononormativity* of the status quo.⁹

6 Angela McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change* (Los Angeles, London, New Delhi, Singapore, Washington DC: Sage, 2009), 12.

7 *Ibid.*, 25–26.

8 *Ibid.*, 49.

In my practice, I have tentatively described these artistic interventions that revisit unfinished political histories as forms of *archival activism*. This is an attempt to highlight the ways in which aesthetic practices reactivate political cases and histories that have been relegated to the drawers of unsolved or forgotten files in the sociopolitical imaginary. A central feature in these archival activist practices is that they question the logics of the dominant understanding of history, using affective and performative historiographical methods to engage the “still living” remnants of the past in the present.¹⁰ As such, they address and assert the importance of long-overdue issues of injustice that risk being neglected or positioned as anachronistic within historical logics invested in chronology and ideologies of progression. Artistic practices that interrupt the separation principle that safely distinguishes “then” from “now” lead us into the difficult negotiation between *feeling historical* and *being historicized*: between the desire, pleasure (and frustration) of touching unfinished histories—and the aspiration to avoid the violent historicization of ongoing struggles.

By giving room to consider the duration of struggles, the stickiness of history, and the fragility of progress, we can complicate political chronicles and chronological narratives that move forward by relegating ongoing fights to the archives of outmoded pasts.

9 I borrow the term “chrononormativity” from Elizabeth Freeman: [<http://english.ucdavis.edu/people/directory/esfreema>], *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2010).

10 For a brilliant discussion of the life of the “still”, see Rebecca Schneider [<http://research.brown.edu/research/profile.php?id=10341>], *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment* (New York & London: Routledge, 2011).

