

COUNTER-ARCHIVAL IMPRESSIONS

by

Jamison Edgar  
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Approved By:

Devan Shimoyama (signed electronically)  
Devan Shimoyama, Project Advisory Committee Chair

Melissa Ragona (signed electronically)  
Melissa Ragona, Project Advisory Committee Member



Lawrence Shea, Project Advisory Committee Member



Jon Rubin, MFA Program Director



Charlie White, Head of the School



Dan Martin, Dean, College of Fine Arts

Date Degree Conferred: May, 2020

**ABSTRACT**

The following thesis surveys artistic utilizations of the archive and underscores its role as a tool for knowledge disruption. Fluctuating between theoretical meanderings, autobiographical reflections, and the analysis of artwork, I propose one avenue in which to reinvigorate conversations around the archive began by Derrida in *Archive Fever* and by Hal Foster in “Archival Impulse.” Approaching the archive as both a theoretical container and as a charged artist medium, I argue for a new archival impulse — one that embraces opaqueness and mess over clarity and order. Comprised of eight individual sections, and a parallel dialogue presented in the form of extended footnotes, the thesis borrows formal and stylistic strategies from arenas of creative non-fiction, diaristic writing, and art historical analysis. Archive scholars — Derrida, Foster, Michel Foucault, Annet Dekker — are cross-examined with thinkers in fields of queer theory, ecology, art history, philosophy, media studies, performance studies, and cultural studies — José Muñoz, Lee Edelman, Sara Ahmed, Jane Bennett, Hito Steyerl, Graham Harman, Timothy Morton, Nicholas de Villiers. Contextualizing artwork made during my time in graduate school through contemporary artists working in the fields of painting, performance and installation, I outline how this research has led me to define a particularly artistic subcategory of archival discourse capable of capturing the pulse of an American undercurrent. Artists building with and through the counter-archive look backward to engage with the potentiality of what has not yet come to pass. Their unorthodox strategies for collecting and sharing history employ the archive not as merely a bank of historical knowledge, but in fact, as a formally antagonistic *counter* to the ways in which history and other forms of knowledge production are weaponized as systems of oppression.

# Counter-Archival Impressions

By Jamison Edgar

**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

<i>Acknowledgments</i> .....	1
Heat Rash.....	2
Invisible Histories .....	6
Ignorant Fields .....	9
Meandering Lines .....	13
Leaking Vessels .....	23
Radiation .....	25
Ancient Voice .....	27
Post-Archive .....	32
<i>Bibliography</i> .....	35





## **Acknowledgments**

This thesis was finished in isolation. In a single day that repeated itself over and over and over again for months. During a semester where strong pedagogy meant forgoing technique and striving for stability of mind. I want to acknowledge crisis. I want to acknowledge fear. I want to acknowledge my frustration with tenure track faculty who safely reminded us that the art world made it through 9/11, so we need to keep the faith. I want to acknowledge jealousy as the root of that frustration. I want to acknowledge a loss of inertia; a three-year sprint cut short due to a sinkhole. I want to acknowledge our capacity to grieve and our ability to speculate what we have lost. I have spent a considerable amount of my time in graduate school thinking about histories – forgotten, lost and repeated. It only seems fitting that our time together should end historically.

As I begin to envision possible futures, I am humbled, honored and tremendously grateful for the constellation of artists, scholars and allies that have supported me over the past three years. Notably, Jon Rubin for his buoyant ability to organize; Melissa Ragona for her sharp critical eye; Charlie White for his fiery goal-oriented ambition; Devan Shimoyama for insisting that beauty is political; Julie Azzam for countless invisible labors that keep the MFA program operational; Larry Shea for theorizing revolution with the body; and Suzie Silver for being a queer-punk role model that's not afraid to cry.

# Heat Rash

*You are so hard to read.  
You play hide and seek with your true intentions.  
If you're only playin' games, I'll just have to say: A b-b-b-bye,  
b-b-b-b-bye.<sup>1</sup>*

- Paula Abdul, "Straight Up" (1988)

Jacques Derrida's *Archive Fever* might have been better diagnosed as a heat rash during the hot summer days I spent inside the unairconditioned reading room of the ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archives at The University of Southern California. There was a moist, if not salty, irony in the air as his text pushed its way out onto Box 2, Folder 19 – Brochures for the Black AIDS Prevention Team; "Nothing is less clear today than the word 'archive'".<sup>2</sup>

Derrida whispers, a sweet nothing – jouissance. The relationship between what Derrida calls clear and what he inadvertently defines as the Archive has been the fulcrum of numerous debates since his infamous text was written over 20 years ago. In a way, I find it pleasantly ironic that his post-structuralist interrogation of archives has led scholars, artists, librarians, archivists, and grass roots community organizers to collectively deconstruct the theoretical parameters of the Archive for well over two decades. I use a capitalized "A" here to underscore the theoretical and cultural scaffolding that has been built up around the Archive. A thin theoretical crust on top of the Anthropocene, penetrating deeper into our zeitgeist than any one archive could possibly reach in scope, scale, or infatuation.

<sup>1</sup> Paula Abdul, "Straight Up," Recorded on March, 1988, Virgin Records, track 7 on *Forever Your Girl*, 1988, vinyl record.

Paula Abdul, whose Pop Star success rose and fell with the height of the HIV/AIDS pandemic in the United States, is a repeating figure in my work. As part of my exhibition, *DAY'S END*, a 1984 centerfold image of Paula was turned into a site-specific installation constructed to resemble the tabloid prints that advertise for queer parties via wheat-pasting (Figure 1). In a painting installation titled *A DIVA IS A* (Figure 2), a diva is found within an ancient underworld. Set within a pink shadow, Orpheus looks back at the viewer through the eye of Abdul.

<sup>2</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: a Freudian Impression* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago, 1995), 87.



Figure 1. Jamison Edgar – *Paul(a)*. 2019. 168 Tabloid prints, 264" x 120", in *DAY'S END* (Powder Room, Pittsburgh, PA)

Today the Archive is a well-established tool in the artist's arsenal of materials. Working at the intersections of painting, video, and performance, I too feel a critical engagement with both the theory and praxis of archives as defined by Derrida. In particular, I am engrossed with the troubling ideas that Derrida brings to the fore addressing the technologies of the archive, tied as they are to political power, and those that govern and manage this power. Indeed, his work, along with ideas concerning the discursive field which Michel Foucault emphasizes in *The Archeology of Knowledge* frame a large part of this thesis and currently inspire central aspects of my practice. Together these theoretical works have contributed to a contemporary framing of the question: how do we manifest counter-archival modalities within the arts which prioritize disorientation and critical opacity?<sup>3</sup>

We can debate the fracturing definitions of the Archive until we are left with a murky slush, but this should not undermine the simultaneous fact that only one, authoritative



Figure 2. Jamison Edgar, *A Diva Is A: Night Watch*, 2019. (Pittsburgh, PA)

understanding of archives has been assimilated into mainstream, Western culture — one that prioritizes efficiency and legibility over multiplicity, fragmentation, and what might be termed optically invisible values. These factors, along with the continued push for digitalization, have all but crystallized archival worth into a readable scale of organization and taxonomy. In fact, as major archives around the United States continue their initiatives to digitize holdings into easily searchable databases, it would appear that our speedy disposition is creating a self-reproducing standard where archival clarity is shaped into beautiful, seamless packages of easily

available knowledge, while opaqueness, disorder, and illegibility deteriorate exponentially.

<sup>3</sup> This is footnote about critical opaqueness can you put a quick footnote here, just defining how you are using "critical opaqueness? Because, usually "transparency" is the more radical strategy, but I get what you mean as I read further — you are more interested in "illegibility," in terms of suppressed meanings throughout our history, i.e. like queer history that is not easily "legible" in terms of mainstream knowledge categories, etc.

Consequently, order and productivity – standards that are dependent on legible systems of grammar and capital – have carved their way into archive theory and have left symmetrical, pre-determined channels for us to follow when theorizing around the Archive. Gliding down the first path, semantic reexamination is camouflaged as theoretical vanguardism. (Re)Definitions of the Archive function as a contradictory-rhetorical strategy to increase theoretical scope; the archive is not “this”, but it is “this.” A comparable debate can be seen in the field of sculpture over the last fifty years. I think briefly of Rosalind Krauss’s “Sculpture in the Expanded Field,” or more recently, Johanna Burton’s “Sculpture: Not-Not-Not (Or, Pretty Air)” – two essays that address the tenuous relationship sculpture has to being defined. Both Krauss and Burton expand the concept of sculpture through an analysis of what it is not. In truth, I wonder if Derrida’s own characterizations of the archive’s ambiguity would be so extreme if he first took to task defining modern sculpture. The two forms – sculpture and archive – certainly operate through their own othering.

Our second path is one of function and design. Where the first guides us towards an archive articulated through binary oppositions, the second preserves control through its rules and regulations. Well aware that we are entrenched in pre-dug theoretical gutters, orderly disobedience is tolerated and accounted for. Perhaps we should take a cue from Audre Lorde and find some different demolition tools?<sup>4</sup>

At the end of these predetermined pathways is what we are trained to think of as “successful” archiving — correct methods of ordering, filing and naming, even when the parameters of the archive are up for debate. There is clearly a correct way to archive and it is whatever makes the least amount of noise.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Audre Lorde, *The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House* (New York: Penguin Books, 2018).

<sup>5</sup> The early 18th-century philosopher George Berkeley is credited with first asking, “If a tree falls in the forest and no one hears it, does it make a sound?”<sup>1</sup> A predecessor to Immanuel Kant, Berkeley sets the stage for what Graham Harman critiques as correlationism in his own theory of Object Oriented Ontology. Shuffled between Berkeley, Kant and Harman, sound becomes a tool in which to prop up or level the authority of human perception.

The politics of making a discernible sound, however, is much older than Berkeley’s proposition. Jacques Rancière reminds us in his “Ten Theses on Politics” that Ancient Greece was founded on the segregation of sound; a democratic state where the sound of affluent male leaders was heard as speech and the voices of women, children, slaves and the poor were ignored as noise.<sup>2</sup> Hito Steyerl, in her own



Figure 3. Kevin Beasley: *A View of a Landscape*, 2018 (Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, December 15, 2018–March 10, 2019). Photograph by Ron Amstutz

In an article published by the Public Library Association, we are offered ten such essential qualities for success.<sup>6</sup> As I read through their criteria – 1. Competence, 2. Accuracy, 3. Efficiency, 4. Consistency, 5. Adaptability, 6. Judgment, 7. Problem Solving, 8. Commitment, 9. Research Ability, and 10. Self-Discipline – I am desperate to dislodge our contemporary understanding of the archive from the neoliberal language of productivity; to hoist myself out of the trenches. If such ruptures are possible, where do we locate them? How might we leverage our own debates of

techno-tailoring of Rancière, writes, “The distinction between speech and noise served as a kind of political spam filter,” in which “those identified as speaking were labeled citizens and the rest as irrelevant, irrational, and potentially dangerous nuisances.”<sup>3</sup>

In 2019, I spent an hour listening to noise on the top floor of the Whitney Museum of American Art; a sound that was both heard and inaudible. Kevin Beasley’s installation *A View of a Landscape* sprawled between two galleries. In the first, a cotton gin taken from the artist’s family property in Alabama was sealed in a soundproof glass box (Figure 3). Seen through the glass, an arrangement of microphones surrounded the cotton gin’s revolving turbines, but like an homage to John Cage’s *4’33’’*, the gallery held an uncomfortable silence.

Thick black cords transmitted the microphone recordings through the ceiling and into the second gallery (Figure 4) where analog synthesizers mutated the records into a new voice altogether. Transplanted, remediated and reperformed, Beasley’s archival heirloom could only be heard once you were not present to witness it make noise.

Refusing to clearly answer Berkeley’s thought experiment, the installation compressed the political, perceptual and historical into a cacophony of frequencies that underscore a key feature of what Jane Bennett calls the Agency of Assemblages in her book *Vibrant Matter*; “Humans and nonhumans alike depend on a ‘fabulously complex’ set of speech prostheses.”<sup>4</sup>

1. George Berkeley, *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge* (Dublin, UK: Printed by Aaron Rhames, for Jeremy Pepyat, 1710).

References found in footnotes will be labeled with corresponding sub-citations at the end of each note. Each footnote will be treated as individual entry, and numbering for sub-citations will reset after the conclusion of every Footnote.

2. Jacques Rancière, “Ten Theses on Politics,” *Theory & Event* 5, no. 3 (January 1, 2001).
3. Hito Steyerl, *Duty Free Art: Art in the Age of Planetary Civil War* (London, UK: Verso, 2017), 50.
4. Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC Carolina: Duke University Press, 2010), 36.

<sup>6</sup> Myung Gi Sung, “Ten Essential Qualities for Success: A New Cataloging Librarian’s Guide from a Supervisor’s Perspective,” *Public Libraries Online*, June 26, 2013, <http://publiclibrariesonline.org/2013/06/ten-essential-qualities-for-success-a-new-cataloging-librarians-guide-from-a-supervisers-perspective/>.

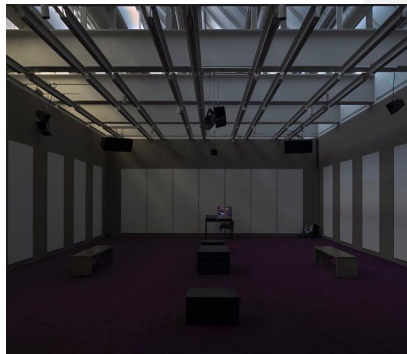


Figure 4. Kevin Beasley: *A View of a Landscape*, 2018 (Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, December 15, 2018–March 10, 2019). Photograph by Ron Amstutz

archival potentiality to advocate for a productively antithetical archive? Who are the stewards of such an archive, and what communities do these archives serve?

The irony, of course, is that archives are confined and defined by clarity, order and success—and are expected to organize information and populations (the latter generally described as disobedient, divergent and subordinate). As a result, the orderly archive becomes a powerful weapon of epistemological control over the same populations it claims to protect. And while contemporary archivists will be the first ones to tell you the Archive is never neutral, this reality is often ignored and substituted for the rosy caricature of the same archive disassociated from place, power, and privilege in service of those who define the pillars of success.

Tracing the ways histories are collected, organized, and applied within and outside of the archive grants us agency to disrupt racist, sexist, xenophobic, homophobic, and transphobic erasure that is habitually masqueraded as part of an ethical epistemological lineage. Clarity under this model quickly reveals itself to be a dense soot able to cover even the brightest counter-histories. Conversely, the anti-epistemological tools of opacity and disorder might serve as the foundation for a novel counter-archival strategy – one capable of clearing up the fogged vessels of our collective pasts.

## Invisible Histories

*I sometimes think the only tale I can tell goes something like this: Once upon a time there was a beginning followed by another beginning, and another, and so on.*<sup>7</sup>

- Kara Walker, “In the Studio” (2011)

Archive Fever does not begin at the archive, but “rather at the word ‘archive.’”<sup>8</sup> Derrida suggests that the English word *archive* first emerged during the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, and derived from the Greek *arkheion* – “the residence of the superior magistrates.”<sup>9</sup> It was at these dwellings that

<sup>7</sup> Steel Stillman and Kara Walker, “In the Studio: Kara Walker,” ARTnews, December 15, 2017, <https://www.artnews.com/art-in-america/features/kara-walker-2-62878/>.

<sup>8</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: a Freudian Impression* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 1.

official documents were filed. Derrida's etymological impulse exposes the archive's fundamental necessity for architecture and helps to visualize the construction of archives as both a material and rhetorical project after authority.

The archive's architecture helps to maintain its epistemological influence, but these authoritarian supports are interlaced with the specific language used to describe the archive and the physical walls that contain it. Meaning, culturally reinforced architecture preserves powerful archives, while those with weaker constructions struggle to be recognized.



Figure 5. ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archives Logo, 2019



Figure 6. Queer History South (Invisible Histories Project) Logo, 2019

experiences. The institution's architecture has become rigid to support its large collection, but this rigidity supports the neat (expected) bicoastal-urban histories of majoritively white cis-men and sometimes their drag personae, while the messier (ambiguous) histories seep from the archive's steel infrastructure.

I do not mean to dispute ONE's importance; on the contrary, I believe archives like ONE hold unbounded potential for those following a counter-archival impression. Nonetheless, remaining critical of the archive's structure and its supports allows us to observe a type of trickster

The ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archives, for instance, founded seventeen years before the Stonewall Riots, has accrued a reputation which supports, contributes to, and legitimizes its own validity as the bank of queer history on an international level. Even in the institution's name (Figure 5) we can see the architectural ways language is employed to sculpt the archive into a shape which mimics complete inclusivity. It does not take a trained rhetorician, however, to parse out the fallacy in that which we call ONE.

When I confront this monolith with my own identity as a gay Southerner, for example, I am made very aware of the ways in which the ONE Archive is built to exclude histories of rural queer

<sup>9</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: a Freudian Impression* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 2.



violence brought on by the pillars of order and clarity — White archival boxes at the ONE should be perceived as policing histories just as they are appreciated for protecting them.<sup>10</sup>

The Invisible Histories Project (Figure 6), founded in 2016 in Birmingham, Alabama, has responded to the lack of Southern representation within the national queer archives with their own mission to protect the vanishing LGBTQ+ histories of the American South. The IHP's geographical specificity, however, does not exempt it from the archive's necessity for built containers and authoritative language — even if those factors are quilted into existence on the campus of the University of Alabama. The difference is that this counter-archive is built to break down — fight back.

If the ONE archive is built with reinforced steel to withstand the earthquakes of Los Angeles, this new archive might be thought of as made of clay. The delicate dirt is fresh and hardening quickly, but before its walls become too sturdy, I am inspired by the influx of messy documents passing through the wet earth — leaving the once invisible histories caked with the opaque red mud that sits beneath the region's surface. These filthy histories are sticky, and as Sara Ahmed suggests in her search for a queer phenomenology, stickiness effectively disrupts our orientation towards established architectures of power.<sup>11</sup>



Figure 7. Lucia Hierro, *De Todo Un Poco*, 2017, Poly organza, felt, digital print on brushed nylon. 66" x 67" (28" Straps) in Mercado series Photo credit Etienne Frossard.

<sup>10</sup> In 2017, Dominican artist Lucia Hierro mounted an exhibition of archives in the form of oversized shopping bags. *De Todo Un Poco* (Figure 7), one of the tote bags in her *Mercado* series, hangs from its straps in the middle of the gallery. Shaped digital prints that resemble an assortment of merchandise can be seen through the iridescent organza. Pop paraphernalia, common consumer necessities, and culturally specific items from mercados (Latin grocery stores) create a collage of identities within a spectrum of class and cultural markers.

<sup>11</sup> Sara Ahmed, "Orientations: Toward a Queer Phenomenology," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 12, no. 4 (2006), 562.

# Ignorant Field

*The electrical power grid offers a good example of an assemblage. It is a material cluster of charged parts...*<sup>12</sup>

- Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter* (2010)

Derrida continues his outlining of the archive with the reminder, “there is no political power without control of the archive.”<sup>13</sup> The power he speaks of derives from the Archive’s ability to manipulate currents of history and knowledge production, but Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick further broadens the relationship between power and archive when she articulates, “Knowledge, after all, is not itself power, although it is the magnetic field of power. Ignorance and opacity collude or compete with knowledge in mobilizing the flow of energy, desire, goods, meanings, [and] persons.”<sup>14</sup> Under her distillation, the counter-archive can be understood as a new “ignorant” magnetic field, one built specifically to interfere with established authority.

The counter-archive is an active reservoir of knowledge that exposes our cultural orientations toward what is familiar, institutional and proper. Adding to Derrida and Sedgwick’s arguments, Jacques Rancière would call these uncooperative archives political, in the sense that “politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time”.<sup>15</sup> Counter-archives bubble up from dark, unseen and noisy places, and rather than aspiring to assimilate into the light, utilize their perceived illegibility to subvert the flow of power within the political majority. Vibrating between cultural undercurrents and top-down sociopolitical matrices of power, the

<sup>12</sup> Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 24.

<sup>13</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: a Freudian Impression* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago, 1995), 4.

<sup>14</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1990), 4.

<sup>15</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (New York, NY: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2000), 13.

counter-archive is a political tool with the power to shift our very criteria of visibility, and reorder what Rancière has termed, “the distribution of the sensible.”<sup>16</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (New York, NY: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2000).

In one of the 20 images documenting David Hammons’s 1983 *Bliz-aard Ball Sale* (Figure 8), Hammons leans against a green-gray concrete wall. Cloaked in winter shades of green and brown, his figure blends into the surrounding New York City street. In his left hand, a blown-out white snowball seems to penetrate through the photograph, a portal to some other world. At Hammons’s feet, 33 snowballs are displayed uniformly against a four-tone woven rug.

The street sale turned street performance turned institutional critique flirts with precarity and positions the black body in a race against time. His snowballs appear to parade as precious commodities with fleeting value, but the care Hammons takes to arrange his inventory refutes a reading of his merchandise as worthless. The symbolic gesture is also an aesthetic proposition, acted out in real time.

When I hear people speak of Hammons’s *Bliz-aard Ball Sale*, there is almost always more emphasis given to Hammons’s hypothetical sale of snowballs than there is given to his creation of the snowballs. If their production is brought up, it is only on the way to their inevitable commodification. Viewing this work as a counter-archive asks us to orient away from the imaged sale of common snow and view Hammons’s impulse to collect and compress sidewalk slush as a political redistribution of the sensible — a gesture that preceded the photograph, the striped rug, and the sale.

Henry Taylor paid homage — a delicate dance between plagiarism and infatuation that is certainly counter-archival — to Hammons in his 2016 painting, *Hammons Meets a Hyena on Holiday* (Figure 9). In the painting, sandwiched between flying reindeer, a winter jacket reminiscent of Veruca Salt and a smizing foregrounded hyena, Hammons’s *Bliz-aard Ball Sale* seems equally out of place.<sup>1</sup> Transposed from photographic documentation to an allegorical scene, Taylor’s hyena returns a gaze that Hammons deflects. Sharp teeth, stitched fur and melting snow reflect with the same bright luminosity. Triangulated between image, imagination and historical ground, the viewer is forced to confront a new distribution of the sensible. The lineage of violence and precarity that sit underneath the surface of the Hammons documentation is now made visible with paint and spectacle.

I first saw *Hammons Meets a Hyena on Holiday* when it was included in the 2019 Venice Biennale. While standing in front of the life-sized painting on the second floor of the Giardini, the snowball in Hammons’s hand suddenly became reminiscent of another redistribution of the sensible made in Venice 18 years prior. An intertextual link to Santiago Sierra’s *133 Persons Paid to Have Their Hair Dyed Blond* (Figure 10).

Invited to participate in the 2001 Venice Biennale, aptly themed *Plateau of Humankind*, Sierra’s performative intervention paid 133 illegal street vendors in Venice to dye their hair blond as part of the international exhibition. Though often criticized for enacting the same exploitative tactics that his art attempts to spotlight, Sierra’s proposition



Figure 8. David Hammons, *Bliz-aard Ball Sale*, 1983, Cooper Square, New York, photograph documentation



Figure 9. Henry Taylor, *Hammons Meets a Hyena on Holiday*. 2016 Acrylic on canvas. 66" x 84" Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University.

In an interview, Rancière aligns aesthetic practices and political practices while discussing the sensible. To do this he first outlines the distribution of the sensible as that which “reveals who can have a share in what is common to the community... it defines what is visible or not in a common space endowed with a common language.”<sup>17</sup> He then provides his own definition of aesthetics: “a demarcation of spaces and times of the visible and the invisible... of speech and noise, that simultaneously determines the place and the stakes of politics as a form of experience.” For Rancière, aesthetics forms the core of politics because aesthetics is a philosophy of vision. The counter-archive tacitly deploys aesthetics in order to activate archival material to a political end.

In his book, *Opacity and the Closet: Queer Tactics in Foucault, Barthes, and Warhol*, Nicholas De Villiers propositions an opaque epistemological discourse for “the closet” while recontextualizing the life-work of three canonical queer figures of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, who, with varying tactics, evaded the constricting containers of “in” or “out.” Foucault, Barthes, and Warhol have all been criticized for their reluctance to be defined, but De Villiers argues that this non-knowledge is, in fact, an extension of what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick defines as queer: “The open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances, and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, of anyone’s sexuality, are made (or can’t be made) to signify monolithically.”<sup>18</sup>

De Villiers continues, “Homosexuality is treated as an object of knowledge, something spoken about, rather than as a positionality from which it is possible to know and to

ruptured the disparities between who at the Biennale are seen and who are ignored to preserve barriers of class and status. A counter-archive of white-blond heads was gathered from the streets, but instead of being catalogued and stored, the archive was released back into the canals, visually charged. Street vendors primed to redistribute while they worked.

1. Veruca Salt is the fictional character in *Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory*, whose privileged disposition prompted her to sing, *I Want it Now*, before being deemed a bad egg and disposed of.

<sup>17</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (New York, NY: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2000), 12.

<sup>18</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1990), 10.



Figure 10. Santiago Sierra, *133 Persons Paid to have their Hair Dyed Blonde*. 2001. Photo documentation. At the 2001 Venice Biennial: Plateau of Humankind

speak.”<sup>19</sup> Under this model, the closet is continuously forced back onto you, and any attempt to leave inevitably ends with you right where you began – back in the closet. We can start here to see how public speech acts of personal truth are ill-equipped to dismantle structures of categorization and power. De Villiers, in response, draws our attention towards the way these three men imploded “the closet” from within, using “queer appropriations of forms typically linked to truth telling ... namely, the interview, the autobiography, the diary, and the documentary.”<sup>20</sup> It is no surprise that the archive holds many of the same truth-telling documents, and while the scope of this thesis extends beyond the parameters of queer identity, I find the disorienting nature of queer opacity to be a frequently employed device for artists who have the most to lose from powerful institutions of knowledge production.

Though compelling, it is a shame De Villiers’s scholarly case revolves around the lives of three historical, white-cis-gay men. Certainly this form of archiving is the most basic and harmful for a transhistorical approach towards futurity. To his credit, De Villiers attempts—if we can call shallow essentializing an attempt—to defend the decision to write extensively on these three figures, but I finish his two-paragraph (out of the 167-page book) explanation feeling even more skeptical of his reasoning. Particularly frustrating is the way he writes off the systemic privilege of his subjects by enlightening us on how they all met “untimely” ends. This, in a way, is to say that AIDS, manslaughter, and botched surgeries make us all equals in the end. Perhaps even more disturbing is the way he finds “Warhol’s resistance to telling the truth ... to be particularly ‘feminizing’”.<sup>21</sup>

De Villiers’s gay bias overlooks similar strategies of femme/POC artists such as Ligia Lewis, who developed a whole choreographic practice around opaque identity. Ligia Lewis finished her monumental trilogy of dance works in 2019. The first show in the cycle, *Sorrow Swag*, began as a solo performance by Lewis herself and was devised from an assemblage of traditionally black and Africana dance movements.<sup>22</sup> When premiered, however, Lewis replaced her own body with a white male performer. The recasting not only changed the context of the movement but

<sup>19</sup>Nicholas De Villiers, *Opacity and the Closet Queer Tactics in Foucault, Barthes, and Warhol* (Minneapolis, MI: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 1

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 6.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 26.

<sup>22</sup> Lewis, Ligia. “Sorrow Swag.” (Vienna, Austria, August 6, 2015).

insisted on a contradicting duality of performance – both identities on stage: one, a stand-in; the other, a projection.

## Meandering Lines

*It may look excited, a landscape does sometimes look excited, but its quality is that a landscape if it ever did go away it would have to go away to stay.*<sup>23</sup>

– Gertrude Stein, *Lectures in America* (1935)

During the last months of 1999, my family dug a hole in the earth. We took a shoebox from my mom’s closet and filled the laminated cardboard with an assortment of objects— a kid’s meal toy, a school photo, a CD-ROM, a boy scout neckerchief, a barbie doll with red heels, a handwritten letter. On the box’s lid, we wrote the year 2025 with a fat sharpie and proceeded to bury our treasure. One year later we moved across town and left the box behind. Twenty years have passed, and my family’s time capsule has been marooned – not in place but in time – underground awaiting a future that will never come.

At the moment, two apparitions are hashing out an argument on my shoulder. To my left, Lee Edelman is all grins because my time capsule’s tragic failure to be rediscovered has damaged its *narrative potential* for a possible Future.<sup>24</sup> The Future he speaks of is politically constructed to

<sup>23</sup> Gertrude Stein, *Lectures in America* (London, UK: Virago Pr., 1988), 93.

In 1935, Gertrude Stein gave a series of lectures throughout the United States. A year prior, her libretto for *Four Saints in Three Acts* premiered in conjunction with Pablo Picasso’s first retrospective in the U.S. Although opening to great success and eventually moving to Broadway, the work was perceived by many Americans as too complex, confusing, and illegible. While talking of *Four Saints in Three Acts*, during a lecture on “Plays,” Stein embraces the contradicting languages in the opera and equates the play to a landscape: “It made a landscape and the movement in it was like a movement in and out with which anybody looking on can keep in time... it moves but it also stays.” I recognize a similar quality of shifting scale, time and legibility inherent to the Archive.

<sup>24</sup> Lee Edelman, *NO FUTURE: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2004), 7.

In *NO FUTURE*, capitalization – as in The Child, The Future – is used by Edelman like a political tool to delineate anthropocentric shifts in scale and perspective. This becomes most clear when Edelman asserts that The Child is often protected at the expense of actual children. Marx might classify this capitalization impulse as a transaction of Use Value. A similar capitalization strategy is used in Timothy Morton’s *Humankind: Solidarity with Nonhuman People*. For Morton, Nature and Humanity (potential synonyms for Future and Child) stand in opposition to nature and humanity; the prior is artificially erect, constructed and explosively whole.

sustain homogenous paradigms of control. Like an ulcer lodged in the ground, the box has acquired a *Queer Phenomenology*, one that might rupture our foundational faith in the reproduction of futurity.<sup>25</sup>

In my right ear, however, José Esteban Muñoz whispers, “Queerness is not yet here.”<sup>26</sup> The same queer failure Edelman absorbs to position us in a radical *No-Future*-present, Muñoz reworks to highlight the box’s eternal journey towards utopia – a future horizon just out of reach. Certainly, the box holds some sort of potential, even if it is not Edelman’s feared narrative potential. Why else would it remain in the back of my consciousness after so many years? But buried underground, can the same be said of the box’s alleged alignment with a radical queer horizon?

By definition, horizons demarcate the line at which the earth’s surface and the sky appear to meet. Throughout the history of art, the horizon line has been used to imply depth and sublime enormity, but this optical illusion has also become an industry standard bound up with signaling status, expertise and allegiance to “classical” perspective. Muñoz’s queer horizon could be understood as a modern, art historical reimagination of the horizon. Untethered from earth and sky, the horizon is located where a seeming material surface meets a more ephemeral substance. Muñoz breaks with tradition to create greater theoretical space from queer bodies left out of canonical traditions of time — but still, notice how both definitions are haunted by human observation.

What I have been referring to as the *potentiality* of my time capsule remains elusive to me precisely because I am above ground looking at a horizon that the time capsule cannot comprehend. How can I categorize its potential when I am no closer to seeing its horizon than it

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<sup>25</sup> See: Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007). Ahmed makes a case for disorientation, the destructive force behind reorientation.

<sup>26</sup> Muñoz José Esteban, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2009), 1.

Additionally, Muñoz goes after Edelman’s limited imagination when relying so heavily on the term “possible Futures”. In *Cruising Utopia*, Possibility is discarded to make room for Potentiality; “Possibilities exist within a logical real ... which is within the present and linked to presence. Potentialities are different ... they do not exist in present things. Thus, potentialities have a temporality that is not in the present, but more nearly in the horizon, which we can understand as futurity.”

is to grasping mine? In this formation, human perception only captures the horizon momentarily before it swells beyond our gaze.

Recognizing that my childhood time capsule does not exist in a time past, present or future is a productive consequence of overlapping the theories of Muñoz and Edelman. However, as artists working with the archive as a medium, the question remains, how might we encounter an archival horizon? How do we work with a plurality of meeting points between materiality and ephemerality while still acknowledging the fact we are only seeing a small percentage of the picture? Under this distillation, the horizon might be better understood as a fluctuating and meandering line.

Following this logic does not lead us to a picturesque beach where we can watch the sunset through clear skies in the fresh air. It forces us to crawl underground through microscopic holes in wet clay, and eventually when we do reach the cardboard box, you notice that the dirt-stained cardboard, the faded convenience store typography, the plastic toys and the mildewed paper are no longer queer, but alien – *Vibrant Matter* gazing off in different directions.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Once during a studio visit with Sreshta Rit Premnath, we began to talk about Timothy Morton, Graham Harman and hippies. I had just shown him a dance video where I performed as a giant flower, wearing a flower petal headdress made of tissue paper. During the filmed performance (Figure 2), I danced to a Lady-Gaga-inspired bassoon quartet while archival videos of 1960s protests, 2000s-era music videos, and my own footage of Atlanta Pride Marches illuminated my body. When he said, “Hippies gave attention to feeling as a valid form of knowledge production,” I scribbled it down in my pink notebook.

Later in the day, I found myself scrolling through Rit’s website. While looking at the documentation of his 2019 exhibition *Below Blue Horizon*, I lingered over an image of a sculpture titled *The Sky Bellow* (Figure 3). In the image, a single sheet of reflective aluminum is cut and folded to resemble a broken-down cardboard box. Made to scale, the sculpture resembles a makeshift bed you might encounter while walking down the streets of New York City – albeit less abject with its metallic sheen. In the photograph, the sky is not reflected, but in its place, the gallery ceiling looks back at me through the computer screen; I am reminded of a quote from Jane Bennett’s *Vibrant Matter*:

As I encountered these items, they shimmied back and forth between debris and thing – between, on the one hand, stuff to ignore ... and, on the other hand, stuff that commanded attention in its own right, as existents in excess of their association with human meanings, habits, or projections... It issued a call, even if I did not quite understand what it was saying.<sup>1</sup>

1. Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC Carolina: Duke University Press, 2010), 4-5.



Figure 11. Jamison Edgar, *Plunge*. 2020, Dance for Camera, Projection Still, 00:07:30, in Drought Float, Miller ICA, Pittsburgh PA.

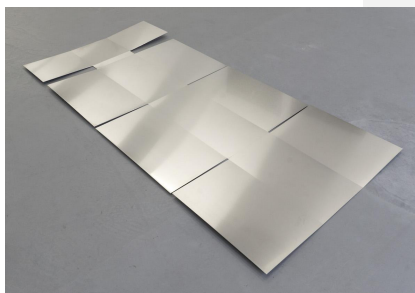


Figure 12. Sreshta Rit Premnath, *The Sky Bellow*. 2019, aluminum, 60’’ x 78’’ Rodríguez Gallery, Poznań, Poland. Available from: <https://sreshtaritpremnath.com/>



Before going too far down this path, it must be said that the less fantastical name for time capsule is an archive; a collection of historical documents or records providing information about a place, institution, or group of people.<sup>28</sup> I admit that in my own graduate research ventures between The State Archives of Georgia, The National Archives in Atlanta, the ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archive at USC, The Lesbian Herstory Archives, and The Transgender Archives at the University of Victoria, has often, for convenience, been compressed and reshaped into an elevator-sized pitch that sounds something like, “My practice centers around a deep engagement with The Archive.”

A more authentic acknowledgment might not fit so neatly into our grammar; I am drawn back again and again to these banks of history because I am looking for myself, my lovers and my adversaries; but also because I like to fly and think of little hotel rooms as an extension of my studio; and because when you don’t know what you are doing in the archive it still looks like research; and especially because sometimes not finding what you are looking for can be more productive than if you found it clearly labeled. Then, back in the studio, the “goods” from this archival scavenger hunt can be fictionalized and expanded into art. Archives can dip in and out of fiction.

My fascination with archives could be seen as a material interest in what Derrida describes as the Archive’s death drive; its journey into the unknown.<sup>29</sup> I am becoming less convinced,

<sup>28</sup> Stuart Berg Flexner, “Archive,” in *Dictionary.com* (Random House Unabridged Dictionary, 2020), <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/archive?s=t>.

In an alternative version of this story, Hal Foster and Jacques Derrida replace Edelman and Muñoz on top of my shoulders. Throughout *Archive Fever* and “An Archival Impulse,” theoretical space is given to examine the archive’s gradual transmutation from a vessel to a tool. Foster lays the groundwork for an archival approach towards artmaking that I believe must now be built upon using ecological approaches found in the theories of Object Oriented Ontology (OOO) and vibrant materialism.

<sup>29</sup> The first archive I visited was the ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archive at the University of Southern California. My partner and I had just received a grant to make a performance using the archive’s holdings, but neither one of us knew what or who to research. This led us down a quasi-DADA path of chance. We decided that we would go to the archive without any specific goals in mind other than to collect a one-percent random sampling of the ONE’s holdings. After transferring the entire archive’s catalog into an excel spreadsheet (Figure 13), we used a random number generator in the reading room to call up what materials we would use for the performance. The ONE was translated into 81,512 excel cells, and then back before being moved into the body.

Archive Name	Collection Name	Folier	Box
1 ONE Archive	Aaronson (Leroy) Papers	1	1
2 ONE Archive	Aaronson (Leroy) Papers	1	2
3 ONE Archive	Aaronson (Leroy) Papers	1	3
4 ONE Archive	Aaronson (Leroy) Papers	1	4
5 ONE Archive	Aaronson (Leroy) Papers	1	5
6 ONE Archive	Aaronson (Leroy) Papers	1	6
7 ONE Archive	Aaronson (Leroy) Papers	1	7
8 ONE Archive	Aaronson (Leroy) Papers	1	8
9 ONE Archive	Aaronson (Leroy) Papers	1	9
10 ONE Archive	Aaronson (Leroy) Papers	1	10
11 ONE Archive	Aaronson (Leroy) Papers	1	11
12 ONE Archive	Aaronson (Leroy) Papers	1	12
13 ONE Archive	Aaronson (Leroy) Papers	1	13
14 ONE Archive	Aaronson (Leroy) Papers	1	14
15 ONE Archive	Aaronson (Leroy) Papers	1	15
16 ONE Archive	Aaronson (Leroy) Papers	1	16
17 ONE Archive	Aaronson (Leroy) Papers	1	17
18 ONE Archive	Aaronson (Leroy) Papers	1	18
19 ONE Archive	Aaronson (Leroy) Papers	1	19
20 ONE Archive	Aaronson (Leroy) Papers	1	20
21 ONE Archive	Aaronson (Leroy) Papers	1	21
22 ONE Archive	Aaronson (Leroy) Papers	1	22
23 ONE Archive	Aaronson (Leroy) Papers	1	23
24 ONE Archive	Aaronson (Leroy) Papers	1	24
25 ONE Archive	Aaronson (Leroy) Papers	1	25
26 ONE Archive	Aaronson (Leroy) Papers	1	26
27 ONE Archive	Aaronson (Leroy) Papers	1	27
28 ONE Archive	Aaronson (Leroy) Papers	1	28
29 ONE Archive	Aaronson (Leroy) Papers	1	29
30 ONE Archive	Aaronson (Leroy) Papers	1	30
31 ONE Archive	Aaronson (Leroy) Papers	1	31
32 ONE Archive	Aaronson (Leroy) Papers	1	32
33 ONE Archive	Aaronson (Leroy) Papers	1	33
34 ONE Archive	Aaronson (Leroy) Papers	1	34
35 ONE Archive	Aaronson (Leroy) Papers	1	35
36 ONE Archive	Aaronson (Leroy) Papers	1	36
37 ONE Archive	Aaronson (Leroy) Papers	1	37
38 ONE Archive	Aaronson (Leroy) Papers	1	38
39 ONE Archive	Aaronson (Leroy) Papers	1	39
40 ONE Archive	Aaronson (Leroy) Papers	1	40
41 ONE Archive	Aaronson (Leroy) Papers	1	41
42 ONE Archive	Aaronson (Leroy) Papers	1	42
43 ONE Archive	Aaronson (Leroy) Papers	1	43
44 ONE Archive	Aaronson (Leroy) Papers	1	44
45 ONE Archive	Aaronson (Leroy) Papers	1	45

Figure 13. Excel Spreadsheet for ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archive visit. July 2018.

however, of Derrida's reliance on semiotics (post- or otherwise) – a structuralist guideline back to the safety of human perception. For instance, let's take a moment to consider all of the possible dimensions to which the archive could voyage when Derrida makes the rather exciting claim, "The structure of the archive is spectral."<sup>30</sup> When he assures us that the archive is "a priori: neither present nor absent."

Unfortunately, we must then follow his thought to completion, which closes, "The structure of the archive is spectral ... a trace always referring to another whose eyes can never be met."<sup>31</sup> In the space of a compound-complex sentence, the Archive offers dominion over the entire universe, before being shackled onto a single-lane-highway traffic jam.

Can the Archive ever be more than – opposed to – the materials that comprise its structure? Does it behoove us to consider the object-ness of archives beyond the limited vision of human eyes? At their core, similar questions of perception and autonomy are central to art discourses that orbit expanded fields, post-internets, and new materialisms. However, as a result of the Archive's anthro-facade—a structure of human lives, organized by other humans, with familiar categories—separating ourselves from one another is less intuitive. Answering yes to these questions despite the Archive's knotted relationship to the human requires us to engage archives with the speculative contemplation of an Object Oriented Ontologist.

Graham Harman, who termed the phrase Object Oriented Ontology (OOO) four years after Derrida's *Archive Fever*, recycles the word "withdrawn" from Martin Heidegger's tool analysis to emphasize an object's independence from other objects, including humans:

The world has been said to contain no relations — nothing other than entities. But entities are always primarily withdrawn tool-beings, and as such, they are sealed away in a vacuum devoid of all relation. If this is true, then the world is packed with noncommunicating vacuous zones, ontological bubbles, none of them able to transmit energy or influence to the others.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: a Freudian Impression* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago, 1995), 84.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Graham Harman, *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects* (Chicago, IL: Open Court Publishing Company, 2002), 295.

Harman reasons that these bubbles and the ontological distance they put between objects are constantly fluctuating between two separate modes of perception defined by Heidegger: “The cryptic withdrawal of readiness-to-hand and the explicit accessibility of presence-at-hand.”<sup>33</sup>

Using the example of a hammer, Heidegger argues that an object (hammer) is ready-at-hand when it functions effectively in so much that the specificity of its being is masked by the seamless confluence of diverse variables which sustain our reality.<sup>34</sup> When the hammer is ontologically trimmed to assure the solid footing of its operator.

The hammer ready-to-hand is perceived only through the qualities that affirm its status as equipment because myopic comprehension allows us to best exploit the use value of objects as we come into contact with them. In Heidegger’s own words, “the less we just stare at the hammer-Thing, and the more we seize hold of it and use it, the more primordial does our relationship to it become, and the more concealed it becomes from that which it is — equipment.” In hand, the object remains productively unfamiliar, “cryptically withdrawn”.<sup>35</sup>

In contrast, the object present-at-hand is thrust into our consciousness right at the moment of its divergence away from expected operations. Like a bright flash of light that illuminates once unseen details, but only after our eyes have time to adjust to the new conditions. Heidegger calls these uncooperative objects, *broken tools* in that their existence no longer relates to human-assigned potential. As a result, their uncharted characteristics become “explicitly accessible,” and demand the full attention of our consciousness.

Nudging Heidegger’s tool analysis further, Harman insists, “[Heidegger’s] insight into malfunctioning equipment tells us nothing special about shattered chisels and flat tires that is not true of all other things as well. The oscillation between tool and broken tool occurs in each entity at every moment.”<sup>36</sup> As a result, OOO dismantles the superficial hierarchy between beings, objects and tools, severing the object from the responsibility of human relations.

<sup>33</sup> G. Harman, “Technology, Objects and Things in Heidegger,” *Cambridge Journal of Economics* 34, no. 1 (2009): pp. 17-25, <https://doi.org/10.1093/cje/bep021>, 19.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York, NY: Harper Perennial Modern Thought, 2008), 98.

<sup>36</sup> Graham Harman, *Towards Speculative Realism: Essays and Lectures* (London, United Kingdom: Zero Books, 2010), 47.

To physicalize their object-oriented-arguments, Harman and his philosophical companions sprinkle their theories with lists of various oscillating objects: a kid's toy, a school photo, a CD-ROM, a boy scout neckerchief, a barbie doll with red heels, a handwritten letter, the desert, Mars, new MOMA, Target, a fire ant, etc.<sup>37</sup> The rhetorical device capitalizes on our anthropocentric instinct to position everything (objects included) in relationship to ourselves, but like reverse psychology, begs us to reconsider the innumerable ways we assign value to objects under the pretenses of human correlation.<sup>38</sup> OOO rejects anthropocentrism, but as I said before, this philosophical pillar is harder to resolve once the Archive joins with red ants and heels on pithy lists; when the A becomes an O in OOO.

This is because an Object Oriented Archive is an archive liberated from the category of tool, freed from the shackles of human usefulness – which is

<sup>37</sup> Like poetry or a naughty mad lib, I have always fancied a good materials list, and artists who build language around their artworks' physical properties to enhance it with layered meaning. At their best, these lists congeal into what Bennett might call *assemblages*, "ad-hoc groupings of diverse elements, of vibrant materials of all sorts."<sup>1</sup> Living entities with many parts, Bennett likens assemblages to confederations, "Not governed by any central head: no one materiality or type of material has sufficient competence to determine consistently the trajectory or impact of the group."<sup>2</sup>

While we were in graduate school together, my friend Max Spitzer assembled a confederation under a different name. His sculpture *The Fellowship* (Figure 14) stands slightly above ankle-height. The paper-mâché plinth is adorned with 26 illuminated portraits of infamous Maxes (Figure 15), brought together from the canons of art, literature and entertainment. Their eyes meet while in symphonic formation. Now living on as documentation, the sculpture's materials list rivals the work in scale. Every Max is working across a vortex of histories, fictions and cultural references alongside Styrofoam, plywood, light particles, and fiberglass.

When I first saw *The Fellowship* of the Maxes, I almost overlooked the coffee-cup-sized hole cut into the base of the sculpture; but there, hiding in the sunken void, the final Max evades depiction. The artist's name haunts the materials list like Derrida's specter.

1. Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Carolina: Duke University Press, 2010), 23-24.
2. Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Coined by Quentin Meillassoux in his book *After Finitude*, correlationism is defined as "the idea according to which we only ever have access to the correlation between thinking and being, and never to either term considered apart from the other."<sup>1</sup>

1. Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: an Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. Ray Brassier (London, UK: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), 5.



Figure 14. Max Spitzer, *The Fellowship*. 2019. Paper mâché over particle board and Styrofoam, plywood, fiberglass reinforced mini box shims, laser cut acrylic, lighting, paint, and images of: Max Beckmann, Max Bialystock, Max Bunny, Max Cady (1962), Max Cady (1991), Max Detweiler, Max Ernst, Max Zorin, Max Fischer, Max Headroom, Mad Max, Max Martin, Max Richter, Max Rebo, Maximilian Veers, Max Roach, Max Rothman, Max Weber, Max, Max, Maxim Gorky, Maximilien Robespierre, Maximus Decimus Meridius, Maxwell Smart, Maxwell, and Miracle Max. 48" x 10" x 48" Powder Room, Pittsburgh, PA. Available from: <https://maxspitzer.cargo.site/>



Figure 15. Max Spitzer, *The Fellowship*. Detail.

to say, Derrida almost had it right when he declared, “The archive always holds a problem for translation.”<sup>39</sup>

True, the Archive has always resisted translation, but not simply because the fragility of language lacks the gravitas to capture the document’s *irreplaceable singularity*, as Derrida claims. The archive remains indecipherable for the same reason my time capsule will never know our horizon – we are separate objects in different worlds.

To some, an archive apathetic to the standards of human legibility and usefulness – an archive always and already oblivious to watching eyes – might not seem like an archive at all. However, embracing the paradoxical nature of the archive-object is an opportunity to distance ourselves from the institutional model of “successful archiving.” A chance to create new fragmented-modalities in which to collaborate with our rich reservoirs of history.

For artists, this new orientation requires us to reexamine our motivations for indulging in an archival impulse. It also motivates us to question the methods and mediums (equipment and tools) that prioritize an archival engagement after epistemological control. It is not enough for the Object Oriented artist to explore the ontological autonomy of the various documents, objects and paraphernalia housed within an archive’s catalog if they still refuse to envision the Archive as anything other than a useful tool for our own epistemological fulfillment.

Our craving for archival knowledge is central to Derrida’s psychoanalytic diagnoses in *Archive Fever*. The symptoms include, “A compulsive, repetitive, and nostalgic desire for the archive, an irrepressible desire to return to the origin, a homesickness, a nostalgia for the return to the most archaic place of absolute commencement...It is to burn with a passion. It is never to rest, interminably, from searching for the archive right where it slips away.”<sup>40</sup> If we hope to reorient ourselves towards divergent archival practices, discovery can no longer be the predominant motivating factor for our artistic actions. Luckily, in our heated state, OOO offers us an aspirin. Borrowing a sentiment from Gertrude Stein, if Derrida’s slipping archive “ever did go away it would have to go away to stay.”<sup>41</sup>

<sup>39</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: a Freudian Impression* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago, 1995), 90.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 91.

<sup>41</sup> Gertrude Stein, *Lectures in America* (London, UK: Virago Pr., 1988), 93.

Reading Derrida and Harman side by side, I was struck by the apparent similarities between what Derrida calls “the withdrawing archive” and Harman’s Withdrawn object. Timothy Morton, in *Humankind: Solidarity with Nonhuman*

Michel Foucault uses the analogy of looking backward vs digging downward while interrogating the Archive in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. In his typical bait-and-switch rhetoric, Foucault disputes established discursive channels that celebrate intellectual voyages backward in search of “original” meaning. Knowledge, he argues is more complicated, and meaning is only understood “by the rules of its use.”<sup>42</sup>

These rules, which Foucault calls *statements*, are the building blocks of knowledge, and they are concerned “in a sort of vertical dimension” that coalesce significance as they come into contact with other statements on their path downwards:

The statement, then, is not an elementary unity that can be added to the unities described by grammar or logic. I cannot be isolated like a sentence, a proposition, or an act of formulation. To describe a statement is not a matter of isolating and characterizing a horizontal segment.<sup>43</sup>

What Foucault sees as a horizontal segment might be better thought of as the horizon above ground. The archive-object, or what I have been calling the counter-archive, embraces an unknown horizon, a vertical web of interconnected rules – *statements*.

Yes, artists working with such an archive must concern themselves with “a historical analysis, but one that avoids all interpretation.”<sup>44</sup> A counter-archival impression:

Does not question things said as to what they are hiding... the unspoken element that they contain, the proliferation of thoughts, images, or fantasies that inhabit them; but, on the contrary, it questions them as to their mode of existence, what it means to them to have come into existence, to have left traces, and perhaps to remain there, awaiting the moment when they might be of use once more.<sup>45</sup>

In this way, the counter-archive is both an object orientation and a stratigraphical tactic that Foucault encourages us to follow in search of tangled “modes of existence.”

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*People*, offers a clarifying alternative for thinking beyond the category of Withdrawn; “‘Withdrawn’ doesn’t mean empirically shrunken back or moving behind; it means – and this is why I now sometimes say ‘open’ instead of ‘withdrawn’ – *so in your face that you can’t see it*.”<sup>1</sup> The “open” archive formulated by Morton presents an entirely new formulation of archival access— one that resides beyond the limitations of human perception.

1. Timothy Morton, *Humankind: Solidarity with Nonhuman People* (London, UK: Verso, 2017), 37.

<sup>42</sup> Michael Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith (London, UK: Routledge, 1969), 89.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 108.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

Mike Pearson and Michael Shanks use the word stratigraphy in their book, *Theatre/Archaeology: Disciplinary Dialogues* to characterize a postdramatic performance conceived in the terms of laminated layers.<sup>46</sup> In their formulation, sound, text, lights, and scenography are assembled one on top of each other. The distinct elements that create the performance are clearly defined, but the traditional blending of formal elements in support of the “total narrative picture” is ignored. A similar attitude to Pearson, Shanks and Foucault can be found in Hubert Damisch’s characterization of “the move.”<sup>47</sup> Working with the counter-archive should be understood comparably – characterized as a commitment to individual parts without the pursuit of forming a solid whole.

In this formation of a counter-archive that is all at once vibrating object, broken tool, layered statement and historical fragment, artists are tasked with plotting intersections – not historical records. They accomplish such mapping within a constantly fluctuating network of physical objects, vehicles of power and architectures of control. At these points of convergence, we might begin to glimpse the potentiality of the archive’s unseen horizon, but first we must excavate beneath geological sediment, ontological accumulation and discursive fields.

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<sup>46</sup>Mike Pearson and Michael Shanks, *Theatre/Archaeology: Disciplinary Dialogues* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2001), 3.

I first came across Pearson and Shank’s notion of Stratigraphy in Ana Vujanovic’s essay, “Meandering Together: New Problems on Landscape Dramaturgy.” Throughout, Vujanovic interrogates what she sees as a new trend in contemporary European performance, the quality of which corresponds to a returned interest in a postdramatic notation of Landscape.<sup>1</sup> Vujanovic traces her formulation of the term “Landscape Dramaturgy” back to Gertrude Stein’s concept of the landscape play.

1. Ana Vujanović, “Meandering Together: New Problems in Landscape Dramaturgy,” in *Metabolic Rifts*, ed. Projections for Art, Education and Knowledge Production (Berlin: Germany, 2017), 87-114.

<sup>47</sup> Performance scholar Maaïke Bleeker summarizes Damisch’s term in “Dramaturgy as a Mode of Looking:” [The] *moves* that make up the performance turn time and space into a specific here and now place. These moves appear through and against a complex network of earlier moves, be it other performances, other art works, philosophical ideas, practical knowledge and everyday experience, or historical events...leading to the development of an awareness of, on the one hand, (possible) relationships between these various moves that together make up the performance, and on the other hand, the relationship between these moves as they make up a performance and the multidimensional network of synchronic and diachronic relationships against which they appear to the audience.<sup>1</sup>

1. Maaïke Bleeker, “Dramaturgy as a Mode of Looking,” *Women & Performance: a Journal of Feminist Theory* 13, no. 2 (2003): pp. 163-172, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07407700308571432>, 166.

# Leaking Vessels

*The Faggots cultivate outrageous parts of the past. They cultivate those past events which the men did not want to happen and which, once they did happen, they wanted to forget. These are the parts the faggots love the best. And they love them so much they tell the old stories over and over and then they act them out and then as the ultimate tribute, they allow their love to recreate those obscure parts of the past. The pain of fallen women and the triumph of defeated women are constantly and lovingly made flesh again. The destruction of witty faggots and the militancy of beaten faggots are constantly and lovingly made flesh again. And so, these parts of the past are never lost. They are imprinted in the bodies of the faggots where the men cannot go.<sup>48</sup>*

- Larry Mitchell, *The Faggots & Their Friends Between Revolutions* (1977)

I was never very good in history classes. That is, I have always struggled to memorize dates, names, and other specificities that are conventionally assigned to evaluate your knowledge of historical events. Consequently, I learned from a young age to construct mnemonic devices to retain information. These architectures of memory and interdependent information served me well in school, and even led me to major in art history during my first two years of college. But when confronted with the parameters of “proper” historiography, I realized that my fascination with the historical was never about solidifying the past. It derived from the pleasure of connecting historical facts and gaps with my own subjective idiosyncrasies. Historical details and continuity were merely the residue of a highly subjective web of connections that I fabricated to link what I knew with what I would inevitably forget.

Like the memory palace, the archive is a dwelling designed to contain seepage and facilitate control – and as it were – both are destined to collapse. What would it mean to let the archive loose? To embrace the archive’s failings in the same way we embrace the slippages of memory while in pursuit of the unconscious.

I want to sink beneath the archive. Go below the sheetrock of its degrading palace and touch a cluster of histories that no document can effectively contain. It’s an impulse like kink-sex without penetration. Like a heat lamp and I’m a bug into electric shock. It’s a mess. It’s sad camp.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Larry Mitchell, *The Aggots & Their Friends Between Revolutions* (New York, NY: Nightboat Books, 1977).



It has expanded my practice from painting into a constellation with sculpture, video, performance and writing. I will try anything to squeeze myself into a shape that can fit into the drains where residues collect.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>49</sup> See: Cynthia Barounis, "Witches, Terrorists, and the Biopolitics of Camp," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 24, no. 2-3 (January 2018): pp. 213-238.

<sup>50</sup> When I was 7, I liked sea creatures. I had multiple porcelain orca figurines and they sat on a white IKEA nightstand next to my fire engine red bunk bed, next to a boombox that held Britney Spears's *Oops!... I Did It Again*. The closest aquarium to our house was one hour and fifteen minutes away. My family and I would go there once a year to visit aquatic life and a giant underground waterfall in the Smoky Mountains. It might have been during one of these trips that I realized I desperately wanted a mural in my bedroom. A mural of a sun setting over the sea.

So, I sketched out a mural mock-up using the aquarium gift shop and my Lisa Frank folders as inspiration; my mom respectfully declined the proposition. White walls in the suburban South and tight pockets in the family house would keep the room simple, but until I outgrew the bunk bed, I longed for that seaside mural with a painted sun kiss horizon.

Images of that never-made-mural came seeping back to me while reading a queer theory double feature of Kathryn Bond Stockton's *The Queer Child or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* and Sara Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology*. For both Stockton and Ahmed, queer is a state of ontological disorientation before a marker of sexual orientation. That is, children and phenomenology are not "gay" but instead made queer, strange and weird. Theoretical echoes are heard in Graham Harman's call for a *weird realism*.<sup>2</sup>

At the confluence of their theories, I saw a potential foil to the buzzy term "queer abstraction" – a trendy category upheld by writers like David Getsy who use the queer and the abstract as elaborate proxies for the body. This *Other* queer abstraction is not passive, but active. One that earnestly interrogates phenomena instead of waiting around to be superficially linked to the bodily qualities of sex and sexuality.

In my first attempt to perform this newfound queer abstraction, I followed a cue from Stockton and descended into my childhood memories, intending to recontextualize my first queer desire – that unwavering need for a sunset-seaside mural.

The resulting exhibition, *PERV*, situated eight painted versions of the imaged mural in relation to cultural artifacts of kitsch and fortune. Muñoz's horizon became a vehicle to *GAZE* (figure 16) backwards, and while the queer subject was felt in the gallery, they were never seen. In the subject's vacancy, the queer tactics of reputation, vibrancy, stickiness and residue were offered as tools for record-keeping, interrogation and reenactment.

This inside-out-sticky-queer abstraction was materialized in the back of the gallery where a human-sized die – recognizable to some as the inside of a Magic-8 Ball – sat displaced and covered in 10 gallons of oozing Elmer's Glue (Figure 17). Reflections of sunsets could be seen in the drying runoff.



Figure 16. Jamison Edgar, *GAZE*. 2018. Oil on Canvas, 60'' x 80'' in PERV, Powder Room Pittsburgh, PA



Figure 17. Jamison Edgar, *Hey, Can I Ask You A Question*. 2018 MDA and 10 gallons of Elmer's Glue. 84'' x 66'' x 84'' in PERV, Powder Room Pittsburgh, PA

I am after a queered historical literacy that embraces amateurism and abstraction. A historiography that celebrates the blurred visions of synchronicities and agitates established transactional claims to knowledge-power. In my studio, the interrogation of diverse subject matter allows me to cross-examine through contradictions, and my painterly propositions prioritize the accumulation of fragments as one productive model for disrupting essentialist ideologies. I attempt to document cultural lexicons of resilience; attempt to curate the records of forgotten histories; attempt to find the language to challenge authoritarian forms of knowledge production; but when all of this fails, I sweep my studio floor and make new paintings from the slag.

My research is knotted with archival and autobiographical departures. Pit Stops on the way to an in-between place. I orient myself towards the past to critically engage with the present – tomorrow. My abstraction is embodied, and it gestures to times and places I can never go. I am a disoriented dandy with a corkscrew gaze, and it rolls me backwards over the shoulder, around the bend of the spine, under the crotch, and pulls me towards different horizons.

## Radiation

*Let's add boring to our list of oppressor identities: cis, white, straight, boring men.*<sup>51</sup>

- Alok Vaid-Menon, *Fabulous: The Rise of the Beautiful Eccentric* (2018)

While I orient myself towards opacity, disorder, and knowledge disruption, I am not naïve to the fact that we find ourselves within a political climate that wages war against the legitimacy of facts, conflating “real news” with Fake News and hearsay. I know many brandish clarity as the great defense against disinformation, and you could argue that to encourage such a destructive practice during the age of “alternative facts” is, at best, counter-intuitive and, at worst, morally insidious. I admit that even I question the ethics of such a project when the anti-intellectual rhetoric

Commented [JE1]: intuitive?

1. Kathryn Bond Stockton, *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009).  
Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).
2. Graham Harman, *Weird Realism: Lovecraft and Philosophy* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2012).

<sup>51</sup> Madison Moore and Alok Vaid-Menon, “I Don't Want to Be Boring!": A Conversation with Alok Vaid-Menon” in *Fabulous: The Rise of the Beautiful Eccentric* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018), 50.

radiating from the White House seeps beyond the pulpit – leaving in its path the red-hot mutation of a rallied fascist base. I, however, resist the urge to drift towards what philosopher Bruno Latour would call, matters of facts.<sup>52</sup>

Latour, in response to the many wars fought on foreign, domestic, psychological, social-political, and intellectual battlegrounds during the early 2000's, asks in his essay "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam?" if it is possible for us to recontextualize the parameters of criticism away from disproving truths and towards the communal infrastructures of *gathering*.<sup>53</sup> To arrive at this new form of criticism, Latour refreshes – deconstructs – Heidegger's theory of object and Thing.<sup>54</sup> Matters of fact, which we could think of as failed gatherings (Heideggerian objects), close off discursive channels and align themselves with the fraught discourse of singular agendas. In their place, Latour offers matters of concern – a unified gathering (Thing) of diverse human, non-human, physical, ephemeral, cultural and political forces.

Latour uses the 2003 Columbia Space Shuttle explosion to demonstrate the complex intersections that extend beyond Heidegger's original four-fold *thinging* of earth, sky, divinities and mortals. In the moments after its mysterious detonation, an international assembling over the

<sup>52</sup> Bruno Latour, "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern," *Critical Inquiry* 30, no. 2 (2004): pp. 225-248, <https://doi.org/10.1086/421123>.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid, 235.

Latour borrows the word gathering from Heidegger's theory of Things. A *gathering* of earth, sky, divinities and mortals is how Heidegger characterizes the hybrid quality of a Thing, versus a simple object that could be seen as "a gathering that has failed."<sup>1</sup> Studying the cultural and philosophical effects of contemporary science and technology, Latour is critical of the limited scope of Heidegger's original four-fold gathering, but uses the contradicting modalities of objects and Things to speak about similar rifts in matters of fact and matters of concern.

1. Bruno Latour, "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern," *Critical Inquiry* 30, no. 2 (2004): pp. 225-248, 246.

<sup>54</sup> Like his analysis of broken tools, Heidegger posits that a Thing could be understood as an object that no longer serve its common function. The broken object (Thing) does not deteriorate, however, It transmutes into a charged force that operates within a phenomenological undercurrent.<sup>1</sup> Ana Vujanović offers another summery of Heidegger's Thing in "Meandering Together." She differentiates between objects and Things as material, physical entities, where the former are already-yet modeled by the human mind (language, history, standards etc.) and thus necessarily objects of knowledge, while the latter exist on their own, (still) unknown to and unnamed by anyone."<sup>2</sup>

1. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York, NY: Harper Perennial Modern Thought, 2008), 58-63.

2. Ana Vujanović, "Meandering Together: New Problems in Landscape Dramaturgy," in *Metabolic Rifts*, ed. Prospections for Art, Education and Knowledge Production (Berlin: Germany, 2017), 88.

ship's explosion transformed the masterfully crafted object into Thing status – demonstrating the power of assembly to blur the lines between objects, things, facts, and truths. Latour explains:

What is presented here is an entirely different attitude than the critical one, not a flight into the conditions of possibility of a given matter of fact, not the addition of something more human that the inhumane matters of fact would have missed, but, rather, a multifarious inquiry launched with the tools of anthropology, philosophy, metaphysics, history, [and] sociology to detect how many participants are gathered in a thing to make it exist and to maintain its existence. Objects are simply a gathering that has failed – a fact that has not been assembled according to due process.<sup>55</sup>

The archive should be seen, as Latour would say, as “so beautifully complex and entangled that it resists being treated as a matter of fact,” yet time and again its contents and containers are used as the gatekeepers of our cultural knowledge.<sup>56</sup>

## Ancient Voice

*You can get there from here, though  
there's no going home.  
Everywhere you go will be somewhere  
you've never been. Try this:*<sup>57</sup>

- Natasha Trethewey, “Theories of Time and Space” (2008)

My own journey into the archive began before I had the language to name it. Growing up in the American South, my Saturday mornings were often spent inside of my mom's red minivan while we drove around the Atlanta suburbs looking for yard sales. Our house became a collection of these trips. An archive that bore our name, but whose holdings betrayed it. Years later, my sister and I still walk through our family home and point to Things – a chair, a record, a ceramic cat – tracing their path from friendly hellos in the rich

<sup>55</sup> Bruno Latour, “Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern,” *Critical Inquiry* 30, no. 2 (2004): pp. 225-248, 246.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 234.

<sup>57</sup> Natasha D. Trethewey, “Theories of Time and Space,” in *Native Guard* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2007).

neighborhoods, to maternal southern-bartering, and eventually into our family's living room where they now hold the histories of their past lives as well as the residues of twenty years with us. These thrifted quasi-objects float between the social and the natural. Their archiving within our home exposes the warped realities of an American nuclear family.

Then, during my second year of college, I was introduced to another Southern archive, which, again, bore a different name – quilt. The quilts of Gee's Bend, as they have become known, are powerful examples of erratic compositions full of seductive colors and are the result of a multigenerational knowledge exchange between the residents of the Southern community of less than 500. The black women who lead the sewing circles in Gee's Bend have long inspired me as

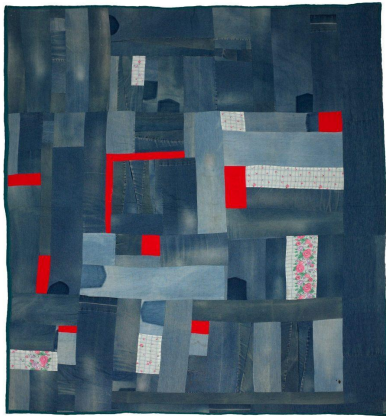


Figure 18. Mary Lee Bendolph (Gee's Bend Quilter), *Work-clothes Quilt*. 2002, denim and cotton, 99.5 x 88", New Orleans Museum of Art, Photograph by Stephen Pitkin/Pitkin Studio/Art Resource, NY.

both community organizers and as artists. Their quilts are in fact one of the main reasons I still endeavor towards new formations of a radical abstraction. Their abstraction feels charged, even now, 70 years after Clement Greenberg and his (white) boys club tried to sterilize abstraction's social and political agency.

The flat patches of these collaborative objects join the chorus of deconstruction that, since the 1960s, has descended upon Greenberg and his notion of art; "A matter strictly of experience, not of principles."<sup>58</sup> For Greenberg, "What counts first and last in art is quality; all other things are

secondary," but the quilts of Gee's Bend complicate quality. They are the result of skilled labor executed through community action. At times, this labor is even stitched into the quilts themselves, and patchworks like Mary Lee Bendolph's *Work-clothes Quilt* (Figure 18) conflate conventions of form and function to productively muddle delineations between personal experience, collective principles, and privileged conceptions of quality.

<sup>58</sup> Clement Greenberg, "Abstract, Representational, and so forth," in *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2006):pp. 133-138, 135.

Similarly disorienting articulations have been forwarded through scholarship in arenas of Black Abstraction and by other artists of color, who like choreographer Miguel Gutierrez question, “Does Abstraction Belong to White People?”<sup>59</sup>

Jack Whitten, a painter with Alabama roots, speaks openly of his upbringing during the American Apartheid and imbues his paintings with medicinal properties.<sup>60</sup> Assembled through an accumulation of painted bits, Whitten pours, cuts and adheres paint onto his canvases to create monoliths with political reverberations. In *Apps for Obama* (Figure 19) these mosaic abstractions coalesce to form an image of shifting signifiers. From a field of geometric jewels, similar in form to



Figure 19. Jack Whitten, *Apps for Obama*, 2011, Acrylic on core door, 84 x 91", Collection of Danny First, Los Angeles

the red patches and jean pockets on the surface of *Work-clothes Quilt*, materializes the familiar image of an iPhone's home screen. Whitten coopts his own abstract processes and offers them as tools to assist a President in the middle of reelection. The gesture of solidarity aligns Whitten's aesthetic and political motivations and reiterates his own statement on painting, “I have a purpose; I have an agenda. I accept the fact that [life]’s difficult, but I’m not going to make it harder.”<sup>61</sup>

Because of their abstract painterly language, it might seem counter-intuitive to think of Whitten's paintings or the *Quilts of Gee's Bend* as useful lenses through which we can reexamine the archive, but perhaps by investing in these seemingly conflicting modalities to the archive's appetite for order, we might begin to reorient ourselves towards a new archival standard. Their charged

<sup>59</sup> Miguel Gutierrez, “Does Abstraction Belong to White People?,” BOMB Magazine, November 7, 2018, <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/miguel-gutierrez-1/>.

For more reading on the intersections of race and abstraction see: Darby English, *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), Darby English, *1971: a Year in the Life of Color* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2016). Mark Benjamin. Godfrey and Zoe Whitley, eds., *Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power* (London, UK: D.A.P./Tate, 2017).

<sup>60</sup> Jack Whitten and Ian Forster, “Resisting Dichotomies & Compressing Complexity,” Art21, April 1, 2018, <https://art21.org/read/jack-whitten-resisting-dichotomies-compressing-complexity/>.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

materiality certainly surpasses simple patchwork or mosaic craft. The quilts and canvas themselves literally hold together the fabric of a communal commitment toward one another. In this gesture, I glimpse the horizon of Muñoz's utopia, and hear what choreographer Deborah Hay calls an "ancient voice."<sup>62</sup> Still, these works seem to stand in opposition to what Hal Foster has called the "Archival Impulse."<sup>63</sup>

In 2004, Foster set out to define what he saw as a growing (if not recurring) trend in artistic communities globally. Presented as "an idiosyncratic probing," the Archival Impulse follows a utopian impulse. Foster observed "its desire to turn belatedness into becomingness, to recoup failed visions in art, literature, philosophy, and everyday life into possible scenarios of alternative kinds of social relations" marked a dramatic shift away from a cultural ethos that saw history as little more than traumatic baggage.<sup>64</sup>

Foster highlights the way artists working with and around the archive grant agency to "historical information, often lost or displaced."<sup>65</sup> Artists collecting and sharing these "alternative knowledges" and "counter memories" both pull from and produce their own "informal" archives. Practitioners of such an art practice are in deep relationship with the vocation of the archivists, but their relationship to utopia turns "excavation sites into construction sites."<sup>66</sup>

In a parenthetical aside, Foster considers, "perhaps 'anarchival impulse' is [a] more appropriate phrase," and it is in this moment of hesitation and contemplation where I believe artists like the quilters of Gee's Bend and Jack Whitten can easily slip into the discourses of artwork associated with the

<sup>62</sup> Deborah Hay, *No Time To Fly* (Austin, TX: Deborah Hay, 2010), 3.

In the footnotes of her dance score for solo performance – *No Time To Fly* (Figure 20), Hay explains that "the ancient voice is 'me' from 10,000 years ago, or from 10,000 years in the future – a compassionate voice, bringing the experience from the past or from the future into the present." The counter-archive I am suggesting here is formed in the fusion of such transtemporal compassion.

<sup>63</sup> Hal Foster, "An Archival Impulse," *October* 110 (2004): pp. 3-22, <https://doi.org/10.1162/0162287042379847>.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.



*complexity and freedom from complexity*

Figure 20. Deborah Hay, page from Performance score *No Time To Fly* (Complexity and Freedom from Complexity) 2010



archive.<sup>67</sup> Moreover, I would argue that many more artists have already experienced the fate of disappearing into the archive.

Artists working with the archive today are no longer in a position to respect the definition of archival art outlined by Foster as “more ‘institutive’ than ‘destructive,’ more ‘legislative’ than ‘transgressive.’”<sup>68</sup> Like the prefix suggests, the anarchive is at times “not” and at other times “against” the archive. In the town of Gee’s Bend, this interference takes the form of radical togetherness as the quilting circles stitch their ancestries temporally backwards and forwards.

In my own studio, employing abstraction has allowed for an unexpected engagement with the archival record. Methods of compression and oversaturation are both strategies for analyzing found readymade-histories and tools for creating new records that would otherwise be impossible to hold within traditional archives. For a recent painting series, my counter-archival impulse did not lead me forwards or backwards in time, but downwards towards my studio floor.



Figure 21. Jamison Edgar, *Xion*, 2019, swept detritus on canvas, 24" x 30"

I have always felt a kinship with the floors of public spaces. Attuned to the charged residue that is left by the body as it passes over the same place again and again. At queer bars, this residue feels personal. Among friends, I am notorious for whipping out my phone during last call to capture photographs (often blurry) of sticky floors as queers are filed out onto the streets. My studio floors have come to reflect this fascination with what we leave behind – seen and unseen – and while working on new projects, it can feel like things develop from within a piled clutter of materials.

One day while finishing a wall sized painting that incorporated oil paint, acrylic, aerosol, glitter, black flocking and organic plant material, I looked around my studio floor to discover a translucent velvet blanket of black dust sparkling between the four corners of the room. I was dumbstruck. Unknowingly, I had created a second

<sup>67</sup>Hal Foster, “An Archival Impulse,” *October* 110 (2004): pp. 3-22, <https://doi.org/10.1162/0162287042379847>, 10.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.



painting that privately recorded and echoed every move that had gone into making its companion. Captivated by this unconscious happening, I tried and failed to capture the black dust painting in a photograph. Unfortunately, the flat medium could not replicate the delicate physicality that held me with such captivation while standing within the work on my studio floor.

The photograph's failure led me to develop a new method for documenting the excess. A process where initial studio sweeping was treated like oil paint being prepared on a glass pallet (Figure 21). The residue series that grew from this new studio archiving were titled after queer spaces in Atlanta and Pittsburgh.

## Post-Archive

*The chain of citations sets the stage for a non-linear diffractive discourse on time, where referencing allows for a text to matter and to sound choreographically with and through the performers' bodies.*<sup>69</sup>

- Sofia Lemos and Aleexandra Balona, "Ligia Lewis: minor matter, on Fugitive Force" (2018)

In the 2017 collection of essays and interviews, *Lost and Living (In) Archives: Collectively Shaping New Memories*, archive and internet scholar Annet Dekker assembles an international system of artists, writers, and researchers to consider the distorted potential of an archive bound to the technology of clouds, webs, and nets. Extending beyond Derrida's *Fever* and his own fascination with the then-new technology of email, Dekker interrogates the implications of an archival praxis located within the omnipresent void of cyberspace. These digital platforms, and the archives they create, remind us that, "The shape of an archive constrains and enables the content it encloses, and the technical methods for building and supporting an archive produces the document for collection."<sup>70</sup>

The disembodying technologies of the 21<sup>st</sup> century have injected the archive with the same cultural and geographical contradictions that we experience daily when strolling through

<sup>69</sup>Sofia Lemos, Aleexandra Balona, "Ligia Lewis: minor matter, on Fugitive Force," in *Metabolic Rifts*, ed. Prospections for Art, Education and Knowledge Production (Berlin: Germany, 2017), 133-142, 135.

<sup>70</sup>Annet Dekker, "What It Mean to Be Loast and Living (in) Archives," in *Lost and Living (in) Archives: Collectively Shaping New Memories*, ed. Annet Dekker (Amsterdam, NL: Valiz, 2017), pp. 11-26, 14.

Instagram, posting anonymous memes, or checking out on Amazon Prime. Strolling, posting, checking out, collecting and preserving are simultaneous hybrid actions.

By emphasizing the archive's relationship to its technological architecture, Dekker begins to "unravel" established archival frameworks – claiming that the archive, and its stored materials, are both forever lost, yet entirely (in) control. The archive's agency is echoed in Dekker's own words, "An archive is not simply a recording, a reflection, or an image of an event," but that which "can also shape the event."<sup>71</sup> For Dekker, digital archives are "dynamic ... flexible systems in which content is constantly recontextualized."<sup>72</sup>

It may come as no surprise that Dekker prioritizes web-based artists to support her hybridized conception of the archive as instigator, but it would be reductive to assume artists working in more traditional mediums somehow overlook the potentialities of such an archival strategy. Kara Walker, for instance, warps her environments with nothing more than a pair of scissors, black paper, and a roll of tape.<sup>73</sup> Some of her installations, like *Darkytown Rebellion* (Figure 22), are frozen in a kaleidoscope of light and projects, but her living archives "are not for memory and long-term storage, but for reproduction, for endless circulation between different arenas, people, networks and locations."<sup>74</sup>



Figure 22 Kara Walker, *Darkytown Rebellion*, 2001 projection, cut paper, and adhesive on wall 168'' x 444''. Collection Musée d'Art Moderne Grand-Duc Jean. (Luxembourg)

<sup>71</sup> Annet Dekker, "What It Mean to Be Lost and Living (in) Archives," in *Lost and Living (in) Archives: Collectively Shaping New Memories*, ed. Annet Dekker (Amsterdam, NL: Valiz, 2017), pp. 11-26, 21.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> I have never seen one of Kara Walker's silhouette installations in person. Her work, like so many artists that have risen to superstar status, is only made available for short amounts of time for small amounts of people. Luckily, Dekker might argue, there is the internet, a growing archive that stores collections of Walker's work with metadata classification. Search engines, clickbait and traffic algorithms, however, present their own problems of visibility for net-archives. Artworks like Walker's sugar Sphinx, *A Subtlety* (2014), and her first New York mounted silhouette installation, *Gone: An Historical Romance of a Civil War as it Occurred b'tween the Dusky Thighs of One Young Negress and Her Heart* (1994) flood internet searches, while smaller works or those of private collections are often sequestered into small thumbnails.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid, 17.

Babak Afrassiabi and Nasrin Tabataba, who created the publication *Pages* and contributed to Dekker's *Lost and Living (In) Archives*, might call Walker's silhouettes a "permeable archive" – a place where nesting interaction between site and site contributor produced a space for decontextualization and re-appropriation.<sup>75</sup> An archive where "re-appropriations are not only a means to a network but about defamiliarization."<sup>76</sup> Archives that ask us to "imagine a kind of archival network that serves itself as it expands."<sup>77</sup>

Like Walker, many of the artists that I have turned to while building a case for the counter-archive are not imminently seen as exemplifying a traditional archival art practice. In fact, they might not even consider themselves to work with the archive because they have never been inside of an archive's reading room or dug through a box of handwritten letters. And even when some artists do brush up against the historical, or collect, gather and recontextualize materials in their work, their mediums are seen as counterintuitive to the rigid architecture that supports the archive's claim to epistemological authority.

These opinions censor who and what gets to be seen as archival in the same way those who control an archive's structure inevitably police its holdings. The counter-archive offers an inverted perspective on archiving that operates beyond the confines of individual documents in specific collections and rigid criteria based on appearances. Counter-archives are not after the specificities of an event, but as Dekker puts it, they are busy building towards new formations of an archival language and architecture that has the power to reshape events. Moreover, they also just want to claim their knowledge-power.

The phrase *post-internet* has been used to categorize the ways our psyches have been rearranged and restructured since the introduction of the internet. Growing up alongside the rise of internet culture, I have always been slightly blind to its effects, but nested somewhere in the concept of life *after the internet* is a way of organizing thought *after the archive*; a prosthesis that has detached from the grips of the document, and over time attached itself permanently onto my body.

<sup>75</sup> Babak Afrassiabi, and Nasrin Tabataba, Annet Dekker, "Permeable Archive: A Conversation with Babak Afrassiabi & Nasrin Tabataba," in *Lost and Living (in) Archives: Collectively Shaping New Memories* (Amsterdam, NL: Valiz, 2017), pp. 213-224.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid, 218.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid, 219.

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