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We Were There, We Are Here: Queer Collections and Their Repositories and Legacies

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We Were There, We Are Here:
Queer Collections and Their Repositories and Legacies

By:

Alexandria Deters

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We Were There, We Are Here: Queer Collections and Their Repositories and Legacies

By: Alexandria Deters

Art history and history has gaps within it that are just now starting to be filled and the absences rectified. Those gaps are caused by erasure of queer art history. The way it has been rectified is through queer institutions and queer collections. This study explores how queer institutions and collections are innately political through saving queer objects and art. It is through their efforts that queer art history is finally being recognized in major institutions, collections, and exhibitions. I interview scholars and collectors to understand why they collect, which reveals the political nature and uniqueness of queer art as well as exposing how this history has been ignored and finally recognized. By looking at three case studies: Charles Leslie Jr., GLBT Historical Society, and the Alice Austen House, the political nature of the past and future of queer art history is seen.

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Introduction

There is one aspect of art history that is ignored: a gap in museum collections in which information cannot be found in your everyday library or archive, even with extensive investigation. That area is queer history.

Queer history, in every aspect from art to politics, has been ignored and erased in history books and museums. Even when learning about the general history of the United States, queer history is ignored.¹ When at a museum and seeing an exhibition, queer artists are presented in a way where their sexuality is not discussed or mentioned.² If it is, it is presented in a non-threatening way to make a heterosexual audience comfortable.³ When a museum or institute has a queer collection, it is not made the focal point and given the acknowledgement it deserves or it is hidden away and forgotten about, or worse it is reframed to follow along with the heteronormative nature of art history.⁴

In the past decade, this erasure and ignorance is starting to be corrected and rectified through exhibits, queer institutions, scholars and people that are inspired to change the way we know history. This is seen with programs in higher education focusing on gender and sexuality and even in art history degrees that focus on queer art

¹ In most lower level schools, such as high school and middle school, queer history is completely ignored. This is seen in my own education, as well as others, with absolutely no mention of the famous “Stonewall Inn Riots”.

²Walter Hopps, Robert Rauschenberg, Susan Davidson, and Trisha Brown. *Robert Rauschenberg, a Retrospective*. New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1997.

³ Cotter, Holland. "Everything About Warhol But the Sex." Review. *The New New York Times* (New York City), July 14, 2002, Art/Architecture sec. Accessed October 9, 2016.

http://www.nytimes.com/2002/07/14/arts/art-architecture-everything-about-warhol-but-the-sex.html?ref=collection/byline/holland-cotter&action=click&contentCollection=undefined@ion=stream&module=stream_unit&version=search&contentPlacement=4&pgtype=collection.

⁴ “...heteronormativity: the mundane production of heterosexuality as the normal, natural, taken-for-granted sexuality.”- Celia Kitzinger, "Heteronormativity in Action: Reproducing the Heterosexual Nuclear Family in After-hours Medical Calls." *Social Problems* 52, no. 4 (November 2005): 477. Accessed December 17, 2016. doi:10.1525/sp.2005.52.4.477.

history.”⁵ To understand how queer art history has now become a focus in schools and the topic of discussion in art history circles, I will discuss how queer art history is erased, recovered and validated in my thesis.

My first chapter “Erasure of Queer History” will focus on and discuss how queer art history has been ignored in museums, institutions, collections and exhibitions for centuries. I will look at how major museums with major collections by queer artists have ignored these artists and not exhibited them until recent years. I will examine how when museums do exhibit a queer artist, the narrative they present is devoid of queer sexuality, making a queer artist comfortable for a heterosexual audience. This will be followed with foundations and institutions that control the perception of a queer artist to either make them appear not queer or ignore their queerness. All of this will be concluded with explaining how and why queerness in art and history has been ignored and how ignoring it has been justified. Yet, in spite of all the odds, queer history and art exists and has continued to exist in bits and pieces through codes and people brave enough to collect and preserve it.

Chapter Two, “Recovery”, will focus on how queer collectors and queer institutions recover and elevate queer art and history, and recover it by doing so. I show this through two case studies that illustrate the recovery of queer art through a collector and institution. The chapter is broken into two parts, each part focusing on a different

⁵ Many colleges today, such as Brown University, offer degrees and focuses in Gender and Sexuality Studies. “The Gender and Sexuality Studies Program encourages students to examine the complex ways that “differences” are produced culturally, politically, and epistemologically: sexual and gender differences in concert with differences that are fundamental to the categories of ‘race’ and ethnicity, nationality, class, religion, and so forth.”- “Gender and Sexuality Studies.” Brown University. 2016. Accessed December 17, 2016. <https://www.brown.edu/research/pembroke-center/gender-and-sexuality-studies>. For example, the University at Buffalo, The State University of New York, offers a PhD program where a student can focus on queer theory under advisement from the Ph.D. Director Jonathon Katz. “Jonathan Katz.” UB Department of Art. August 22, 2016. Accessed December 17, 2016. <http://art.buffalo.edu/faculty-staff/jonathan-katz/>.

case study: Part I: Charles Leslie Jr. and Part II: The GLBT Historical Society/History Museum. Part I will look at the collector, Leslie, who has collected queer art for decades and how he is preserving history. It was this preservation that eventually lead him to co-founding, with his partner, the first gay and lesbian art museum: the Leslie-Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art. After looking at how a personal collection can turn into a queer institution, I will discuss the GLBT Historical Society/History Museum in San Francisco that started with dedicated scholars in the Bay Area seeking to preserve the unique queer history in San Francisco. Both of these case studies show the innate political nature of queer art, collections, and institutions and how they are unique and different.

Finally, my conclusion “Validation” will look at how non-queer institutions, museums, and society are beginning to rectify historical wrongs by acknowledging queer art history. I will focus on recent museum exhibitions that are exhibiting and promoting queer artists and culture, such as the Museum of the City of New York and the Smithsonian American Art Museum. In 2016, they both had two major exhibitions focusing on queer art and life. I will also look at the Alice Austen House, which, until recently, did not acknowledge Austen’s queerness. The institution is now exploring it through grants and research. Then, I shall discuss the other areas of research that can be done to acknowledge and recover queer art history as a whole. Finally, I shall acknowledge and discuss how queer art history is innately political and how, by housing these collections, they are political acts. Through these collections, we are planning and hoping for a better future where queerness can be seen as a norm and not a subcategory. To do this, I will discuss José Esteban Muñoz’s theory of “queer utopia” and how

through collecting, preserving, and sharing queer art history, we are not only saving a part of the past, but giving hope for a better future. ⁶

⁶ José Esteban Muñoz . *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. New York: New York University Press, 2009.

Chapter 1: Erasure of Queer History

What would it be like to learn about artwork without any context of the artist's past? Or what if an artist's works, like Pablo Picasso, were completely left out of the general canon of art history because of his affairs? And in fact that was so offensive that people burned or destroyed any of his works when found because it offended them so much? This idea seems impossible to many but that is exactly what happened with queer artworks and queer artists. Many valuable and important artists have been left out of art history because of their sexuality. Even the artists that are included, some of the works are "erased" from the public's mind, like Andy Warhol's sex works. This is the challenge that art historians, institutions, and collectors are facing and trying to fix today.

Combating the erasure of queer artworks and queer collections, bringing them out of the metaphorical and literal closet and giving them the respect and acknowledgment that they deserve.

Today the erasure that has been occurring for centuries is starting to be fixed, but there is a long way to go. The art world and society today are starting to recognize the value of queer artists and queer history but it is a slow ongoing process. I experienced this first hand in graduate school. When discussing important figures in American art in the 20th century, I asked my professor about the artist Paul Cadmus.⁷ He replied, that he was not as important in the general scope so we would not be looking at him. This experience is not the fault of the professor however, but how art history has been framed for centuries. The way certain artists are prioritized over others in importance is reflected in how museums exhibit artists and whom they choose to give retrospectives. It is also

⁷ For example, in art history classes what a teacher decides to focus on or ignore, tends to go with the general canon of art history. This is seen more in high school and middle school rather than higher levels of education.

seen in our daily lives and the way general history is taught. It was not until 2016 that the legendary Stonewall Inn, where the famous riot on June 28, 1969, was given National Historic Monument status. The Alice Austen House, known for its denial of Alice Austen's queerness, is finally recognizing that Austen was a lesbian and are exploring that aspect of her work through the National Endowment for the Humanities grant. This research was recently seen at the panel discussion at the Whitney Museum in March 2016 on Austen.⁸

Major museums will show queer artists today, but in ways that deemphasize how their sexuality influenced their work, or they do not acknowledge it all. Artists such as Catherine Opie and Robert Mapplethorpe have broken the hetero-ceiling with having retrospectives and having their works included in major exhibitions. But artists' more "extreme" or what some consider "vulgar" works are just now starting to be appreciated. An example of a more "extreme" queer artist would be Tom of Finland.⁹ His work is referenced continually and he was one of the first people to create explicit work for a gay male audience. Yet, while his work is paramount in the history of gay male centered art of the 20th century, no major museum has had a retrospective of his work, even though museums like the MoMA in New York City have work by him in their collections.¹⁰

It is because of things like this, where queer work is in a collection, but not receiving the full recognition that it deserves, that queer institutions are necessary. It is

⁸Lillian Faderman, Sarah Kate Gillespie, Richard Meyer, Lara Vapnek, and Laura Weller. "New Eyes on Alice Austen." Lecture, Alice Austen House Presents: New Eyes on Alice Austen, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York City, March 31, 2016. Accessed October 22, 2016. http://whitney.org/WatchAndListen?play_id=1514.

⁹ Famous in the queer and gay community for his sexually explicative artwork.

¹⁰ "The MoMA has five works by Tom of Finland in their collection.- Jerry Portwood, "The Second Coming of Tom." Out Magazine. March 19, 2015. Accessed December 17, 2016. <http://www.out.com/art-books/2015/3/19/second-coming-tom-finland>. This information was discovered on the Tom of Finland Foundation website. "EXHIBITION HISTORY." Tom of Finland Foundation. Accessed October 22, 2016. <http://www.tomoffinlandfoundation.org/foundation/TomExhibitions.html>.

these institutions that are able to recognize and celebrate queer artwork in a queer context, by recognizing the queer aspect in works rather than hiding it or ignoring it. For years people have hidden away their queer collections, with many being destroyed by family members and friends after the collectors' deaths on their discovery. This was heightened during the AIDS epidemic of the 1980's when queer people were dying at an alarmingly rate and their families came into their homes and threw away what they considered "offensive" memorabilia and artwork.¹¹ This erasure of queer life and evidence of it is why queer institutions are needed to house these queer collections. Traditionally institutions and museums rather than appreciating what they are donated, either have thrown away, hid in the back of storage, or have re-contextualized the history of objects to make them not queer. It is because of this that we need a change in mainstream institutions; in the way they appreciate and exhibit queer artwork.

This is also seen with the way museums and institutions exhibit and recognize their collections of queer artists. An example of this at a museum, is the artist Romaine Brooks (b.1874-1970), where a majority of her work is housed at the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington D.C. Brooks died in 1970 and she left most of her work to the Smithsonian American Art Museum (SAAM) in Washington D.C. She is a pivotal figure in queer art history, and her portraits foreshadow the gender performativity that we now see in many queer artworks. Yet, her first major retrospective put on by SAAM was in 1971. It was not until 2000, that another retrospective of her work was

¹¹ Charles Leslie Jr. discussing what happened to his friend's collection after he died from AIDS related complications, "Larry [McLaughlin's 11:05] mother and the family priest are here throwing everything in his apartment into a dumpster. We his neighbors, we've offered to buy things, but they're destroying everything. Wh-Can't you do something?"-Charles Leslie, "Queer Collector." Interview by author. September 12, 2016.

seen, at the National Museum for Women in the Arts.¹² It was not until forty-five years later in 2016 that SAAM finally has created another major retrospective of her work, *The Art of Romaine Brooks*.



Figure 1. Romaine Brooks: *Self-Portrait*, 1923

The case of Brooks is not new, nor should it be looked at to say that the problems of the past, of acknowledging queer artists, has been solved. Her retrospective is just one small step forward, and also highlights a key problem, the traditional museum institution.

How major museums and institutions represent queer artists is also problematic and shows erasure of queer history in an institutionalized way. If it's a major or well-respected artist, museums will exhibit their queer artists, but when they do much of their history and context of the pieces has been lost historically. For instance the most well-known example of this happening was in 2002 in the *Andy Warhol Retrospective* exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles. The exhibit showed two hundred and fifty paintings by the artist throughout his career, but there was a noticeable

¹²John Anderson, "The Art of Romaine Brooks' At the American Art Museum, Reviewed." Washington City Paper. July 14, 2016. Accessed October 9, 2016. <http://www.washingtoncitypaper.com/arts/museums-galleries/blog/20828088/the-art-of-romaine-brooks-at-the-smithsonians-american-art-museum-reviewed>.

absence that many critics were quick to notice, sex. *The New York Times* critic Holland Cotter, pondered that “one possibility: the images are almost exclusively of men and male sex parts and express an undisguised interest in same-sex sex”.¹³ The most frustrating part about that is that since those works were excluded, a major part of Warhol’s life was excluded as well. Cotter gave a perfect example of why this exclusion was problematic. What if for example you were to go to a retrospective of Pablo Picasso with all of sexual works excluded, his history with women not included. That would be preposterous because with all of his works “sex was too much part of his work”.¹⁴ Sexuality and Warhol’s own sexual exploration is just as important in his works just as it was in Picasso’s. So the absence of Warhol’s “whole series of sexually explicit paintings ... hundreds, probably thousands of explicit photographs”, is an example of erasure of queer sexuality in a major museum setting.¹⁵

Warhol’s sexuality is repeatedly “neutered” in museum shows, even if his gay identity is not. Even shows that claim to celebrate LGBTQ sexuality still fall short in exploring the sexual aspects of it.¹⁶ An example of a more recent show is *Gay Gotham* which opened October 7, 2016 at the Museum of the City of New York, which claims to feature the works of artists “including paintings and photographs, as well as letters, snapshots, and ephemera that illuminate their personal bonds and reveal secrets that were scandal-provoking in their time and remain largely unknown today”.¹⁷ One strength of the show was how they displayed the queer history of New York City and through large

¹³ Cotter.

¹⁴ Cotter.

¹⁵ Cotter.

¹⁶ LGBTQ-Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer

¹⁷ "Gay Gotham." Museum of the City of New York. October 07, 2016. Accessed October 15, 2016. <http://www.mcny.org/exhibition/gay-gotham>.

maps of famous queer locations on the walls. They did not do the general mistake in many queer shows of ignoring lesbian history, which is noteworthy, but the artwork they choose to represent certain artists was disappointing once again. Andy Warhol was in the exhibition and the works that were included were not the famous screen-prints he had done; but once again any of his explicit sexual work was excluded.

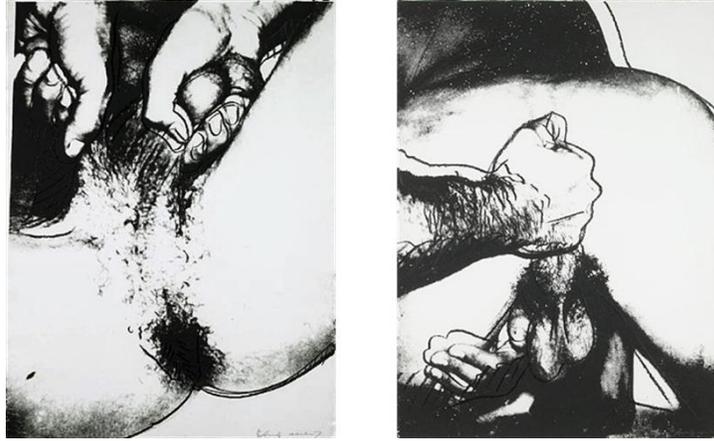


Figure 2. Andy Warhol, *Sex Parts (+ Sex Parts; 2 works)*, 1978

What was included was many of his pen and ink drawing, some photographs, a clip of his slightly erotic video *Kiss* (1963), and love letters. Once again Warhol's more aggressive and "in your face" explicit works were not included nor mentioned. It is only in the catalogue for the show that his more explicit works are briefly discussed. Warhol was not the only victim though of this sexual censorship, the famous bad boy of photography, Robert Mapplethorpe, was as well. Mapplethorpe's early life is explored in photographs and some of his famous nudes of African American men are included, but what is troubling is the absence of images from his famous *X Portfolio* series. While the box the *X Portfolio* comes in is included in the show in a display case, the actual works

are not. In the catalogue one of his images from the *X Portfolio* series are included, but it was one of the few “tame” images from it.¹⁸

Gay Gotham also does not do full justice to the important New York native artist Paul Cadmus. The only work by him that is included in the show is the drawing *Ray*, 1937, which was of costume designs for the ballet *Filling Station*. This work is important for queer presence in ballet, but does not exemplify the work that Cadmus is known for. In the catalogue at least there is an image of Cadmus’s famous work *The Fleet’s In!*, 1934 but as is the case most people will not know this because they will not by the expensive catalog for the exhibit.¹⁹

Gay Gotham is an example of how museums are starting to become more accepting of queer history overall, especially in art. However, it also highlights how much still needs to be done in the art world for queer artists sexuality to be accepted not in bits in pieces, but as a whole. For when we think of male or even female heterosexual artists, their intimate lives are told unabashedly with all the details about their sexual lives included and images as well if possible.²⁰ This cult of biography of an artist also brings up a point of debate within the art community, of how important the biography of the artist is in understanding their work.²¹ Before looking at that debate though, queer artists and their lives need to be accepted and seen in art history in general. Only when

¹⁸Donald Albrecht, and Stephen Vider, *Gay Gotham: Art and Underground Culture in New York*. New York, NY: Skira Rizzoli Publications, 2016, 278.

¹⁹ As seen on page 154 and 155, Albrecht.

²⁰ For example books about of mistresses of famous artists, such as Fernande Oliver, a mistress of Pablo Picasso. Fernande Oliver, *Loving Picasso: The Private Journal of Fernande Olivier*. New York: Abrams, 2001.

²¹ An example of this debate is in: Roberta Crisci-Richardson, "Conclusion." In *Mapping Degas: Real Spaces, Symbolic Spaces and Invented Spaces in the Life and Work of Edgar Degas (1834-1917)*, 323-24. Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015. Accessed January 7, 2017. <https://books.google.com/books?id=a2YHCgAAQBAJ&pg=PA323&lpg=PA323&dq=importance+of+artist+bio+debate&source=bl&ots=3jreRReeYJ&sig=oN1921pIaMv91fGnHcJQwxHbBvM&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwiEmKvT0bDRAhXHjlQKHxnXBUYQ6AEIOzAG#v=onepage&q=importance%20of%20artist%20bio%20debate&f=false>.

queer artists have that same luxury of all parts of their lives being accepted not just the easy comfortable parts, then queer history and queer art will truly be recovered.

Artists that continue to be celebrated and praised across the globe have hidden histories that make many of those artist and foundations uncomfortable and would rather deny them than acknowledge them. The most well-known example is the artist Alice Austen (b.1866-1952) whose queer identity had always been denied and ignored until recently, but there are more well-known artists that this happens to as well. The artists Jasper Johns (b.1930) and Robert Rauschenberg (b.1925-2008) are internationally famous, which is seen in how all-major museum collections have at least one of these artists' works. Yet, how many times in an exhibit or in an art history book is the queer part of their identity discussed? Or even acknowledged? I would assume that most people's experiences are like mine, and that they are not even mentioned. This is because besides museums and reputable art history books ignoring this, but even the foundations of these artists stubbornly refuse to acknowledge it.²² Just like how the Alice Austen House and Staten Island Historical Society in the recent past would not allow scholars into their archives if they had queer aspect to their research; the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation also does not allow entry to them as well.²³

It is seen on the Jasper Johns website and the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation website the erasure of the queer part of their lives.²⁴ It is not apparent to the unaware

²² This is also seen in major book published on Robert Rauschenberg and his works for his 1997 Retrospective. There is no mention of any intimate relationships with any men, and all relationships with men are presented as friendships only.- Walter Hopps, Robert Rauschenberg, Susan Davidson, and Trisha Brown. *Robert Rauschenberg, a Retrospective*. New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1997.

²³ Novotny, Ann, and Oliver Jensen. *Alice's World: The Life and Photography of an American Original, Alice Austen, 1866-1952*. Old Greenwich, CT: Chatham Press, 1976.

²⁴ On the website it discusses in the "Chronology" section his friendship with Johns, but there is no mention of their intimate relationship. "Chronology." Robert Rauschenberg Foundation. 2016. Accessed December 17, 2016. <http://www.rauschenbergfoundation.org/artist/chronology-new#1950-59>.

observer, but when you know what to look for it is clearly missing. Both websites state how Johns was influenced by Rauschenberg and vice versa.²⁵ They discuss their earlier history and how Rauschenberg influenced Johns greatly in his early career, but not on the intimate relationship that they shared.

Even when visiting the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation a very distinct narrative of his life is emphasized. The Foundation appears to be open to questions and happy to provide any information on him. However, what one quickly noticed is that the Foundation was keen on presenting Rauschenberg in a heterosexual light. If one did not know of Rauschenberg's relationships with men and other artists, a person would not even know he was queer. How do they do this? It is by the way they talk about him and frame his life and the foundation. When I was given a tour the employees continued to mention his son and how his son is very active in the foundation. Having a biological child does not make a person heterosexual, but when it is continually mentioned it generally implies heterosexuality. There was no mention of the intimate relationships he had with women or men and by doing that the Foundation was not technically hiding or denying his queer sexuality; but making any of his sexuality not part of the conversation. The only acknowledgment of his sexuality was his son, which made his sexuality be heterosexual by default.

Denying scholars access to an archive because of a researcher wanting to show an artist's queer side is not only disappointing, but it is actively keeping queer art history hidden. Scholars and people in general would gain so much more understanding from these artists' works if their queer identities were acknowledged. For then people would

²⁵ "He soon became friends with the artist Robert Rauschenberg (born 1925), also a Southerner, and with the composer John Cage and the choreographer Merce Cunningham. "-"Jasper Johns Biography." Jasper Johns. 2010. Accessed December 17, 2016. <http://www.jasper-johns.org/biography.jsp>.

know that one of the reasons why Johns and Rauschenberg produce similar work during the same period was not only because they were friends, but because they were lovers. The fact that this fact is still not known or common outside the queer community is frustrating, but also is a grave injustice to these men's memories and lives.

I was able to contact the Director of Archives and Scholarship at the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation and ask her about this apparent "under-the-radar" policy of homosexual erasure and she told me that this was not the case. She did admit though that, "During his lifetime, Rauschenberg wanted to be seen as simply an artist rather than solely as a gay artist. This is because it was important to him that the viewer bring their own interpretations to his artwork and not to have it interpreted through a single lens".²⁶ This statement goes back to the era that Rauschenberg grew up in, but also reflects the fear of many artists today. That by labeling yourself "queer" or "gay" your artwork will only be seen as an extension of queer commentary and that you as an artist will forever have the byline of "gay artist". While it is important to respect Rauschenberg's intentions when it comes to how he wants his art seen, it is important that his sexuality is seen and discussed as well. Not because it directly reflects his art practices, but because by acknowledging his sexuality it shows queer children today and in the future that their sexuality does not have to define them and does not have to be a hindrance to having a successful life.

The denial of certain narratives and the recognition of an artist's queerness, is a policy though that is not official and is an example of how homophobic policies are still kept "under the radar". When talking to employees of queer focused art institutions and queer scholars, it is a topic of discussion that is always brought up. Even artists that were

²⁶Francine Snyder. "Rauschenberg Foundation Question." E-mail message to author. November 1, 2016.

“out” in their lives as queer people with certain messages are in subtle ways “dequeerified”.²⁷ This is because many people in the art world believe, and this idea is given staying power by the art market, that if an artist is to become a “blue-chip” artist, an artist cannot be labeled with any other subcategory such as “gay”, “activist” or “AIDS” artist to name a few.²⁸ This is why with artists like Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg, both blue-chip artists, queerness is not talked about or mentioned. An example of an “out” gay artist whose sexuality and health status is trying to be deemphasized to get to the “blue-chip” level is Félix González-Torres.

González-Torres (b.1957-1996) was a gay male artist that died of AIDS related illnesses in 1996. Many of his works centered around his partner that also died of AIDS related causes, but his works are made in a way that anyone can look at them and take from (literally and metaphorically) their own personal message. His works, because of the universal message that can be taken from them are constantly seen and exhibited in museums and galleries. Yet, that universality has also become a hindrance and tactic to make his work reach blue-chip status. The Félix González-Torres Foundation, while never denying his HIV status and sexuality, has been known though to deny the AIDS messages that are in his works. Is this because they believe that if his work is too closely associated with HIV/AIDS artwork, his work will not be as well-respected in the art market and will not reach high prices?

This question is answered through the exhibits his work is in. When an exhibit is about HIV/AIDS the foundation will make it very difficult to lend work to that show,

²⁷ “Dequeerified” is when something is queer or considered part of the LGBTQ culture or an LGBTQ person, is presented in a non-queer way and is instead presented as heterosexual/part of heterosexual culture.

²⁸ Blue-Chip Artist- an artist that sells well on the art-market at the highest prices.

such as with the Bronx Museum of the Arts' show *Art AIDS America*, which had two González-Torres pieces, both having to be lent by private collectors.²⁹

While this idea seems wrong and not tied to fact, it sadly has been proven true. Works by women, gay, or any other “subcategory” never reach the same record-breaking prices as their white male heterosexual counterparts.³⁰ Because their work does not sell as high in galleries and auctions, their works are considered less-desirable. The notion that their works are less-desirable makes people equate those artists' works as less important. This leads to museums not having major retrospectives of those artists, which leads to students and people either being taught that those artists played only a minor role in the larger scope of art history or are not even mentioned at all. When a person is taught that an artist is less important, they will think the artist is less-desirable and will not buy their work and the vicious cycle continues again. It is this cycle that is a key component in the erasure of queer artists in art history and to why collecting such work is so vital and where it is housed so important.

Another challenge though with breaking this cycle of erasure is the basic one of exposing queer art and history. The challenge exists because as many queer scholars have discovered, much of queer art is still hidden or even worse lost throughout time. This is because “Culture is a lived experience *and* historical memory. Excluded from, or misfiled in, the archives and institutions that consolidate a historical record, minoritized cultures generally lack access to the very materials that might structure their lived experiences”.³¹

²⁹ Yet having a González-Torres piece in the Met Breuer show “Unfinished” (2016) did not require negotiation or controversy.

³⁰ To learn more about discrepancies in the art market see: Maura Reilly, "Taking the Measure of Sexism: Facts, Figures, and Fixes." ARTnews. May 26, 2015. Accessed December 07, 2016. <http://www.artnews.com/2015/05/26/taking-the-measure-of-sexism-facts-figures-and-fixes/>. Which discusses how female artists are valued less in the art market.

³¹ Lord, 38.

Artists like Rauschenberg and Johns grew up in a time when being out with a queer identity was not only a risk to their careers but also their lives. It is because of this that evidence of their queer lives either doesn't exist, was destroyed, is hidden, or coded. What keeps being seen is the apparent lack of evidence of queerness in artwork and in the personal lives of artists. This is because for centuries any even hint of queerness had to be hidden, and of people wanted to find other queer people, codes had to be used to decipher if someone was safe or not safe to be open with. Richard Meyer's explains perfectly why codes became necessary in *Art & Queer Culture*:

From the trials of Oscar Wilde to Betty Friedan's accusation of a 'lavender menace' and beyond, homosexual subjects have often been cast as the object of someone else's phobic representation. They have been framed as outlaws by the police, sinners by the church, as perverts by the medical establishment, as security threats by the federal government. And yet, even as they have been subjected to the frequently violent force of these associations, sexual minorities have crafted ways to resist or exceed definitions.³²

It is because of how queer people "crafted" ways to resist erasure that created the constant struggle for any queer focused art historian, being able to validate and prove that the images and symbols in artist's works mean more than what is on the surface, that there is hidden language within them speaking to their queer identity.

It is these codes that made it possible for queer artists of the past and today to be able to express their queerness in their works while still remaining hidden. This safety though has come with unplanned consequences in today's society, which is the denial of queerness in work. Because how many queer works use codes, a hidden "queer language", that usually only people in the queer community are able to notice, it makes it easy to deny that queer works are even queer at all. It is also because many of these codes have a double meaning, one with a queer message and one with a message that is clearly

³² Meyer, 28.

recognized in the hetero-world. An example of a queer code is the usage of the Catholic saint, Saint Sebastian.³³ He is known as the patron saint of archers and athletes but the image of St. Sebastian has been used repeatedly in queer art since the early 20th century, such as with the artist Carl Van Vechten (b.1880-1964).³⁴

Another code is the usage of Ancient Greek and Roman forms and images used as a way to express queer desire and queer sexuality. This has been used countless over and over again in art history, most notably with the art historian Johann Wincklemann (b. 1717-1768) and with the usage of ancient Greek poses and scenery in physique magazines of the 1940s and 1950s. It was the use of these poses and props that made the almost complete nudity of male models able to pass the censors in the 1940s/50s in the United States. It was argued it was used to extenuate the male form and to inspire other men in bodybuilding what was the ideal male form. It was also though a way to show men other men in almost no clothing, and physique magazines were the first place for many young queer boys to be exposed to male bodies without being accused of homosexuality.

³³ "Increasingly, from the nineteenth and throughout the twentieth century, Saint Sebastian became the subject of profane interpretation. Largely freed from the burden of specifically Christian meaning, his symbology was adapted to fit a host of purposes. For gay viewers, he had obvious appeal and he became a symbol of gay persecution (and later of gay pride). They could identify with his isolation within a society where true identity has to be hidden, and on his inner strength in admitting who he truly is when questioned."-Steve Cox, "Saint Sebastian: Part II Sebastian in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Century." Steve Cox. Accessed December 17, 2016. <http://www.stevecox.com.au/SAINT-SEBASTIAN-PART-II>.

³⁴ "The gay (but closeted) American writer/photographer, Carl Van Vechten made several works on the theme of Saint Sebastian in the 1940s."-Cox.

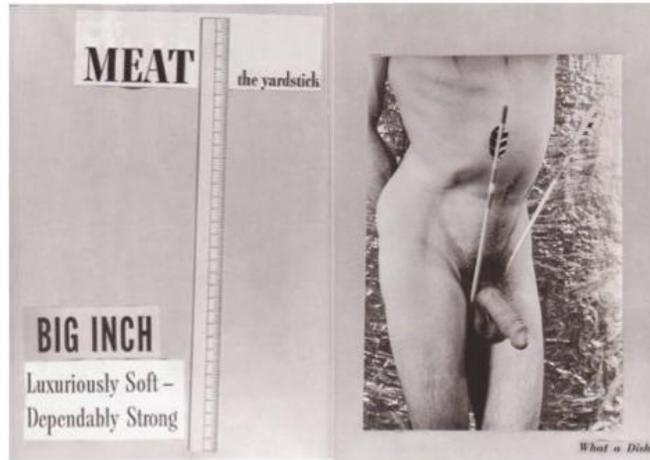


Figure 3. Carl Van Vechten, untitled photographic collage, late-1940s

Material culture that validates the existence of queer codes and gives solid examples of what artists reference in their works is what makes the existence of archives and collections so important to queer history. It is because, until very recently, queer lives and events were ignored and cut out of the general canon of history and art, sometimes not even on purpose because people did not realize that history existed. That is why this history has to be taken from any piece of evidence possible, no matter how small or insignificant it seems. Art historians and librarians assume the role of:

...the archeologists of queer culture, retrieving facts, gossip, names, and images that would otherwise vanish, cruising, filtering to redistribute our presence in time and space, constructing counter memories through ink on paper and ephemera such as softball uniforms and matchbooks, salvaging what has been excised from the historical inventory.³⁵

Queer art history is different than any other history because of its necessity to be “in the closet” and passed down behind closed doors for years. That is what makes it so vitally important to collect and maintain as soon as possible, but also difficult to archive.

³⁵ Lord, 38.

The challenges of archiving and collecting queer art and material is eloquently stated by Catherine Lord in, *Art and Queer Culture*.

The very precariousness of queer archives unsettles the ways in which the conventional historical narrative opposes the 'public' and the 'private', sets history against gossip, pits stories against shards. Queer culture is necessarily collaged from fragments, animated by back story, mined from close readings and based upon an intelligence and intensity of gaze. 'Many of us', notes artist and writer Martha Fleming, 'must remember and recount at all costs-not in a flurry of induced abreaction, but rather because our realities and experiences are not inscribed in history, our identities and collectivities are fragile rumours composed of flicker and smoke'.³⁶

Queer history has not been written down, documented, archived, saved or collected by many people. The people that did save it for many years had no place to donate it. There was nowhere that respected and appreciated what they had been given because it was seen as unimportant, taboo or both. It is this reason that makes queer collections and institutions so important, and why, just by their existence, they are resisting the general canon of history and political acts.

³⁶ Lord, 39.

Chapter 2: Recovery

As stated in the previous chapter, institutions and society have continually erased queer history and queer art history. It is through symbols and codes seen in works of art and culture that have been repeated through time, as well as the dedicated few that collected queer objects, that kept queer history alive. The people and organizations that saw value in these objects are the pioneers of exposing and validating queer history and giving it a place in history. Many people have collected queer objects in silence and hidden their collections. However, a few people in the twentieth century began to not only show their collections, but support queer artists of today and even create institutions to house their collections and make them available to the public. These institutions are distinctly queer or have a strong queer aspect to their mission. Because of their queerness, they have a distinct political edge because the objects they collect and archive challenge the heteronormative version of history. They call attention to a group of people that have and still are persecuted. Rather than let these histories continue to be hidden, they are bringing them to light.

Some of these institutions are in other countries, but the most well-known and extensive ones reside in the United States. Some examples include the Lesbian Herstory Archives, Leather Archives, and Visual AIDS. The Lesbian Herstory Archives is based in Brooklyn, New York and “is home to the world's largest collection of materials by and about lesbians and their communities.”³⁷ The institution’s statement of purpose has a distinct message focusing on the lesbian community, but also reveals how all queer history is collected and discovered through fragments; “The process of gathering this

³⁷ The Lesbian Herstory Archives. "History." The Lesbian Herstory Archives. Accessed November 25, 2016. <http://www.lesbianherstoryarchives.org/history.html>.

material will uncover and collect our herstory denied to us previously by patriarchal historians in the interests of the culture which they serve.”³⁸ The Lesbian Herstory Archives’ statement of purpose and archiving principles show how the collecting of any queer material is political and a call to changing history as we know it.³⁹ The Leather Archives and Visual AIDS show how minority communities also have a distinct queer aspect and mission, making them political and different than major institutions. This is seen in the mission statement of the Leather Archives and Museum in Chicago, Illinois: “The compilation, preservation and maintenance of leather lifestyle and related lifestyles [including but not limited to the Gay and Lesbian communities], history, archives and memorabilia for historical, educational and research purposes.”⁴⁰ While its focus is on the fetish and leather community, this archive rose out of preserving a community within the queer community. This is also seen with the non-profit organization Visual AIDS in New York, New York that “utilizes art to fight AIDS by provoking dialogue, supporting HIV+ artists, and preserving a legacy, because AIDS is not over.”⁴¹ The organization, while documenting and archiving artists that had HIV/AIDS also support artists living with HIV/AIDS through shows and projects. The organization does not focus only on queer artists with HIV/AIDS, but rather any artist. While this doesn’t make them a distinctly queer institution, its focus does revolve around queer history and a distinct group of people within the queer community.

³⁸ The Lesbian Herstory Archives.

³⁹ “The Lesbian Herstory Archives exists to gather and preserve records of Lesbian lives and activities so that future generations will have ready access to materials relevant to their lives. The process of gathering this material will uncover and collect our herstory denied to us previously by patriarchal historians in the interests of the culture which they serve. We will be able to analyze and reevaluate the Lesbian experience; we also hope the existence of the Archives will encourage Lesbians to record their experiences in order to formulate our living herstory.”-Lesbian Herstory Archives.

⁴⁰ “About the LA&M.” The Leather Archives & Museum. Accessed November 25, 2016. https://www.leatherarchives.org/about_.html.

⁴¹ “Visual AIDS.” Visual AIDS. Accessed November 25, 2016. <https://www.visualaids.org/>.

Examples of institutions with a broader scale of focus of the queer community include: ONE Archives, Leslie-Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art, and the GLBT Historical Society/History Museum. The ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives at the USC Libraries, founded in 1952, “is the largest repository of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer (LGBTQ) materials in the world” and its mission is to “collect, preserve, and make accessible LGBTQ historical materials while promoting new scholarship on and public awareness of queer histories.”⁴² The Leslie-Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art and the GLBT Historical Society/History Museum are examples, however, of two distinct queer institutions that focus on a large area of the queer community, but in distinct ways. The Leslie-Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art in New York, New York is an archive and museum that focuses on preserving and sharing queer art history through its collection, project space and archive. The GLBT Historical Society/History Museum in San Francisco, California, while archiving and preserving all queer history, has a strong focus and collection on queer history in the Bay Area of California.

These last two queer institutions, Leslie-Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art and the GLBT Historical Society/History Museum, will be my case studies on why queer collecting is political and why it is important to house queer collections in queer institutions. I will discuss these two institutions in this chapter in two parts. The first part will be on the collector and co-founder of the Leslie-Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art, Charles Leslie Jr. The second part will focus on the history and present collection of the GLBT Historical Society/History Museum. I chose to focus on these two

⁴² "About." ONE National Gay Lesbian Archives at the USC Libraries. Accessed November 25, 2016. <http://one.usc.edu/about/>.

queer institutions because of my own personal experience. In the fall of 2014, I interned at the GLBT Historical Society/History Museum working in the archive and museum. Because of this experience, I was able to email people directly from the organization. During the summer of 2016, I was the Summer Fellow at the Leslie-Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art and worked in different areas of the museum. Because of my fellowship, I was able to meet and interview Charles Leslie Jr..

Part I: A Queer Collector and His Legacy, Charles Leslie Jr.

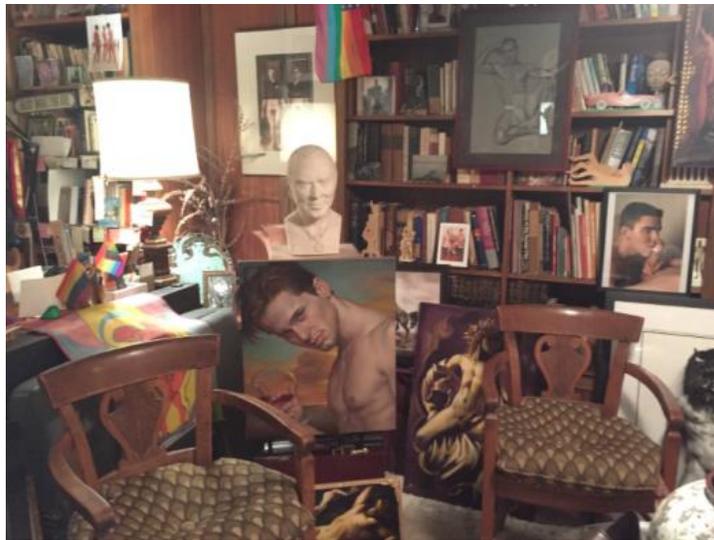


Figure 4. The Living Room of Charles Leslie Jr., September 12, 2016

When thinking of what defines an art collector, one tends to think of a white male that buys beautiful objects because of their aesthetic value or personal passion behind the works. This is how Charles Leslie Jr. began to collect queer artworks in the 1950s. It grew from early childhood memories around his sexual awakening, to passion, to owning beautiful objects that he enjoyed, to finally coming full circle and seeing the innate historical value in the objects he owned and wanting to preserve them. This is how many queer collections, or collections tied to sexuality/politics, begin: from a place of personal interest that morphs into something more profound.

Charles Leslie Jr. was born in Deadwood, South Dakota on June 7, 1933. It was there that he first discovered his sexuality and interest in art. His initial interest in art was intimately tied to his discovery of his sexuality and began the way it did for many young men of that time, through the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Leslie, when interviewed about this experience, said, "You know, I've known thousands of gay men in my life, and so many Americans had that same experience of discovering the nude in the Families of Britannica."⁴³ It was in this common household item that Leslie was first exposed to homoerotic art, through pictures and drawings of Greco-Roman sculptures. He states in *The Art of Looking: The Life and Treasures of Collector Charles Leslie* that, "Finding that edition changed by life. You might even say it was the starting point for my interest in art...Later on, I understood that this had to do with an aesthetic perception which was directly related to my sexuality."⁴⁴

The images of artwork in the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Leslie believed, have "...kind of opened their [young men] eyes to what they were feeling unconsciously or semi-consciously, and it's surprising the number of gay men who responded in the same way when they were adolescents."⁴⁵ But in actuality, it is not surprising at all because "any representation of homoerotic desire in art (or literature) was only possible via a detour to antiquity."⁴⁶ Since this, images of antiquity such as the statue, *Apollo Belvedere*, became a part of a secret language, "...placing a copy of this Apollo [the

⁴³ Charles Leslie, "Queer Collector." Interview by author. September 12, 2016.

⁴⁴ Kevin Clarke. *The Art of Looking: The Life and Treasures of Collector Charles Leslie*. 2nd ed. Berlin: Bruno Gmuender, 2015, 37.

⁴⁵ Leslie

⁴⁶ Clarke, 37.

famous Apollo Belvedere]—or at least his head—in the living room was considered a 'sign' that you were an 'art connoisseur,' and interested in men."⁴⁷



Figure 5. *Apollo Belvedere*

It was these codes and having to hide your sexuality to the rest of the world, that drew Leslie to buying distinctly queer works and to supporting and discovering queer artists. But before he founded the first gay and lesbian art museum with his partner, he first had to start collecting. His path to being a collector began in the early 1950s in California at a flea market with then partner, Freddy Albeck, who worked in the TV industry.

...where there was an old man selling old prints and drawings. Thumbing through them, we [he and Freddy Albeck] found a beautiful male nude of a young man with an erection. It cost five dollars, which I happened to have on me. So I bought it. It became my first art purchase. And it was, of course, a piece of homoerotic art. I assume I was infected, back then, with the collection bug.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Clark, 37.

⁴⁸ Clarke, 59.

It was through his relationship with Albeck that his collection began to grow and where he met people with "large art collections in their homes, often with a homoerotic twist."⁴⁹

It was seeing these homes that impacted Leslie on a personal level, "...it thrilled me to see that someone could put up something like this on their living room wall for everyone to see, unashamed, proud and liberated. I wanted to do the same thing myself one day".⁵⁰

Soon, Leslie started collecting works that pertained to queer life in that moment, with artists such as Paul Cadmus and Jared French, whom "documented homoerotic currents in contemporary American life."⁵¹ Yet artists such as these "limited the circulation of their most homoerotic work to likeminded friends and patrons. This in turn gained them mixed blessings of critical indifference as they sacrificed claims to rank in the avant-garde for the freedom to explore homoerotic imagery."⁵² This fate, of having to decide to either become successful in the larger art world or focus on homosexual topics and only share these works with a select few, is what many artists who Leslie collected faced.⁵³ This doomed fate however, drove Leslie to collect queer artworks and was something he was "determined to change, by aggressively promoting and exhibiting such

⁴⁹ Clark, 61.

⁵⁰ Clarke, 61.

⁵¹ Clarke, 61.

⁵² Clarke, 61.

⁵³ This is similar to how feminist artists in the 1970s had to decide to either create feminist work or to distance themselves completely from the movement. "The feminist art movement developed in conjunction with the wider women's movement because female artists faced discrimination in pursuing professional careers and because art depicting women's subjective experiences was discouraged and disparaged by the art world establishment. Feminist artists challenged the exclusion of women artists from galleries and museums; created new aesthetic practices; and developed innovative forms, styles, and subjects of representation to portray female experiences and critique a range of gendered restraints on women's agency from trivialization to violence."- Jill Fields. "Frontiers in Feminist Art History." *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 33, no. 2 (2012): 1-21. Accessed December 26, 2016. doi:10.5250/fronjwomestud.33.2.0001.

art in order to give it wider recognition, getting it out of the closet and into museums. Even if that meant founding a museum himself, one day."⁵⁴

It was not only the fate of artists and their works that Leslie wanted to change, but also how and where works were displayed and collected. While being inspired by the collectors he met in California, he also experienced collections that inspired him in another way. During 1952/1953 Leslie was drafted into the Army during the Korean War and was stationed in Germany. While in Germany, he met collector Peter Lüdtkke. Lüdtkke interested Leslie because he owned some homoerotic drawings and hung them in his house. Yet the drawings that hung on the walls "were all double-faced" which meant when Lüdtkke wanted to view his homoerotic works, "he turned the frame one way. On the other side were pastels of a bowls of fruit which he would display when 'normal' people came to visit."⁵⁵ This was done as a way to protect yourself, but also enjoy homoerotic works that you owned. Later, when Leslie was putting homoerotic works on his wall, he did the same thing. However it left him deeply unsatisfied: "But then I thought, why should I bother with this? I never turned it [the work] around again, and forthwith hung my erotic work with no shame."⁵⁶

It was seeing works having to be hidden behind other works to be able to display them in a collector's home without fear, of artists having to choose between success and being true to themselves, of wanting to buy works that spoke to his own life, not in codes, and wanting to display them, that lead Leslie on the path to creating a museum.

It was only later in his life, when he had explored the world and "settled down" with Fritz Lohman, that Leslie begin to start supporting queer artists in a more direct

⁵⁴ Clarke, 61.

⁵⁵ Clarke, 81.

⁵⁶ Clarke, 81.

way. In the 1960s, Lohman and Leslie made the daring move to South of Houston in New York City, better known as SoHo. Soon after moving into the SoHo district, the first Leslie-Lohman gay art exhibition was put on in their loft in 1969. Following their first show, they put on other gay art shows in 1970 and 1971. After these shows, they finally decided to "become part of the first wave of gallerists to open in SoHo."⁵⁷ This happened with the opening of the Leslie-Lohman Gallery on Broome Street in 1972, where the current Prince St. Project Space, part of the Leslie-Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art, is located.

The gallery showed distinctly queer works and was able to do what Leslie wanted, which was promoting queer art. But then the AIDS Epidemic hit and "with panic and paranoia feasting on everyone's fears, people stopped coming to the Leslie-Lohman Gallery," which led to its closing in 1983.⁵⁸ Yet the closing of this space did not stop Leslie and Lohman from continuing to collect queer works and sell them to other interested parties. By the last few years of the 1980s, Leslie and Lohman were considering opening up a gallery space again to exhibit queer art. But, on advice from their accountant, decided to create a non-profit organization, "The Leslie/Lohman Gay Art Foundation."⁵⁹

By creating a plainly "gay" organization during a time when "large parts of American society...were intensely busy wiping gay subject matters and gay art off the map" was an innately political act.⁶⁰ Because of the AIDS Epidemic and queer sexuality

⁵⁷ Clarke, 140.

⁵⁸ Clarke, 154.

⁵⁹ "Their accountant Phil Rubin told them, 'I am tired of you guys spending all your money on these nonsensical enterprises. Think of turning this new gallery into a non-profit organization and hosting non-profit events there.'" -Clarke, 161.

⁶⁰ Clarke, 161.

being persecuted more than ever, creating an organization with “gay” in the name was a statement of intent within itself. It was celebrating desire and sexuality in art in a way that had not been done before, and it was because of this appreciation unlike other institutions that Leslie "...inherited collections from artists such as Neel Bate (aka Blade) who died in 1989 and knew his legacy would only be upheld by someone with a broad view of art, like Charles."⁶¹ Because Leslie "grew up in a society where the mere existence of homosexuality has suffered a constant unrelenting religious and civil attempt to erase."⁶² The Leslie/Lohman Gay Art Foundation is so unique because it combats this erasure, by making "it one of [their] special missions to save homoerotic work that might otherwise be destroyed by people who considered it 'dirty' or 'immoral' or 'unimportant'" and the foundation has "made it our business to try and locate, protect, and preserve art that is still, even now, engendered by societal prejudice."⁶³



Figure 6. Coffee Table in Charles Leslie Jr.'s SoHo Loft, September 12, 2016

⁶¹ Clarke, 164.

⁶² Leslie.

⁶³ Clarke, 164.

These goals and wanting to preserve queer art and life is what eventually lead Leslie to co-found the Leslie-Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art (LLM). After Lohman's death in 2009, Leslie started to think of how the collection could be preserved. Finally in 2010, the board of the foundation decided to apply for museum status and attained it in New York.⁶⁴ In the summer of 2016, the museum officially became recognized as a full museum with acceptance by the American Alliance of Museums.⁶⁵

The Leslie-Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art came from the passion from two men to enjoy and appreciate homoerotic art that grew into something more. The hope that Leslie had of one day not having to worry about what was on his walls in case of offending someone and to be able to buy and promote the art that he had a personal connection to, made it possible to create the first art museum that focuses on LGBTQ art. Even their Mission Statement reiterates this: "to exhibit and preserve art that speaks directly to the many aspects of the LGBTQ experience, and foster the artists who create it."⁶⁶ This is important because, with this as their mission, people can come to them and donate their collections, which can be seen and appreciated for what they are in the creative context. Their mission statement also reiterates how LGBTQ is innately political, and therefore the preservation of these collections goes beyond preserving art, but preserving the history of a group of people. The preservation of queer art history is seen in the size of its collection that has grown from just Leslie and Lohman's to other

⁶⁴ Clarke, 188.

⁶⁵ The LLM is funded in large part by Charles Leslie, which is one of the reasons why he is not on the board of the museum today, for legal reasons and conflicts of interest.

⁶⁶ "Mission." Leslie Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art. Accessed November 25, 2016. <https://www.leslielohman.org/about/mission.html>.

collections that have and continue to be donated.⁶⁷ The preservation of new LGBTQ art is also continued to be preserved through Leslie in the form of the Prince Street Project Space, which is still curated under Leslie. The Prince Street Project Space on Broome Street hosts weekly events, but also small pop-up shows of new and emerging artists that make work that speaks to the queer community. The space is a heralding back to the first queer art show that Lohman and Leslie first put on in 1969 by giving these artists a chance to exhibit their work.

The collections that are donated and the artwork that is shown at LLM speaks directly to why these works and collections are political. When I interviewed Leslie, I asked him if he believed collecting work for queer people was different than it is for other collectors and if it had a more important drive behind it. This topic continued to come up throughout the interview and the word he continually said was “erasure.” It was the erasure of queer history that made these collections so important and vital. Because collecting of art objects and preserving goes back to the constant struggle, “the whole thing has been a struggle against erasure. Erasure, because so much of the gay history of the world has been erased.”⁶⁸ But the political aspect came when Lohman and Leslie wanted to put a name to their foundation to preserve this work and exhibit, for as Leslie says, “this collection and the idea of putting it in view of public people, that’s where it became a political issue. You know, because we finally reached a time where they couldn’t kill us, at least not officially.”⁶⁹ It is these words that sum up why these queer institutions are so important for queer history. It is because they themselves know and

⁶⁷ “The Museum maintains a collection of over 24,000 works, and retains an artist archive that contains information on over 1,900 LGBTQ artists, both those represented in the collection and others of interest to LGBTQ audiences.” Leslie-Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art, About Us.

⁶⁸ Leslie.

⁶⁹ Leslie.

understand this struggle on a personal level and fight against erasure because it is not just the fear of queer history erased, but that their own personal history as well. It is why Leslie continuing to promote queer work is so important, especially in this time before a new presidency. His legacy of creating this museum and promoting this work is significantly political and vital.



Figure 7. Charles Leslie and myself, September 12, 2016

Part 2: GLBT Historical Society/History Museum

Understanding how one person with a passion for queer art can create a museum is important to understanding why collecting queer works is political. The other part, however, is institutions themselves that came out of a need to fill a gap in history. An example of such an institution is the GLBT Historical Society/History Museum in San Francisco, California. California, like New York City, has been a haven for queer people for over a century. The queer history in California tends to have one place of strong significance and that is the Bay Area. The Bay Area, dating back to the time of Oscar Wilde, has been a place where LGBTQ people have escaped to seek refuge and create a

new home for themselves.⁷⁰ This is evident with the people that have made it their home and the strong queer communities that have thrived there. While most people today know about the Stonewall Riots in New York City in 1969, many people do not know that the first transgender riot, the Compton Cafeteria Riot, took place even earlier in San Francisco in 1966. The first openly gay politician elected to office, Harvey Milk (b.1930-1978), was also elected in San Francisco in 1978. The political nature of queer objects and material culture is apparent when one looks at queer history, especially in the Bay Area. It also shows how the GLBT Historical Society, while focusing on the LGBTQ history of the Bay Area, also focuses on the politics of queerness as well.

Just like LLM, the GLBT Historical Society came from two men, Willie Walker and Greg Pennington, meeting in the early 1980s and realizing they both had a passion for gay and lesbian history. They decided to put both of their personal collections of this subject matter together. They called this new collection the San Francisco Gay Periodical Project. While Walker and Pennington were working on this project of periodicals, Walker was also involved with the San Francisco Lesbian and Gay History Project with other scholars, academics and activists. It was through this project, where during one of the meetings every member had to come up with a project idea that the queer archive of the Bay Area was first thought of. Walker proposed an archive to preserve the gay and lesbian history in the Bay Area and to make it available to the community in 1984. By the summer of 1985, a board of directors was elected and the first iteration of the GLBT Historical Society was founded.

The first name of the society was the San Francisco Bay Area Gay and Lesbian Historical Society, but by 1990 the organization wanted to clarify the region that it was

⁷⁰ "...Oscar Wilde, the era's most celebrated libertine...visited San Francisco in 1882."- Stryker, 19.

focusing on and renamed themselves "Gay and Lesbian Historical Society of Northern California". However, they soon realized this title was not inclusionary of all types of people in the queer community, so in 1999 they changed their name to what it is today, the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Historical Society, or GLBT Historical Society for short. This makes sense because the Bay Area has a rich history of all parts of the queer community, not only gay and lesbian. This is evident with how, even in the beginning, the institution focused on "documenting the experiences of people of color, the disabled, youth, the elderly, and other groups sometimes marginalized with the LGBT communities."⁷¹

Before it became one of the largest archives in the world on GLBT history, the institution had to build its collection. This happened through donations and with people that specifically helped in creating the collection it has today, such as Jim Van Buskirk. Van Buskirk, a well-known queer historian and librarian, has helped the institution in creating its collection and is the co-author of the 1996 book *Gay by the Bay: A History of Culture in the San Francisco Bay Area*. *Gay by the Bay* is important because it is the first book to chronicle the queer history of the Bay Area and because research at the GLBT Historical Society was used in helping creating it. The other co-author, Susan Stryker, was also the first director of the GLBT Historical Society. The book starts from the late 1800s through the mid-1990s, and discusses important events that have happened in queer history in the Bay Area. The strongest feeling while reading this book is how rich and political that history truly is. I was able to get in contact with Van Buskirk through a board member of the GLBT Historical Society due to my previous internship there. I was

⁷¹Jim Van Buskirk, "GLBT Historical Society/Jim Van Buskirk Questions." Email interview by author. November 15, 2016.

able to email him some questions about his experience working with the collection and queer collections in general.

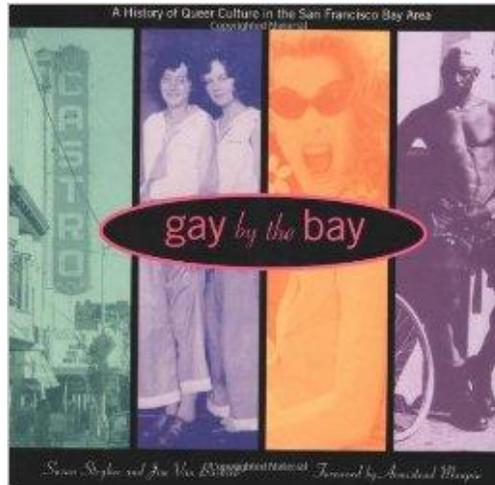


Figure 8. Cover of the book *Gay by the Bay: A History of Culture in the San Francisco Bay Area*

One of the things I asked him, which sums up why archives are important and distinctly different than art collections, was his response to my question "Do you think queer collections have an innate political aspect to them that other types of collecting do not?" He replied stating:

I think all collecting is political, and that archivists and librarians are all activists. What is acquired (and by extension what is not) is incredibly important, especially for a permanent, historical collection. Archival collections are unique, and once materials are lost or dispersed, they are impossible to replace. Determining what should be acquired (and how access points are established) is essential and inherently political!⁷²

The political aspect comes from types of materials that are collected, as well as the drive to preserve these collections. The GLBT Historical Society was founded during the AIDS Epidemic, and the Bay Area was one of the hardest-hit places in the United States. That, combined with the history of the Bay Area, made saving people's collections

⁷² Van Buskirk.

even more of a race against time. When I asked him if the epidemic made it more difficult and/or more necessary to collect object he told me:

Both. We were in a race against time. People would approach us as they were sick, or friends and family would call soon after a death. Often materials had to be transferred quickly as the apartment or storage unit was being dissolved. We would read an obituary and make inquiries to ensure that there were plans for the personal papers to be preserved. Having seen the archives of many important writers, musicians, dancers, etc. lost, it was increasingly important for the Center to help preserve as much material as possible. All this in addition to the general aging and dying of our pioneers.⁷³

The AIDS Epidemic had ripple effects with much of the history being lost forever, but also with the preservation of that history with people donating to institutions like the GLBT Historical Society and Leslie/Lohman Gay Art Foundation. It is finally with people creating these institutions that objects and material that are important and defining to queer art and history are able to find a home where they are appreciated. For example, the GLBT Historical Society houses over 200 boxes of material by Del Martin and Phyllis Lyn, both early lesbian activists and the founders of the first lesbian organization in the United States, the Daughters of Bilitis. They also have personal objects of Harvey Milk as part of their collection, most notably the suit he was assassinated in, which is on permanent display in their museum.⁷⁴

Objects and material like this, that are so important to queer history, are able to be appreciated and elevated to the value they deserve in queer institutions. It is because of this history and wanting others to see it that eventually lead to the GLBT Historical Society to have a pop-up exhibition from their collection from 2008-2009 that focused on queer history in the Bay Area. Following that success, the Society had a preview opening

⁷³ Van Buskirk

⁷⁴ This is an example of a queer object of extreme important historical and cultural value that was appreciated and recognized for what it is because of it being in a queer institution.

of its museum space in 2010 and officially opened its doors in 2011 in the famous Castro neighborhood. The GLBT History Museum focuses on the Bay Area's history of queer life by showing objects from the collection as well as objects on loan. In the past, they have focused on material culture only, but in the last couple of years have started looking at queer art. The importance of dialogue with other queer institutions is seen in a recent show that was up from July to October 2016, *Stroke: From Under the Mattress to the Museum Wall*.⁷⁵ This exhibition was originally at the Leslie-Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art and reflects the connections within the queer community and combating erasure on all levels.



Figure 9. The Author as in intern at the GLBT Historical Society Archive, 2014

The desire to share one exhibition with another queer institution reflects how queer history wants to be uncovered and exposed so that others can see it, appreciate it,

⁷⁵Leslie-Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art. "GLBT History Museum Presents Traveling Exhibition of Gay Erotic Art, 1950s-1990s." News release, 2016. Leslie-Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art. Accessed November 26, 2016. https://www.lesbielohman.org/exhibitions/2016/traveling/Stroke_Media_Release_SF.pdf.

and know that it happened. It reflects José Esteban Muñoz's idea about "queer utopia," of always wanting to have a better future: a queer future.⁷⁶ It also suggests the importance of these queer objects and saving and preserving them so that others can see and know of the history of combating queer erasure. It is by preserving these objects and displaying them for others to see that we are making a political statement, that our history is just as valid and important. Van Buskirk states it perfectly when asked if ideas around queer erasure affect the need to collect queer objects:

The history of queer erasure (and the erasure of queer history) instigates the need to revivify and revise our history. The fact that much of our experience has been censored, mistranslated, lost, stolen, destroyed, misattributed, etc. motivates me personally to ensure that a permanent record is available for future generations. We were here!⁷⁷

⁷⁶ "Queerness's form is utopian. Ultimately, we must insist on queer futurity because the present is so poisonous and insolvent." –Muñoz, 30.

⁷⁷ Van Buskirk.

Validation

Queer erasure in art and history has begun to be recovered in art collections and institutions. The final frontier in countering the centuries of erasure is for acceptance of queer art history in the general canon of art history. This is able to be done with major museums and institutions recognizing the validity and importance of queer art by acquiring that work in their collection, exhibiting it and recognizing its importance to queer history. This has already begun in the last few years with museums acquiring queer artists into their collections, exhibiting the queer artists they already have more frequently, and finally acknowledging that an artist is queer. It is through this that Muñoz's belief that a queer utopia is only in the future can eventually change to be in the present.⁷⁸

While the length of time it took for SAAM to finally have another retrospective on Romaine Brooks is troubling, the fact that they finally had one in 2016 is a step in the right direction. For a historically conservative museum that exhibits conventional art, to have not only an exhibition that includes her work but an entire retrospective, shows that history is starting to be corrected. Even the exhibit *Gay Gotham*, while not perfect, is an example of not just a museum, but a city acknowledging the importance of its queer history. Not only does it simply acknowledge it, but it also takes pride in that history by having an exhibition that is on two floors to fully display the queer side of New York City.

The most striking and notable change has been with the legacy of the photographer Alice Austen at the Alice Austen Society. Austen is one of the most

⁷⁸ "Ultimately, we must insist on a queer futurity because the present is so poisonous and insolvent."- Muñoz, 30.

recognizable artists that were officially erased from queer history until recently. This erasure caused anger and protest in the queer community, seen notably in 1994 with the Lesbian Avengers, “an activist organization ‘dedicated to fighting for lesbian visibility and survival,’” protesting at the Alice Austen.⁷⁹ This protest came from a direct reaction to the way the Alice Austen House’s Board and supporters were “not receptive to the idea of Austen being homosexual.”⁸⁰ The refusal came in large part because of lack of scholarly research on Austen’s sexuality, which was largely done through the Alice Austen House not even allowing or willing to hear that type of research.⁸¹ The former Board’s claims of Austen not being homosexual were also backed up by the only scholarly book on her framing her in a heterosexual way.⁸²



Figure 10. Alice Austen House

Finally, over fifteen years later, the Alice Austen House is correcting this wrong with new research on Austen through a grant from the National Endowment for the

⁷⁹Laura Peimer, "Alice's Identity Crisis." *History of Photography* 24, no. 2 (2000): 175-79. Accessed October 5, 2016. doi:10.1080/03087298.2000.10443389, 175.

⁸⁰ Peimer, 175.

⁸¹ Peimer, 175.

⁸² “Gertrude had one suitor who remained a lifetime friend, even after she firmly rejected him...Alice never lacked for escorts in her youth...but she never seems to have considered marriage. From her earliest childhood memories of her mother’s betrayal by Edward Munn, she undoubtedly retained some mistrust of men as husbands...”- Novotny, 60.

Humanities.⁸³ This grant has brought new research to light, which was seen in March 2016 with a panel discussion at the Whitney Museum of American Art by five major scholars who showed their new research and insight into the life of Austen.⁸⁴ The new research is helping the Alice Austen House update the language that is used on the website and to redo installations in Austen's house.⁸⁵

Austen is an example of a queer artist finally receiving recognition for her queerness in the art historical community and of validation by a major institution that houses her work and preserves her home. Austen is the beginning of a new era of queer artists in the past no longer having to live in the closet but recognized and even celebrated for their queerness.

Conclusion

To understand the importance of queer collections and institutions, I started from the beginning by giving a brief but current history of erasure in major institutions of queer art. From there, I explored the ways in how queer art history has survived through codes and fragments. These codes and fragments were able to be saved and studied today by people who are willing to save and preserve these objects: collectors. This act of preservation reveals the innate political nature of queer collections and institutions.

Following this understanding, I looked at two case studies: Charles Leslie Jr. and the GLBT Historical Society/History Museum, to illustrate how and why people collect queer art and create institutions to house them. These two case studies were able to exemplify why queer collecting is unique and why it is vital for queer collections to be in queer institutions.

⁸³ Shiloh Aderhold Holley, "Alice Austen House." Interview by author. September 7, 2016.

⁸⁴ Aderhold Holley.

⁸⁵ Aderhold Holley.

The work of queer institutions and collectors has begun a change in the general canon of art history and the recognition of queer artists that had been denied for decades. This was seen in the reframing of Alice Austen in the institution the Alice Austen House. That change is important and shows that people that denied any queer identity in an artist are now open and even excited to explore their queer identities.

Muñoz's idea that it is through looking at the future that we are able to handle this toxic present for queer people is finally coming full circle with queer identity beginning to be celebrated and recognized.⁸⁶ However, the future is uncertain, especially in December of 2016, when the United States is on the cusp of a new presidency. But it is our hope in the future, the hope that queer people have had to learn to always sustain, that will give us strength and the potential for a queer utopia, a queer future.

My thesis has left me with more questions than answers and more research needs to be done to fill all the gaps. My research reveals how much work still needs to be done in queer art history, such as in researching codes in queer artwork, the public vs. private collection, and research on queer artists in general. It also shows the new challenges that people can conquer, like creating queer focused art exhibits and creating a real and viable market for historical queer figures in auctions and galleries. This research is just the beginning and marks a change, and signifies that not just art history, but all history will be re-understood with its inclusion of its LGBTQ brothers and sisters.

⁸⁶Muñoz.

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