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TOUCHING HISTORY: ARCHIVAL RELATIONS IN QUEER ART AND THEORY

THE ARCHIVE IS ALSO A PLACE OF DREAMS
— CAROLYN STEEDMAN[1]

One of the most touching moments in Gus Van Sant's Academy Award winning film *Milk* (2008) is the archival footage in its opening sequence. In the black-and-white newsreel of police raids of gay bars in the 1950s and 1960s, we see groups of young, well-dressed men being arrested. Gestures of shame dominate the recordings: While sitting in the bars waiting to be taken to the police vans, the men hide their faces from the aggressive press photographers documenting the arrest. Taken from the archives of homophobic violence, the footage historically contextualizes the film's tale of the unexpected political success of the gay activist Harvey Milk — and his tragic death by assassination in 1978. The images call attention to the brutality of documentation, showing how the camera can be used as a shaming device. But the redeployment of the material in *Milk* intends to reverse this process of shaming: As the narrative on Milk's activist life unfolds, it is the police and the homophobic state apparatus that get shamed.

The story of how gays and lesbians went from covering their faces in shame to becoming 'out and proud' subjects marching in the streets has become a standard narrative of gay liberation in the West. The annual Pride Parades in capitals and major cities in Europe and the U.S. are often said to manifest how the fight for equality has been won, and that homophobia and gender discrimination are things of the past. When queer activists continue to be angry and criticize the current state

of affairs, we are frequently dismissed as 'living in the past,' being nostalgic about our lost status as victims, and refusing to realize how liberated we *really* are. But unfortunately this is far from the truth. As the story of the assassination of Harvey Milk reminds us, increasing visibility does not necessarily result in long-term political progress, and the so-called victories are often conditional. Only some gays and lesbians have received basic rights of citizenship, and in many cases this has only been possible by breaking the "ties to all those who are still outside," as Heather Love formulates it in her contribution to this volume. It is important to resist the tempting progressive notion of history, and when reflecting on the past, as films like *Milk* inspires us to do, remember that the fight for a society livable for all continues in the present.

But perhaps there is something to this understanding of queer politics as being a thing of the past, although not in the sense that it is passé or out of date. Rather, it could draw our attention to the many ways in which queer politics continues to be touched by the past.[2] The reclaiming of the stigma-inflected term 'queer' by activists and theorists in the early 1990s, is an example of such affective connections across time, embedded as it is in the historical haunting of its pejorative use. In the seminal essay "Critically Queer" (1993), Judith Butler reflects upon the performative force of this appropriation, asking whether 'queer' can "overcome its constitutive history of injury" and be redeployed "in the direction of urgent and expanding political purposes."[3] This difficult balance between the politics of the past and the present is central to current queer politics, as it is to many of the contributions to *Lost and Found: Queerying the Archive.*

Recent queer art and theory have entered into relationships with the past in many ways, challenging traditional understandings of the archive, evidence, visibility, and truth. These are central issues in *Lost and Found*'s focus on 'queerying the archive,' where artists and theorists query and *queer* the way we *do* and understand history. This text outlines some of the archival strategies that are at stake in this work, investigating how practices of speculating, flirting, imagining, confronting, and unlearning may open up new ways of touching and being touched by the past.

AN ARCHIVAL AGE

Monumental buildings, museums, libraries, messy lofts, albums, computers, and memory-sticks — archives come in many forms. When we talk about archives, we usually mean

repositories for individual or collective — official or unofficial —documents and materials: Repositories that function as a basis for our attempts, however partial or ineffective, to reconstruct and represent stories of the past.[4] But the understanding of the archive as a place to consult when writing history is fairly new, dating back to the turn of the 19th century. Traditionally, the archive referred to the storage of legal and bureaucratic records, but the opening of the National Archives in Paris to the public on July 25, 1794, symbolized a shift towards a new and modern archival spirit where the archive "morphed into a hybrid institution based in public administration and historical research alike."[5] This process also coincided with a symbolic shift from a sovereign form of 'royal memory' of great acts to the emergence of new forms of 'public memory' of everyday life.[6] But questions of relevance and importance became central in the task of selecting between the vast quantities of material that could have potential interest in the future. Prioritizing paper documents of an official character, the limitations of national archives to encompass collective memory has made evident the importance of different kinds of archival structures for the transference of knowledge and the writing of history.

The question of the use of archives always implies questions of power. As the philosopher Jacques Derrida points out in his influential book *Archive Fever — A Freudian Impression* (1995): "There is no political power without control of the archive, if not of memory. Effective democratization can always be measured by this essential criterion: the participation in and the access to the archive, its constitution, and its interpretation."[7] The question of control of the archives and memory is still a crucial one in our contemporary context — often described as "an archival age."[8] The explosive development of information technology has given rise to numerous new forms of archival structures, based on microchips and hard drives, and available to us through the interface of laptops, iPods, and cell phones. In the age of Googlemania, we are 'all' said to be both archivists and archive consumers.[9] And whilst it remains important to be aware of the universalizing Eurocentrism that runs through much of the rhetoric on the Web 2.0. revolution,[10] the Internet has certainly transformed the structure of and relationship to the archives for many of us.

The Internet, with all its "chaotically sorted" information, presents us with dynamic and interactive archives — archives of transmission and continual change, rather than static accumulation.[11] Traditional archives have taken up this challenge, and major libraries and museums have opened up

their collections online, giving new opportunities for people across the world to access knowledge formerly only accessible to the few. But it is important to remember that these technological developments have also created new possibilities for surveillance, creating opaque archives of state security in our 'societies of control.'

It is crucial to question the political use and abuse of archives, just as it remains central to question the politics of archiving itself. Archives are constituted by exclusion. It is the processes of selection, classification, and presentation for later analysis that "makes an object archival."[12] The archive is therefore positioned between memory and forgetting, between order and chaos. As Ernst van Alphen has made clear, the introduction of systems, orders, boundaries, and reason into what is disparate and without contours can be viewed as a practice of "consciousness and meaning production." But the principle of coherence has a price, as the object's "[u]niqueness, specificity, and individuality are destroyed within the process."[13] In other words, the archive is dependent on a principle of identification and recognition — a principle that risks reducing the material in the tyranny of categorization that severs connections and other possible meanings. The process of archiving has therefore often been described as an act of violence, where an object's admission into the archive represents a form of "protective destruction."[14] Questions of archival violence have been strongly raised in relation to the archival methods of totalitarian regimes such as the Stalinist Soviet and Nazi Germany, where the manipulation and destruction of archives and evidence were important strategies of control — an important historical context for many artists and theorists' work on archives and memory in the latter half of the 20th century.[15]

In the art world, the museum — functioning as an archive for storing and presenting works to the public — has been a central site of critique, from the avant-garde movements in the early twentieth century to Institutional Critique and feminist art and theory in the 1960s and 1970s. While the former criticized the bourgeois museum for creating and maintaining the distance between art and life, the latter delivered rigorous analyses of the economic, gendered, racist, and heterosexist assumptions embedded in the ideal of the 'neutral' white cube of the gallery.[16] Theorists and artists worked to change the representational imbalance in art museums, focusing upon the exclusion of female, non-heterosexual, and non-white artists in collections and curricula.[17] Fighting to overturn the patriarchal legacies that dominated the art world, the postmodernist art of the 1980s launched a deep-rooted critique of the notion of representation itself.

In the current 'archival impulse' in contemporary art, described by the art historian Hal Foster, the relationships to the archives of art are somewhat different. Foster argues that "the critiques of representational totality and institutional integrity [...] [are] generally assumed — not triumphantly proclaimed or melancholically pondered."[18] In other words, the recent interest in the archives seems less motivated by a critique of the destructivity of archives than by using archives as points of departure for developing "alternative knowledge or counter-memories."[19] Discussing the work of contemporary artists such as Thomas Hirschhorn, Liam Gillick, Tacita Dean, and Sam Durant, Foster points out that the new archival art is characterized by a desire to "make historical information, often lost or displaced, physically present."[20] Often using fragments or obscure traces to embark on new explorations, these artists-as-archivists invite the spectator to participate in the production of meaning. Foster's description of the archival impulse in contemporary art is relevant to many of the artworks in *Lost and Found* that are similarly engaged in archival strategies of post-production and remixing, citation and juxtaposition, collecting and combining. But whereas questions of gender, sexuality, and race are tellingly absent from Foster's analysis of contemporary archival art, a queer perspective on the archive can open up new understandings of this archival impulse in contemporary art and theory.

ALTERNATIVE ARCHIVES

The archive has been a central subject of debate in relation to the writing of the histories of non-normative sexualities. A common feature within both the tradition of Lesbian and Gay Studies established in the 1970s and current work in Queer Studies is the deep-rooted mistrust of public archival institutions. This wariness has many facets, related to ideology and the archival politics of the material collected. Peter Hegarty has pointed out that "early pioneers in this field [of Gay and Lesbian Studies] found the recovery of gay and lesbian pasts to be impeded by the lack of a coherent lesbian and gay archive, the deliberate destruction of personal letters, and the withholding of access to archives for gay and lesbian scholars."[21] There are endless stories of archives lost or destroyed due to historical or contemporary homophobia, and researchers on gender and sexuality have often met fierce

resistance. The exclusion of material on sexuality from the archives on a 'moral' basis is also rooted in the fact that homosexuality and other 'perversions' have been criminalized and/or pathologized until fairly recently in the West. In institutional archives, traces of homosexuality are usually only to be found in the registers of the criminal and sick. In the article "The Life of Infamous Men" (1977), Michel Foucault discusses this particular form of 'negative' presence in the archives.[22] Coming across an internment register in Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, Foucault writes about the intensity of these fragments of "[l]ives which are as though they hadn't existed, lives which only survive from the clash with a power whose only wish was to annihilate or at least to efface them, lives which only return to us through the effect of multiple chances."[23] As in the influential study *The History of Sexuality* (1976–1984), Foucault reminds us that repression does not necessarily imply invisibility, but that discourses of sexuality may be found in unexpected — and often uncomfortable — places.

As a reaction to heterosexist and patriarchal state institutions, several grassroots-based lesbian and gay archives were opened in the 1970s throughout North America and Europe. Not wanting histories to be left in the hands of potentially homophobic history keepers, alternative institutions were set up to save material and stories of lesbian and gay lives neglected in official versions of history. An important feature of these archives is their community-based structure, run by volunteers, who collectively create their own systems of value and inclusion.[24] These systems often go beyond the technologies of inventory of institutional archives, with their prioritization of textual and identifiable documents. Since stories of homosexualities have been excluded from most official discourses, these alternative archives often focus on other forms of historical remains, like art, popular cultural artifacts, clothes, anonymous pamphlets and zines, and various forms of miscellaneous 'ephemera.'

One of the most influential and long-standing of these alternative institutions is the Lesbian Herstory Archives (LHA) in New York. Started by a collective of lesbians in 1974, and for many years located in Joan Nestle's apartment on Upper West Side Manhattan, the archive has now grown to fill a four-story house of its own in Brooklyn. LHA is an example of how alternative archives often have important social functions, positioning themselves in stark opposition to the idea of an archive as "a dreary, dusty and dark place filled with boxes of papers of interest only to a small group of academic researchers and

writers."[25] Instead, as stated on their homepage, LHA is "a magical place — part library, part museum, a community gathering space" open to all lesbians.[26] LHA has a policy of inclusion centered on whether something has relevance to, or is made by, a lesbian — displacing the notion of neutrality and objectivity often connected to the archive as institution. But the LHA is not a 'role model-collection,' as Joan Nestle calls it: It does not restrict itself to 'good' and 'representable' lesbians, since it also includes the difficult histories.[27]

The importance of separatist archives, such as the LHA, has to be seen in the light of the representational imbalance in LGBT history. Even within this field, it is evident that some subjects are more visible than others. As pointed out by the curators of the landmark 1994 exhibition on gay and lesbian life in America, *Becoming Visible: The Legacy of Stonewall*, at New York Public Library: "Middle-class gay white men have been, and continue to be, much more visible in the photographic and archival record — as they are in the media and in the streets — than lesbians, people of color, and working-class people."[28] While such critiques of equal representation tend to be dismissed and reduced to questions of 'politically correctness,' it is important to remain aware of the structural factors at play in issues of invisibility: Who has access to archives and archiving? What kind of material is archived and considered worth saving? How is the archive organized? What does one look for when thinking and writing history?

QUEERYING LESBIAN AND GAY ARCHIVES

The politics of identity central to the archival logic of lesbian and gay archives have been challenged by queer theory's critique of sexual identities and categories. One criticism is based on the issue of anachronism in archives of gay and lesbian history. Given that the term 'homosexuality' is a fairly recent construction, dating back to the last two decades of the 19th century, and the meaning of categories like 'gay' and 'lesbian' are even younger, categorizing historically on the basis of such modern terms is seen as problematic. Would it be a form of archival violence to label people in the past something like 'gay' or 'lesbian' — terms that describe modern identities they did not know of? Of course, the fact that the categories themselves did not exist does not mean that homosexual acts did not happen — but how are we to categorize such actions of the past in the present?

The historical contingency of identity categories has also been raised in relation to the reclaiming of historical subjects

as lesbian or gay. In the process of rectifying the heteronormative erasure of homosexuality, major historical figures and artists, like Leonardo da Vinci, Caravaggio, and Oscar Wilde, have been reclaimed as gay men. But this raises questions not only of anachronism, but also of inclusion. As several of these men are known to have had (at least official) relationships to women, what is it that makes them gay and not bisexual, as some bi-activists claim? And who decides? As Clare Hemmings points out in *Bisexual Spaces* (2002), there are several problems with such a reclamation, as it forms a politics of inclusion that "creates a never-ending necessity for identifying the next excluded other to be incorporated."[29] The battle over historical figures' identities is problematic, Hemmings contends, as it "maintain[s] the structure of inclusion and exclusion, itself productive of minoritization."[30] Since the search for mirrors of 'ourselves' in history is ultimately something that can never be accomplished, we could instead learn more by focusing on the partial and tangible relations to these incommensurable lives and experiences of the past.

These difficulties of categorization go to the heart of the politics of archiving, and in this way the queer critique of identities disturbs the logic of the archive. A queer understanding of the heterogeneous and fundamentally indeterminate characteristics of sexuality challenges the traditional gay and lesbian archive, where history and material have been included and identified according to categories of sexual identity. A queer archive may in this sense almost seem like a contradiction in terms, because if we understand identity to be essential for an archival order, the strength of queer theory is the continual pushing and troubling of such categories and definitions. But even though a queer perspective criticizes the essential status of identities, this does not mean that questions of identification and recognition are unnecessary or unimportant. A total lack of recognizability can make life unlivable.[31] The queer archival practices included in *Lost and Found* stand at this conflicted juncture, interrogating the terms by which the archive is constrained in order to open up possibilities for new modes of archives and archival relations.[32]

SPECULATING

The role and position of the archivist and researcher is at the center of recent queer theoretical ventures into the question of archives. In the essay "What's That Smell? Queer Temporalities and Subcultural Lives" (2005) cultural theorist Judith Halberstam criticizes the hierarchies within studies

of subcultures, where queer subcultures — especially those including lesbians and people of color — are located at the bottom and tend to be left out of theoretical and historical accounts. Arguing that queer subcultures must be reckoned with on their own terms, she states that "the nature of queer subcultural activity requires a nuanced theory of archives and archiving."[33] One important aspect of queer archiving is that the boundaries between archivists and cultural producers are blurred. It is often members of the groups and communities themselves that document the activities — not external 'adult' experts. Friendship networks and cooperation are therefore central to the archival procedures, replacing the ideal of the disinterested archivist and researcher with a reflexive understanding of the implicated activist-archivist.[34]

Halberstam describes the ideal queer archive as an eclectic merging of ethnographic oral history, online databases and home pages, collections of zines and temporary artifacts, and statements and descriptions from activists and cultural producers. But she does not stop with these different material repositories:

> *[T]he notion of an archive has to extend beyond the image of a place to collect material or hold documents, and it has to become a floating signifier for the kind of lives implied by the paper remnants of shows, clubs, events, and meetings. The archive is not simply a repository; it is also a theory of cultural relevance, a construction of collective memory, and a complex record of queer activity.*[35]

Pointing out that an archive needs users and interpreters to function, she urges cultural historians to "wade through the material and piece together the jigsaw puzzle of queer history in the making."[36]

Halberstam's queer archival practice challenges the discursive, material, and conceptual boundaries of conventional archives. Her focus on the importance of including lived experiences in the archives is inspired by the work of the cultural theorist Ann Cvetkovich and the performance theorist José Esteban Muñoz. In her influential book *An Archive of Feelings* (2003), Ann Cvetkovich argues that "Lesbian and gay history demands a radical archive of emotion in order to document intimacy, sexuality, love, and activism — all areas of experience that are difficult to chronicle through the materials of a traditional archive."[37] But how to document feelings? As Cvetkovich discusses in her article "Photographing Objects"

here, emotions and sexuality can only be archived indirectly, and art and cultural artifacts can therefore function as important archival practices.

Along a similar line, in "Ephemera as Evidence" (1996), José Esteban Muñoz argues that the ephemeral is central to an understanding queer history. Focusing on the temporality of queer acts and performance, Muñoz writes:

> *Queerness is often transmitted covertly. This has everything to do with the fact that leaving too much of a trace has often meant that the queer subject has left herself open for attack. Instead of being clearly available as visible evidence, queerness has instead existed as innuendo, gossip, fleeting moments, and performances that are meant to be interacted with by those within its epistemological sphere — while evaporating at the touch of those who would eliminate queer possibility.*[38]

Muñoz reminds us that the lack of queer presence in official archives and history is related to the performative and ephemeral quality of queer acts. Focusing on the 'invisible evidence' of queerness, he shows the necessity of rethinking the evidential when writing queer history. Interested in paying heed to the "worldmaking qualities" of performance and queer acts — events that disappear "in the very act of materializing"[39] — Muñoz shows the importance of an expanded understanding of materiality, one that centers on the "traces, glimmers, residues, and specks of things."[40] His focus on the ephemeral is therefore not to be understood as a move away from either questions of truth or materiality: The ephemeral does not equal immateriality, it is rather "another understanding of what matters."[41] His argument of the importance of invisible evidence might sound speculative to some, but the speculative is not negative in this case. Rather, his embrace of an anti-rigorous methodology is a strategy to confront the institutional ideology of 'hard facts' that dominates the humanities — an ideology that excludes the temporary and performative knowledges of queerness.

FLIRTING

The focus on the ephemeral represents a different modality of proof and argumentation — one that welcomes the tentative and provisional. Muñoz is not alone in pointing out the importance of queering the evidential.[42] In *Dear Friends — American Photographs of Men Together 1849–1918* (2001), David Deitcher argues in a similar way for the value of *uncertainty* in

historical interpretation. In his work on anonymous photographs of men, he makes a case out of the fact that he does not *know* what the poses and gestures meant for the men in the images. He has no evidence that can prove that there was a sexual or erotic relationship between the many affectionate men in these photos. But neither is there any evidence of the opposite. Countering what we could term the evidentiary logic of heteronormativity — implying that all are heterosexual until the contrary is proven — Deitcher argues for the importance of a speculative method. "From a queer perspective," he writes, "this self-imposed horizon of historical knowledge has a salutary effect, inasmuch as it rejects the hubris that so often motivates more elaborately legitimated attempts at historical reclamation."[43] This queering of the evidential can be seen as a larger move within queer studies — away from the essentialist fantasy of finding the crucial piece of evidence that can identify someone's homosexuality, and towards an acknowledgement of the *un*certain as a productive site of entertainment.

Obviously, the practice of interpreting historical material where 'hard evidence' is scarce or lacking is not something unique to queer studies, nor is it something that the minoritarian subject has a privileged relationship to. But the reflexivity and productivity of this position is seldom acknowledged in other areas of study. As the art historian Carol Mavor reflects upon in the introduction to her book on sexuality and eroticism in Victorian photographs, *Becomings*:

> *All historical research, whether the objects of study are from a long time ago or yesterday, feeds on a desire to know, to come closer to the person, object, under study. Though we go to great pains to cover up our desire, to make our voice objective, to see that our findings are grounded, to dismiss our own bodies, we flirt (some of us more overtly, others more secretly) with the past. Flirting, as a game of suspension without the finale of seduction, keeps our subjects alive — ripe for further inquiry, probing further research. The more we flirt, the more we fantasize about our subject, the more elusive and desirable it becomes.*[44]

IMAGINING

Cheryl Dunye's feature film *The Watermelon Woman* (1997) shares this flirtatious and speculative relationship to history. The film centers on the video clerk 'Cheryl' (played by Dunye herself) who wants to become a filmmaker. Deciding that her first film project will be a documentary on 'The Water-

melon Women,' a black actress she has seen in a Hollywood movie from the 1930s, the narrative unfolds through a series of encounters with different archives. We follow Cheryl on her extensive, but futile, search for information on The Watermelon Woman — browsing through books at the public library, questioning people on the street, visiting a collection of black film and memorabilia, interviewing an academic theorist — as well as her mother. Nowhere does she find any information. But an old acquaintance of her mother, the 'stone butch' Shirley, sets her on the right track: She knew Fae Richards, which is The Watermelon Woman's real name, from the music and dance clubs in the old days. Knowing her name, and understanding that she was a 'Sapphic sister' like herself, Cheryl goes to New York to visit C.L.I.T. — Center for Lesbian Information and Technology (a humorous parody on the Lesbian Herstory Archives). In this chaotic and cozy archive she finds a box full of images of Fae Richards and manages to track down Richard's life partner, who tells Cheryl that she has passed away. Although Cheryl concludes that her documentary cannot be made, the film ends with her presenting the biography of Fae Richards while showing the beautiful black-and-white photographs she has found and collected. While this story is told, the end credits intersperse with a text stating that the artist Zoe Leonard has created the images of Fae Richards. The credits end with the following statement, "Sometimes you have to create your own history. The Watermelon Women is fictional — Cheryl Dunye."

Just because the archival evidence of Fae Richards's life and career in *The Watermelon Woman* is revealed to be as fictitious as the film itself, this does not mean that people like Richards did not exist. Rather, the film's staging of the racist and heteronormative dispositions of institutional archives reminds us that such stories would probably never have been documented in official archives in the first place. As a reaction to these empty archives, Dunye and Zoe Leonard have created their own.

The author Tony Morrison makes an important point in this regard in her article "The Site of Memory" (1990). Reflecting upon the task of writing the traumatic history of slavery from the perspective of black women, she points out that the crucial distinction in history is not between fact and fiction, but between fact and truth:

> *[F]acts can exist without human intelligence, but truth cannot. So if I'm looking to find and expose a truth about the interior life of people who didn't write it (which doesn't mean that they didn't have it); if I'm trying to fill in the blanks that the slave narratives left [...] then the approach that's most productive and trustworthy for me is the recollection that moves from the image to the text. Not from the text to the image.*[45]

Morrison is critical of the credibility given to verifiable 'facts' in the archive — a discourse that marginalized subjects have seldom had the possibility to take part in, though they often were its subject. Instead, Morrison argues for the "gravest responsibility" of the imagination.[46] The fictional evidence of Fae Richards in *The Watermelon Woman* invites us to reflect upon the fact that though this archive is fictional, it still may represent a truth.

CONFRONTING

The Watermelon Woman, like many other works in *Lost and Found*, represents what Carolyn Dinshaw describes as "a queer historical impulse [...] to make connections across time."[47] But these connections can be anything but pleasant, as Conny Karlsson and Andy Candy's video *I Am Other (Candy & Me)* (2007–2008) makes clear. This poetic video work presents us with complex questions of identification, recognition, and expectations of transsexuality, through a careful archival strategy of reenactment. In the work, the Swedish activist and writer Andy Candy reembodies the former Warhol Superstar Candy Darling, as portrayed by Peter Hujar in his famous photo *Candy Darling On Her Death Bed* (1974) — known to many from the cover of Anthony and The Johnsons' album *I Am a Bird Now* (2005). In the voice-over, Andy Candy talks about the confrontation with such historical images:

> *Candy Darling represents to me what you can expect of a transwoman. The most well known image of Candy is from 1974 when she lies on her death bed. For a long time I have not wanted to identify myself with the common image of a transperson. I refuse to be that lonely, scared, vulnerable, and tragic transperson.*[48]

The act of taking the name Andy Candy and reembodying Candy Darling's image in this film can be read as an act of identification, creating an affective and partial community across time, in Carolyn Dinshaw's terms. But the critical focus on the stereotypical scripts that this story represents highlights the ambivalence and conflicted nature of such connections with the past. While paying heed to the legacy of transwomen like

Candy Darling, Andy Candy does not want to stay put in this community of victims. Claiming that the only way of dismantling an image is to first "recognize that it exists," the video shows how confronting the archive can be a strategy of resistance: After Andy Candy has pointed out how there is "nothing liberating in being an object," she leaves the prescribed 'death bed' and walks out of the image — out of the archive.

UNLEARNING

"What is it to learn?" the postcolonial theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak asks repeatedly in the essay "Acting Bits/Identity Talk" (1992).[49] In *I Am Other (Candy & Me)* this nearly impossible question is taken up through a problematization of the scripted narrative of gender transition embedded in the diagnosis 'transsexuality' — a narrative Andy Candy refuses to accept. This question of learning how to *do* gender arises in a somewhat different way when confronted with Kimberly Austin's adult-sized alphabet blocks in the installation *Learning Normalcy* (1997). The blocks spell out the alphabet with images of objects and texts from old manuals on health, childhood development, hygiene, and sex and marriage. The text on block A (for Apple, Airplane, Arteries, Alligator) says, "Adolescents need outlets for the sexual tensions building up with them. If no normal and natural associations with the opposite sex are developed, really abnormal behavior may develop." These scripts of proper behavior have been written to parents and adults to help children grow up in a correct and normal way. But in *Learning Normalcy*, the instructions are removed from their instructional context and displaced on the disturbingly over-sized alphabet blocks inviting to be played with. Engaging with this installation then, we are encouraged to (re)enter a process of learning. But what is there to learn?

In a time when public debates on child-rearing seem to be centered on learning gender-specific behavior based on stereotypical notions of masculinity and femininity, Austin's engagement with the archive of pedagogical texts on normalcy seems anything but outdated. But as the blocks in the works are directed towards adult bodies, they also point our attention to the fact that we never finish the process of learning how to do gender and sexuality. Gender is an activity we continually perform, whether we know it or not. But the terms and ways of understanding gender are not something we can remake on our own, as they are connected to the realm of the social — to language, relationality, and how we are perceived by others. We always "act in concert," as Judith Butler says.[50]

Learning Normalcy invites us to think about identity in terms of process and reiteration, and in this way it *outs* "the unthought of normalcy," to use a phrase by Deborah P. Britzman. The concept of normality is central to the field of pedagogy, as Britzman makes clear in her book *Lost Subjects, Contested Objects* (1998). In her explorations of how one can develop a queer pedagogy, she wonders whether "pedagogy [can] move beyond the production of rigid subject positions and ponder the fashioning of the self that occurs when attention is given to the performativity of the subject."[51] She argues for the importance of developing a pedagogy of uncertainty and risk, one that unsettles the self as the center of education. Central to such a project is a critique of the regulations and effects of normalcy: "[N]ormalcy [is] a conceptual order that refuses to imagine the very possibility of the other [...] because the production of otherness as an outside is central to its own self-recognition."[52] By pointing out the exclusionary logic underlying ideas of normalcy, she shows how a pedagogy focused on normality results in a huge loss of possibilities.

If normalcy can be learned, can it also be *unlearned*? The importance of 'unlearning' has been strongly raised in critical race theory and postcolonial studies, in the process of breaking down deep-rooted assumptions about race, gender, and sexuality. In her critique of racial and gendered privileges, Gayatari Spivak raises the question of learning and unlearning, focusing on the loss at the heart of being the privileged.[53] Donna Landry and Gerald MacLean explain these losses in their introduction to *The Spivak Reader*: "Our privileges, whatever they may be in terms of race, class, nationality, gender, and the like, may have prevented us from gaining a certain kind of Other knowledge: not simply information that we have not yet received, but the knowledge that we are not equipped to understand by reason of our social positions."[54] Unlearning our privileges means fighting normalcy's "passion for ignorance."[55] It summons us to question our position, our knowledge production, and our relationship to others. Touching the building blocks of historical pedagogy in *Learning Normalcy* can inspire us to question the histories and concepts we live with and live by, fueling our desire to *unlearn normalcy*, "working critically back through one's history, prejudices, and learned, but now seemingly instinctual responses."[56] Through this difficult process we can strive for gaining knowledges that have been hidden from our limited perspectives — perspectives that luckily are never fully determined or final.

REMEMBERING THE HERE AND NOW

The queer archival practices in *Lost and Found* do not only alter the hierarchies of legitimacy that structure the traditional archives; they also challenge the production of significance in history. Within art history, questions of relevance and importance are usually addressed in terms of a work's relationship to artistic traditions. But many queer art practices have relations to the past that are detached from these traditional teleological time frames — finding legitimacy in neither endorsed historical traditions nor in their utility for future generations.

Feminist theorists have criticized the 'generational legacy' paradigm central to the production of relevance in history, where the present is held up to standards of the past, assuming a problematic reproductive logic.[57] Queer archival practices urge us to overcome this logic of 'reproductive futurism' by developing other models of transmission than dominant nuclear family narratives, where the Child remains the horizon of what and how we think of the future.[58] Any queer archive has to rework this heteronormative investment in history. Here, the performance historian David Román's attention to the value of the *here and now* is central. Román emphasizes that performances "should not need to prove relevant to future generations in order to be valued today, nor should they be obliged to build on conventional models of tradition to be deemed significant. Rather, the contemporary should be evaluated primarily in terms of how it serves its immediate audience."[59]

The artists and theorists in *Lost and Found* address their own historical moment. Setting up unpredictable encounters with history — encounters that are flirtatious and painful, funny and disturbing — they draw attention to how we are touched by the past, whether we want to be or not. The importance of these touches does not need to be legitimized by reference to the past or the future — they can be felt here and now.

1 Carolyn Steedman, *Dust* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), p. 69.
2 For an elaborated discussion of the notion of 'touch' in relation to the past, see Carolyn Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval — Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 1999).
3 Judith Butler, "Critically Queer" in *Bodies That Matters: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (New York & London: Routledge, 1993), p. 223.
4 Harriet Bradley, "The Seductions of the Archive: Voices Lost and Found" in *History of the Human Sciences*, Vol. 12, No. 2, 1999, pp. 108–109.
5 Sven Spieker, *The Big Archive — Art from Bureaucracy* (London & Cambridge: MIT Press, 2008), p. xii. See also Thomas Osborne, "The Ordinariness of the Archive" in *History of the Human Sciences*, Vol. 12, No. 2, 1999, pp. 54–55.
6 Osborne, "The Ordinariness of the Archive", p. 59. Osborne borrows the term "royal memory" from the historian Jacques Le Goff's book *History and Memory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992).
7 Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever — A Freudian Impression* [*Mal d'Archive: une impression freudienne*, 1995] translated by Eric Prenowitz (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 4 n. 1.
8 See for instance Lilly Koltun, "The Promise and Threat of Digital Options in an Archival Age" in *Archivaria*, No. 47, (Spring 1999), pp. 114–135.
9 Antoinette Burton, "Introduction: Archive Fever, Archive Stories" in ed. Burton, *Archive Stories — Facts, Fictions, and the Writing of History* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2005), p. 4.
10 John Hutnyk, *Bad Marxism — Capitalism and Cultural Studies* (London & Ann Arbor: Pluto Press, 2004), p. 63.
11 Wolfgang Ernst, *Sorlet från arkiven. Ordning ur oordning* [*Das Rumoren der Archive. Ordnung aus Unordnung*, 2002], translated by Tommy Andersson (Göteborg: Glänta Produktion, 2008), pp. 94–97.
12 Diana Taylor, *The Archive and Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2005), p. 19.
13 Ernst van Alphen, "Obsessive Archives and Archival Obsessions" in *What Is Research in The Visual Arts? Obsession, Archive, Encounter*, eds. Michael Ann Holly and Marquard Smith (London: Yale University Press, 2008), p. 66.
14 Matthias Winzen quoted in ibid. p. 66.
15 For a discussion of the relationship between totalitarianism and archives, centering on the archival logic of the Nazi's concentration camps, see van Alphen, "Obsessive Archives and Archival Obsessions."
16 See for instance Douglas Crimp, *On the Museum's Ruins* (Cambridge & London: MIT Press, 1993).
17 See Linda Nochlin, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" in *ARTnews*, January 1971, pp. 22–39, 67–71; Griselda Pollock, *Vision and Difference: Feminism, Femininity and the Histories of Art* (New York & London: Routledge, [1987] 2003).
18 Hal Foster, "An Archival Impulse" in *October* 110, (Fall 2004), p. 5.
19 Ibid. p. 4.
20 Ibid. p. 4.

21 Peter Hegarty, "Harry Stack Sullivan and His Chums: Archive Fever in American Psychiatry?" in *History of the Human Sciences*, Vol. 18, No. 3, 2005, p. 41.
22 Michel Foucault, "The Life of Infamous Men," in Foucault, *Power: Essential Works of Foucault 1954–1984, Volume 3*, ed. James D. Faubion (London: Penguin Books, 2002), pp. 157–175.
23 Ibid. p. 163. The quote is taken from a different translation of the text, cited in Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval*, p. 137.
24 Lisa Duggan, "History's Gay Ghetto: The Contradictions of Growth in Lesbian and Gay History" in *Representing the Past — Essays on History and the Public*, eds. Susan Porter Benson, Stephen Brier and Roy Rosenzweig (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986), pp. 283–4. For further discussions of gay and lesbian alternative archives, see Ann Cvetkovich's chapter "In the Lesbian Archive" in *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2003) and Charles McGraw's "Archives and Sources: The Papers of Foster Gunnison, Jr, and the Politics of Queer Preservation" in *History Workshop Journal*, Issue 65, 2008, pp. 179–187.
25 From Lesbian Herstory Archive's "Virtual Tour" on their homepage, see www.lesbianherstoryarchives.org/tourintro.html.
26 Ibid.
27 Joan Nestle, in the introduction film to the Lesbian Herstory Archive, available at www.lesbianherstoryarchives.org/viditl.html.
28 Molly McGarry and Fred Wasserman, *Becoming Visible: An Illustrated History of Lesbian and Gay Life in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: New York Public Library & Penguin Studio, 1998), p. xvii.
29 Clare Hemmings, *Bisexual Spaces — A Geography of Sexuality and Gender* (New York & London: Routledge, 2002), p. 31.
30 Ibid. p. 31.
31 Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York & London: Routledge, 2004), p. 4.
32 This sentence is a borrowed and twisted version of a phrase by Judith Butler, where she points out that "critique is understood as an interrogation of the terms by which life is constrained in order to open up the possibility of different modes of living." Ibid. p. 4.
33 Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place — Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York & London: New York University Press, 2005), p. 169 (italics in original).
34 Ibid. p. 162.
35 Ibid. pp. 169–170.
36 Ibid. p. 170.
37 Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings*, p. 241.
38 José Esteban Muñoz, "Ephemera as Evidence: Introductory Notes to Queer Acts" in *Women & Performance*, No. 16, Vol. 8:2, 1996, p. 6.
39 Ibid.
40 Ibid. p. 10.

41 José Esteban Muñoz, "Gesture, Ephemera, and Queer Feeling: Approaching Kevin Aviance" in *Dancing Desires — Choreographing Sexualities On and Off the Stage*, ed. Jane C. Desmond (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2001), p. 441. Thanks to Vanessa Agard-Jones for pointing this text out to me.
42 My understanding of the queering of the evidential is highly indebted to Gavin Butt's remarkable book *Between You and Me: Queer Disclosures in New York Art World 1948–1963* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2005).
43 David Deitcher, *Dear Friends — American Photographs of Men Together 1849–1918* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2001), p. 51.
44 Carol Mavor, *Becoming — The Photographs of Clementina, Viscountess Hawarden* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 1999), p. 16.
45 Toni Morrison, "The Site of Memory" in *Out There: Marginalization in Contemporary Culture*, eds. Russel Ferguson, Martha Gever, Trinh T. Minh-ha and Cornel West (Cambridge & London: MIT Press, 1990), p. 303.
46 Ibid. p. 305.
47 Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval*, p. 1.
48 The voice-over in *I Am Other (Candy & Me)* is in Swedish, but with English subtitles. This quote is a slightly different translation than the one in the subtitles of the film.
49 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Acting Bits / Identity Talk" in *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 18, No. 4 (Summer 1992), pp. 775–776.
50 See Judith Butler, "Introduction: Acting in Concert" in *Undoing Gender*, pp. 1–16.
51 Deborah P. Britzman, *Lost Subjects, Contested Objects: Toward a Psychoanalytic Inquiry of Learning* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), p. 81.
52 Ibid. p. 80.
53 See for instance Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Sneja Gunew, "Questions of Multi-Culturalism" in *The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues*, ed. Sarah Harasym (New York & London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 59–66.
54 Donna Landry and Gerald MacLean, "Introduction: Reading Spivak" in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *The Spivak Reader*, eds. Landry and MacLean (New York & London: Routledge, 1995), p. 4.
55 Britzman, *Lost Subjects, Contested Objects*, p. 80.
56 Landry and MacLean, "Introduction: Reading Spivak," p. 4.
57 Robyn Weigman, "Feminism's Apocalyptic Futures," discussed in David Román, *Performance in America — Contemporary U.S. Culture and the Performing Arts* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2005), pp. 14–15.
58 For an incisive critique of the heteronormative logic of 'reproductive futurism,' see Lee Edelman *No Future — Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2004).
59 Román, *Performance in America*, p. 15.

COLOPHON

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