

Ariel Goldberg

Incomplete Messengers, or Notes on *Heavy Equipment*

01/12

Lustful Ekphrasis

Eyes squint to focus, while breath bounces against the back of a camera, its film sealed off from light except for fractions of a second. To be consumed by the camera is to undergo a blind spot, to leave the present and send something to the future. I am drawn to pictures of photographers documenting wide-ranging lesbian feminist activity from the 1970s–1990s. Cameras literally appearing on people's bodies inside pictures, as opposed to looming outside the image, work as messengers about processes of image-making that documented social-political spaces and their fledgling ethos.

By looking at photographs of image-makers, I move through excerpts – far from comprehensive – of a messy collectivity that characterized “lesbian photography” in the United States in the last two decades of the twentieth century. I highlight a multiplicity characterized by image-makers performing other roles of cultural production and survival that include demonstrating, organizing consciousness raising groups, volunteering to edit periodicals, working at cooperative cafes, and performing slideshows. Much evidence of “lesbian photography” lingers in analogue formats that are not yet digitized. Dispersed material – such as pamphlets, newspapers, correspondence, release forms, exhibition fliers, work prints, and contact sheets – makes this world difficult to access, especially when vast networks are housed across multiple institutional and personal archives. Diana Davies's work prints, for example, are oftentimes captioned with the phrase “negatives lost.”

In 1998, photographer Tee Corinne, known for her darkroom experiments with solarized kaleidoscopic erotica, reflected on her participation in the creation of an image culture: “Women who take pictures are often willing to be in photographs. This recurs through the history of lesbian photography perhaps because of the photographer's intimate knowledge of how difficult lesbian subjects are to find.”¹ Twenty years later, I translate the bold identity groupings in Corinne's statement and hear loud silences with regards to other gender and sexuality enunciations in considering the “lesbian photography” of the late twentieth century. Why, also, does Corinne not mention race in her statement on “lesbian photography”? Speaking from a perspective of whiteness, Corinne's argument holds that “lesbian photographers” were more willing to be photographed because they often convinced others not to fear being *seen* within lesbian culture, which carried with it risks like losing jobs, families, kids. But how then are we to also hold the less visible relationships

e-flux journal #94 — october 2018 Ariel Goldberg
Incomplete Messengers, or Notes on *Heavy Equipment*

02/12



Michelle Parkerson shooting her film *Storme, Lady of the Jewel Box* (1986). Copyright: JEB (Joan E. Biren), 2018.

between those who held the camera and those who posed before it?

Working backwards to recover traces of the lesbian feminist movements of the end of the twentieth century, I am fueled by the reality that I barely encountered these histories as a young photography major in the early 2000s and that now, teaching in photography departments at art schools in New York City, students never utter the names of the photographers I'm researching. Robert Mapplethorpe and Catherine Opie quickly fill the tiny spots allocated for explicit LGBTQ work.

Arriving with my own modes of identification that confuse each other (dyke, trans, queer, white, jewish), celebrating and interrogating are always uncomfortable postures in my rough translations of "lesbian photography." In the daily life of 2018, the language of mundane greetings (hello ladies) and gendered bathrooms deny a non-binary existence, however persistently queer people and their allies alter gendered constructions of social space. A plunge back in time finds me wrestling with words and ideologies that have invested in the limitations of the gender binary: "women only" art shows and "separatist collectives" litter the archives of lesbian identified photographers. Language from just four decades ago that intended to empower cisgender women's sexuality from the clutches of patriarchy, such as Corinne's *Cunt Coloring Book* (1975), continues to influence current discourse. The 2017 Women's March protest signs referencing biological body parts – for example, "Public Cervix Announcement: Fuck You!" – fail to acknowledge the expansiveness of women's bodies and women's experiences, especially those treated as disposable by our culture. Meanwhile, an epidemic of violence and discrimination towards trans women of color rages, tied to the criminalization of sex work and a broad lack of access to education, jobs, and housing.

Photography has always held a stake in power and representation, in terms of what is shown and what is seen. For me personally, the material of they/them pronouns or identifiers is where I announce my body as gender-non-conforming, while on the surface I may appear as a teenage boy or a soft butch lesbian. I do not "pass" as either side of the gender binary. I similarly absorb through the fault lines of perception people that I see only through the surface of images, even as I strive to map relationships and communities that participated in the creation and circulation of these photographs. While my tools for self-determination reside in clothing,

hair, and language, language is also where the violence of exclusion resides. The language of asserting trans and non-binary identities and analysis is still relatively new and always changing. Trans-exclusionary radical feminists, or TERFs, who insist on a restricted sense of biological gender, feel threatened by the blurriness of categories, and view themselves in competition with trans and genderqueer people and allies.² Even younger generations of TERFs have taken up the ideologies of some factions of second wave feminism to espouse a hateful politics of denying the humanity of trans lives.³ When I encounter the term "lesbian photography," I remain viscerally aware of the connotations this aesthetic grouping may have with violent trans-exclusionary practices.

The Camera Strap

At a demonstration, Tia Cross and Barbara Smith pose: their arms wrap around each other, reaching along their backs, resting on shoulders or waist. Davies, the photographer, seems to know them both, and they look happy to see her. Cross's camera lands just below the bottom of the frame, but its strap arches across her chest: thick and designed in parallel lines interrupted by triangles. Not one for meticulous notes, Davies gives us a place, Boston, and a date range: 1970s–1980s.

Cross's seriousness as a documentarian is made visible through her inventive system of duct taping two rolls of spare film canisters to both sides of her camera strap. Above and below the double canisters are political pins. One that is semi-legible in the photocopy matches a popular piece of lesbian merchandise from that era. The slogan "We are everywhere" frames a map of the United States, whose inner borders are blurred by interlocking women symbols sized to stretch over as much of the country as possible. Smith stands at a slight diagonal while Cross is directly facing Davies. Both wear their hair in the saintly late 1970s androgynous inch-and-a-half-all-around haircut. Their smiles show some teeth, in a camera ready though still relaxed presentation of self. People in a crowd stand behind them, but only in slivers: a backpack, a forehead. Even further behind them, tree branches seem overpowered by their leaves and extend upwards beyond the top of the frame. Cross and Smith were at one point a couple, maybe before, while, or after Davies took this picture of them together.

Barbara Smith is a Black Feminist activist, independent scholar, politician, and one of the founders of the Combahee River Collective. The galvanizing statement the group penned in 1977 continues to inspire long-term grassroots

organizing four decades later. Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor's 2017 edited collection *How We Get Free – Black Feminism and the Combahee River Collective* reprints the manifesto followed by interviews she conducted with collective members Barbara and Beverly Smith, Demita Frazier, and cofounder of Black Lives Matter Alicia Garza. In her conversation with Taylor, Barbara's sister Beverly Smith reflects on a photograph that is not printed in *How We Get Free*, of a march in the late '70s:

I'm thinking of a demonstration that was organized in the Black community...You have this photograph and you can see a lot of people in the crowd, individually. And it's a very diverse group of folks, and, again, as far as I'm concerned, that might not have looked that way if it hadn't been for our collective being there. And it was both a matter of relationships – you know, connections and relationships with these women. One of my best friends at the time is very clearly pictured in the march. But also because of our being around, their consciousness was raised.⁶

Between January and June of 1979, twelve Black women and one white woman were murdered in Boston.⁷ The Combahee River Collective was instrumental in creating task forces, leading demonstrations, and pamphleteering on the crisis, which was being ignored by politicians and the mainstream press.⁸ I imagine Beverly Smith is looking at one of Cross's most circulated images, showing four women spaced out evenly behind a fabric banner with a dark background and light capital letters: "3rd WORLD WOMEN WE CANNOT LIVE WITHOUT OUR LIVES." Black and brown women lead the demonstration while a mixed crowd stands behind them.

Cross, a white lesbian, took pictures at these demonstrations to further generate awareness and circulate information about resisting the violence.⁹ At the time of publication in newspapers such as *New Women's Times*, the sign-holders were unnamed in the caption to protect their identities as organizers.¹⁰ In the late 1970s, Cross began to formalize the consciousness-raising groups she participated in with the Smith sisters and Freeda Klein.¹¹ Cross continues a permutation of this work as a consultant and educator on "cultural diversity and all forms of discrimination."¹²

Like the photograph of Cross and Smith, Davies's oral history transcription lives in her papers at the Sophia Smith Collection at Smith College. The oral history interviewers ask Davies how

"attitudes changed toward you as a white woman" since she began photographing for Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and then Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) to when she documented the Black Power movement. Davies admits that she was a suspicious entity but flattens the question of her role as white woman photographer within Civil Rights as applicable to all the movements she covered: "A lot of times I would get accused of ripping off the movement. I've been accused of ripping off the women's movement. I've been accused of ripping off the black movement. I've been accused of ripping off the gay movement."¹³ Davies then jokes that she makes millions of dollars off her pictures. She dismisses the capacity of the photographic medium to become a tool of theft, instead viewing it solely as a mode of support for liberation.

This prompts the question of how variable the empowerment of a photograph is to the relationship between all the participants in the then and now of the image. The photographer, who fronts the money for materials and does the legwork to get it printed is *sometimes* the one credited rather than the people in the photograph, who, unless already public figures, often go unnamed as the anonymous labor fighting for social change. A notable exception: Davies took photographs of trans activists Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson in Greenwich Village that provide contemporary trans scholars and activists with visual records of the early days of the Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (STAR). Davies knew Johnson and Rivera's names and I can recognize their images.

Often the people in the crowds at protests in photos from this era are unfamiliar to me. Those who appeared in protest documentation often withheld their names from a photographer's caption in order to protect themselves during homophobic and racist times. And then there are those who didn't seek the "credit" of a white photographer like Davies to begin with and unwittingly participated in the making of photographs. Sometimes photographers in public never write down names because they are working quickly in frenetic environments, attempting to act unobtrusively. The inherited caption tactics of photojournalists like Bettye Lane were to name the well-known leaders, like Florence Kennedy or Kate Millet in her captions, but make anonymous everyone else who surrounded them. Even if a photographer asks for consent to "take" pictures, and then records a name or the request to go unnamed, this does not redeem photography from the murky conditions and practices that haunt it to this day.¹⁴ Is there a contract of agreement to be

04/12

e-flux journal #94 — october 2018 Ariel Goldberg
Incomplete Messengers, or Notes on Heavy Equipment

05/12



lesbianherstoryarchives • Following

lesbianherstoryarchives Today we remember the life and the art of Bettye Lane (Sept 19, 1930 - Sept 19, 2012) one of the top news photographers of her time and one of the early documentarians of the feminist, and lesbian & gay rights movements. She was an early supporter of LHA and her work can be found here and in several other major archival collections. Like many photographers Bettye did not always like her own photo taken but she was caught at work with her camera by Paula Grant at a Lesbian Feminist Liberation meeting in New York City circa 1972. [#lesbianphotographers](#) [#lesbianvisibility](#) [#bettyelane](#)

[lgbt_history](#) hero

[gggiuuu8](#) Great shot, Paula! And thank you [@lesbianherstoryarchives](#) for sharing and caring.

[terristrange](#) Gorgeous picture



346 likes

SEPTEMBER 19, 2017

Add a comment...



Screenshot of an Instagram post by [lesbianherstoryarchives](#), September 19, 2017. The Paula Grant's photo portrayed here is of Bettye Lane at a Lesbian Feminist Liberation Meeting in NYC, circa 1972.

seen within a photographic image when entering public space? Even if one accepts the existence of this presumed contract, even the most complete caption does not record the tensions and affections between photographer and “subject.”

In Davies’s oral history she explains how her least favorite part of the process was selling pictures, though she did do so on occasion to *Newsweek* and *The New York Times*. Davies identified so strongly with overlapping resistance struggles that she does not view her work as accruing the cultural capital that it did, perhaps because she lived itinerantly, even referring to herself as a “dumpster diver.”¹⁵ What archives of hers that remain are housed not only at the Sophia Smith Collection at Smith College but The New York Public Library and Howard University.¹⁶ The artist Kady, a close friend of Davies, reminisces about helping Davies compete for images when she was covering social justice movements. Kady recalls that Davies had no “place to live” and instead “slept on the desk at her agency’s office.”¹⁷ I glimpse into Davies’ process of documenting political resistance with the help of her friend’s inventive strategies: “I used to run ahead of Diana and crawl up a lamppost and reserve it for her because the other photographers would try to take them all.”¹⁸

By moving through a series of photographs where I find links and gaps between photographers, I notice how image-making practices in the 1970s–90s involved networks for sharing skills and resources, but also how contentious it was to label one’s work “lesbian” – that word holding a constantly shifting set of difficulties. Davies avoided the word “lesbian” and Bettye Lane never publicly came out as lesbian in her lifetime. Lane, however, donated photos to the Lesbian Herstory Archives (LHA) throughout her life, and when she died in 2012, all the rights to her photos were transferred there. Sitting at the wooden dining room table with a motley range of photo albums and binders at the LHA in Park Slope, Brooklyn, I paused on a photo in a plastic sleeve inside Lane’s collection. I found another picture of a photographer in action – this time lying down on the sidewalk. She is using her stomach muscles to inch her shoulders up off the globs of spit, footprints wet from puddles, and gum beginning to meld with the cement in imperfect circles. Her brown hair is the length of a clipping for a locket; some C-shaped curls fall over her forehead. Both hands are holding on to the off-brand Nikon 35mm camera with a small hot shoe flash attached for filler. The camera presses against her nose and big aviator glasses, still blocking half her face. Her right eye,

however, strikes a direct line of contact with Lane’s camera. The subject is rewinding her film after getting an extreme angle from below at one of the many anti-pornography protests that characterized women’s liberation. Leaning on Davies’s torso is her second camera, which brushes against her forearm. In the vulnerable position of lying all the way down on the sidewalk, the pictured photographer’s camera covers her mouth. I don’t know if she is smiling or scowling at Lane. But her eyes squint with irritation at being caught unaware. The caption reads, “Diana Davies, at a ‘SNUFF’ Demonstration,” 2/15/1976, New York, New York.” After months of studying Davies’s photos, this was the first time I had seen a picture of her.

Moving Images

Filmmaker and activist Michelle Parkerson adjusts a hip-level 16mm movie camera on a tripod, ready to swivel. She bends to look through an upright viewfinder, which resembles a microscope tunnel magnifier glued onto the base of the camera near the lens. The film coils in its light-safe case over her right shoulder, poised to move around the structure of a reel. Parkerson is inside Stormé DeLarverie’s apartment at the Chelsea Hotel, shooting a scene of the 21-minute biopic *Stormé: the Lady of the Jewel Box* (1987), charting her life as jazz singer, emcee, bodyguard, and lesbian bar security. As if alluding to the sensitivity of light metering, Parkerson’s glasses tint in response to ample sunlight or the infused artificial brightness of the film set. The room behind the camera is decorated with paintings, and translucent glass shelves holding vases and sculptures. A large yucca houseplant stands taller than DeLarverie, anchoring the room at its archway, while she stands back giving Parkerson space to set up the shot. DeLarverie’s right elbow meets the left side of the invisible edge of the frame. Her hands hold nothing but the air; pointer fingernail touching her middle finger.

Joan E. Biren (JEB) had been on a mission to photograph lesbians for two decades when invited on to the set of *Stormé* to make this picture of the film in progress. JEB was completing her second book of portraits, which depicts lesbians performing recognizable roles in society. Her first book, *Eye to Eye: Portraits of Lesbians* (1979), was the first photography book to have the word lesbian in its title.¹⁹ DeLarverie was the emcee and only “male impersonator” in the *Jewel Box Revue*, which traveled throughout the country performing for integrated audiences during the 1950–60s.²⁰ Named the “King of New York” within the Imperial Drag community, Stormé acknowledges her acquired skills in the documentary when saying, “to this day I can tie a

06/12

e-flux journal #94 — october 2018 Ariel Goldberg
Incomplete Messengers, or Notes on Heavy Equipment



Screenshot of an Instagram post by butchpleaselondon, January 4, 2018.

bow-tie without even looking in the mirror.”²¹

In Parkerson’s film, Stormé tells her life story, from her 1920 birth in New Orleans to a Black mother and white father to the streets of Greenwich Village. She modestly talks of being at the 1969 Stonewall rebellion. The pursuit of liberation on that night continued in her work in the 1980s as a security guard at The Cubbyhole. Trans historian Morgan M. Page, in her podcast *One From the Vaults*, explores how Stormé is rumored to have thrown the first punch when cops performed their routine raid of Stonewall Inn fifty years ago.²² While the story of Stonewall continues to change depending on who is interpreting the records of the event, Stormé’s presence as a protector of LGBTQ people in the village remains the cornerstone of her long life.²³

A two-page spread of Parkerson in JEB’s second self-published book, *Making a Way: Lesbians Out front* (1987), presents the filmmaker and her camera pointing leftward, to the previous page, where Parkerson appears without a camera. As co-chair of the National Coalition of Black Lesbians and Gays, Parkerson moves on a picket line at the South African Embassy in Washington, D.C. in 1985. The protesters are wearing winter jackets and walking in a single file line with chest to torso-length posters attached to strings, enabling hands-free messages that read “Black Lesbians and Gays Against Apartheid” and “Artists Against Apartheid.” A vertical image below the picket line shows Parkerson being arrested and guided away by a cop who points his finger outside the frame. This spread demonstrates Parkerson’s dual roles of documenting Black queer histories across generations while also standing on the frontlines of protests.

Mid-Scroll

Renderings of image-makers with their equipment also exist in the closed circuit of the self-portrait. Not all self-portraits choose to employ mirrors reflecting the person *and* camera; there have always been ways of making the camera un-visible: the cable release, the self-timer, the trusted person to direct. On Instagram, in February, 2018, I saw a self-portrait of Jean Weisinger as she joined with the legs of her tripod. I scrolled back up, pausing at the Instagram phenomenon h_e_r_s_t_o_r_y’s latest post. Weisinger’s left shin runs parallel to the hard wood floor, but her right leg is turned out at an angle, matching her right arm, also bent and lifted to adjust the height of the tripod. Her camera is turned to a vertical position, while her body faces a mirror. As a safeguard, the 35mm camera strap loops through one leg of the tripod. Her collared shirt skips some buttons. Weisinger’s left hand holds a loose grip at the

base of the camera, hovering over the shutter. The camera blocks a part of her lip and the right half of her chin and lower cheek. Weisinger looks at herself, in control of the timing. This empowering platform confronts the potential lack of control in anything from in-camera cropping to the final context of presentation. We, the viewers, are not there yet. A few locks of hair fall out from her head wrap, near her left eye’s pupil. Her right eye aligns with the lens of the camera. The background is out of focus but transmits a low bookshelf lined with paints in short round canisters, and the leg of an easel with a painting resting on its shelf. I can see the nails in the light wood infrastructure.

With a following of over 100k, I suspect photo editor Kelly Rakowski, who created and moderates h_e_r_s_t_o_r_y, has broken records of the sustained distribution of lesbian-themed imagery. Her project is one of mass appeal. She celebrates famous lesbians (whether they self-identify that way or not) such as Jodie Foster, Fran Lebowitz, and Queen Latifah alongside documentations of lesbian culture from Weisinger, JEB, and Lane. Rakowski, who identifies as a white, she/her cis woman and lesbian, was motivated to begin aggregating images of lesbians and to share them for “self-education” in the form of “a public visual diary” to fill a void on the internet.²⁴

h_e_r_s_t_o_r_y’s recirculation of images that are often found online taps into the deep roots of DIY lesbian photohistories. This format tends to trade the context of collectivity that defined the production of the images for a cluster of voices in comment sections, often belonging to people seeing these works for the first time. Instagram’s presentation reminds me of the appear-then-disappear structure of analogue slide projectors: just when meeting an image, it’s gone, unless you move backwards and beckon its return. This sequential ephemeral format brings to mind analogue slideshows that were popular multi-media entertainment systems within community art spaces before video became more affordable. Cheaper than making a film, slideshow presenters could take a technology used for showing vacation photos to instead display educational materials and art, and often add live scripts to images.

h_e_r_s_t_o_r_y’s caption for Weisinger’s self-portrait, “Seeing Myself Through Alice Walker’s Eyes,” (March 1991), includes her artist statement:

My work is the way I give back to my sisters and to the universe. It’s a way in which I

08/12

e-flux journal #94 — october 2018 Ariel Goldberg
Incomplete Messengers, or Notes on Heavy Equipment

fight the constant battle against racism, sexism, classism, and violence toward women/children/human beings/animals and the trees. I take photographs to not only document these times and the lives of those who cross my path, but also to express myself. Photography is a passion born within me, a necessity that is not governed by monetary payment. It has become part of the progress toward freedom and love. Photographing the self is an act of love and a gift to others.

“Seeing Myself Through Alice Walker’s Eye” is the cover photo of Weisinger’s book of portraits *Imagery: Women Writers*, published in 1996 as a weekly planner. Weisinger’s intimate portraits, which include Barbara Smith and Octavia Butler, face pages of a week’s worth of dates in columns, followed by a quote from the pictured author. Weisinger frames her portraiture as practicing love while also being a tool of resistance. Like Davies, she says her work does not hinge on revenue and instead is about cultivating a sense of self and images that reflect inextricable relationships to people and the natural world. Rakowski concludes the Instagram post on Weisinger with a vague citation: “text & image found on Purdue University.edu.”

Purdue University remarkably still hosts a web gallery erected in 1998 entitled “Lesbian Photographers of the U.S. West Coast 1972–97,” which Tee Corinne gathered to give a home to her decades of organizing and historicizing lesbian-identified photographers. A sort of prototype of image sharing on social media, Corinne’s online publication lives as an html maze, with hyperlinked chapters and image thumbnails. The table of contents begins with “Social Upheaval,” introducing the wave of lesbians “coming out” and establishing self-sufficient community spaces. Chapter 4, “The Dynamics of Color and LVA: Lesbians in the Visual Arts” chronicles Weisinger as well as photographer, filmmaker, and archivist Lenn Keller, and the founder of LVA Happy/L.A. Hyder. While a founding member of the Gay and Lesbian Caucus of the College Art Association, much of Corinne’s historical writing remains unpublished in her papers.

Corinne’s humble “Lesbian Photographers of the U.S. West Coast 1972–97,” holds court within my algorithmic menu as a top hit if I google “lesbian photography,” competing with Autostraddle – a sort of BuzzFeed of lesbian content – and wedding photographers. But the html history book format feels obsolete compared with the suggested image feeds that pop up as soon as I follow someone “new” on Instagram. For

instance, a butch-themed club in London started by promoter and singer-songwriter Tabs Benjamin hosts the Instagram account butchpleaselondon. With a markedly lower set of audience metrics than h_e_r_s_t_o_r_y, this is one feeds the social network presented to me like a bottle of cooking oil on the supermarket shelf of my keywords. butchpleaselondon puts forth PSAs on butch figures in popular culture alongside the documentation of those dancing at the club which describes itself as centering butch dykes *and* welcoming trans, non-binary and queer people.²⁵ In a more quiet mood than the club, butchpleaselondon posted a worn paperback on an ambiguous knit rug or blanket. This photo of *The Persistent Desire: A Femme Butch Reader* (1992), edited by Joan Nestle, received comments that gushed with positive memories of reading this classic with excited heart and flame emojis. Below the handwritten script-y title of the book’s cover is a photo of two pairs of legs, in a lush field of grass: one in heels, knee-high tights and a black slip, the other, slacks and leather boots. They are falling off their picnic blanket and using their thighs to hit erogenous zones. Compelled out of my lurking, I posted a rare comment: “I believe that is a Morgan Gwenwald photo on the cover of book,” followed by a spontaneous hashtag: Caption Lesbian photographers (all one word). No one responds, except butchpleaselondon starts to follow me after this comment.

Camera Limbs

In 1980 Morgan Gwenwald began a mail-based “Lesbian Photography Directory” so more names would be known amongst self-identifying lesbians looking to connect and collaborate with one another. Each photographer’s entry to the directory included their contact information and a short biography. Practices that emerge in the social formations of local volunteer-run organizations like the Lesbian Herstory Archives, which houses the papers for Gwenwald’s directory, aim for trust, recognition, and permission. Saskia Scheffer, who has been active in the LHA since 1989, and is the resident photo archivist, began digitizing their photo collection around 2005. There are 664 images in the LHA’s online collection to date, which represents a tiny fraction of all the photographs they house and continue to catalogue.²⁶ LHA’s instagram (lesbianherstoryarchives), which Scheffer started in 2016, also features photographs and objects sourced from the LHA’s collection. The h_e_r_s_t_o_r_y Instagram account’s bio in Fall 2018 describes itself in a jubilant, yet deflective, tone: “HERSTORY, A DYKE IG ACCOUNT / LESBIAN CULTURE □ pop culture to high art □ / NOT AFFILIATED W LESBIAN

09/12

e-flux journal #94 — october 2018 Ariel Goldberg
Incomplete Messengers, or Notes on Heavy Equipment

HERSTORY ARCHIVES. NO TRANSPHOBIA.”²⁷ At one point Rakowski explicitly differentiated the content on her Instagram account from lesbianherstoryarchives. The two accounts, which both include the word “herstory” in their names, are often confused; until recently, Rakowski also used the archives as a resource for her account. The description in the LHA’s Instagram bio imbues a more somber tone invested in aggregating a cohesive record: “In memory of the voices we have lost. All images ©LHA. If you have additional info on any let us know. Please include complete caption when reposting.” Caring for images and their shifting contexts is a painstaking process. More often than not, photographs made and distributed by self-identified lesbians in the last three decades of the twentieth century that have been digitized rise to the gurgling froth of image searches without requests to re-publish them.²⁸ The benefits of wider audiences accessing an image from a distant subculture is undeniable, however, it is also welded to an internet culture that may lose an image’s caption and contextualization.

Emblematic of what has not been adequately digitized and made more accessible is a magazine like *The Blatant Image*, co-founded by Corinne, described as “a Magazine of Feminist Photography” (1981), which costs \$738.83 on Amazon. This photography magazine, initiated by participants at the Ovulars, feminist photography workshops in rural Oregon, co-facilitated by Corinne, ran for three issues from the late 1970s to early 1980s.²⁹ I learn from an interview with JEB, who taught at the workshops in 1980, that the name “Ovular” was intended as playful rejection of patriarchy in language, (i.e. the semen implied in “seminar”). Decades later the Ovulars bring up the problem of assigning gendered language to body parts. *The Blatant Image*, located with cracked binding on the second floor of the LHA, was part of a wellspring of small run lesbian and queer publications in the 1970s-1990s. After my interview with Scheffer, she noted how the same shelves of the periodical room are populated with the warring factions of anti-porn feminist newspapers and sex-positive magazines that embraced butch/femme culture and trans and queer expression. Nestled in the photography closet at the LHA is Corinne’s “scrapbook” of the Ovulars, which gathers portraits of topless photographers with fellow subjects posing for them, inside photo corners that are laid out like a family album.

In the inaugural *Blatant Image*, JEB published her essay “Lesbian Photography – Seeing

through Our Own Eyes,” in which she outlines her process and ethics: “We strive for collaboration, not domination.”³⁰ How to translate collaboration in a slower time than the pace with which images move online? As a white middle-class lesbian, JEB acknowledges the power dynamics and histories embedded in imaging technologies. In her process, she learned to seek formal consent for pictures intended for publication. JEB photographed many Black leaders and cultural figures in artistic and political lesbian feminist movements – Audre Lorde, Pat Parker, Barbara Smith, Angela Davis. This required building relationships and clear channels of permission to take and circulate the image, and the attempt to reverse the script of the camera as a tool for “domination.” Accounting for both cultural appropriation and erased histories, the crisscrossing identities of photographer and photographed leads me to the politics of citation.

I wonder how people initiate dialogue about taking, posting, or even viewing images that reflect self-determination in our current image culture. What’s the ratio of conversations about distributing images of peers *after* the image is posted with tagging on social media compared to requests to post with a Direct Message (DM)? What if someone photographed is not “on” that particular social media platform? Images will circulate without one knowing its routes. In the early twenty-first century, it’s almost more difficult to take a picture and *not* include someone holding a camera (phone) inside the frame. Pictures of photographers become like camouflage as many grow accustomed to holding cameras on their bodies at all times – not to mention the cameras comprising the police-state which seek to criminalize or ignore those perpetually under attack in a white supremacist patriarchy. A photograph of a photographer can represent a kernel of self-determination for those who still scarcely populate mainstream image-culture.

Searching the Process

2018 has so far seen notable examples of “lesbian photography” failing to meet the “community guidelines” of Instagram. Images representing those who are not wearing clothing present opportunities for such platforms to restrict circulation. Nude photography offers a realm of vulnerability that is converse to where this essay traveled with image-makers proudly wielding their equipment as if extra limbs and prostheses.³¹ Clarity Haynes published an article on Hyperallergic about the photographic documentation of her paintings and exhibitions that is “constantly disappearing.” Haynes describes her work as follows:

I paint large portraits of the bare torsos of women, trans, and gender nonconforming people. The paintings celebrate my lesbian gaze and community, and point to the body as a topography of our life experiences. Scars, wrinkles, stretch marks, and tattoos tell intimate stories of surgeries, survival, and self-determination. In many ways, my work is about confronting and healing shame. I've been working with this subject matter since the late '90s.³²

11/12

Ariel Goldberg's publications include *The Estrangement Principle*, *The Photographer*, and *Picture Cameras*. They have received research fellowships at the New York Public Library's Wertheim Study and Allen Room, a Franklin Furnace Fund grant for a series of slideshow performances, and have been an artist in residence at Headlands Center for the Arts, The Invisible Dog, Residencias Artísticas Intercambios and SOMA in Mexico City.

Photographic records of Hayne's work, which sees lesbian as part of an "and" with trans and gender-non-conforming people, is defined by precariousness. How does the tenuous presence of her work relate to the influence of Snapchat, which attempts to monetize the lure of a disappearing image? Further complicating the fleeting images are the proliferating networks of queer and trans people posting selfies and pictures of their daily lives, that may be art, protest documentation, and/or just communication. These images' existence subverts and ignores the systems that scan images for meeting "community guidelines" across the rigid gender binary.³³

Further troubling the assignment of indecency to art that documents the basic signifiers and facts of a queer body is the case of Laura Aguilar. An icon of both Latinx lesbian photography and the Los Angeles art scene, when she passed at the age of 58 in April 2018, digital memorials to her on Instagram featured her photographs. Portraits of Chicanx Lesbians and queers in the now shuttered Plush Pony bar remained within community guidelines, but her nude environmental portraits, of which she frequently posed with friends, amongst the boulders of Joshua Tree were taken down.³⁴ Users then reposted the haunting notification that their images have been removed, and processing sessions in the comments ensued, confined to the hug or the boxing match.

I screenshot fervently peeking into Instagram while penciling in trips months away devoted to pouring over variously housed archives and interviewing people involved in the photographic processes of then and now. These two speeds are tied together like the zodiac signs that popular queer astrologers warn combust when matched.

x

Special thanks to Saretta Morgan, Sara Jane Stoner, Liz Kinnamon, Lana Dee Povitz, Tara Hart, Jess Barbagallo, Kaye Cain-Nielsen, and Carolyn Ferrucci, who continue to help me develop this work in progress.

e-flux journal #94 — october 2018 Ariel Goldberg
Incomplete Messengers, or Notes on Heavy Equipment

1	Tee Corinne, "Lesbian Photography on the U.S. West Coast: 1972–1997," <i>Purdue</i> , 1998 https://www.cla.purdue.edu/WAAW/Corinne/index.html#Intro	and <i>Society</i> , vol. 19, 2017 - Issue 3: Combahee at 40: New Conversations and Debates in Black Feminism, 328–341.	
2	Alix Dobkin and Sally Tatnall, "The Erasure of Lesbians," <i>Gender Identity Watch: Watching Legal Developments that Erase Female Reality</i> , January 28, 2015 https://genderidentitywatch.com/the-erasure-of-lesbians/	12/12	21 Parkerson
3	Liza Cowan frequently posts hostile transphobic comments to Facebook, the Lesbian Herstory Archives and erasureoflesbians Instagram feeds. Cowan's 1975 photo of Alix Dobkin's "The Future is Female" T-shirt went viral when it was shared on erasureoflesbians and it in turn inspired the Otherwild store to create a wildly popular contemporary version of the t-shirt with the same slogan, which did not adhere a tag with a critical lens to the slogan's ideologies. For other current examples of TERFs in action see Erin Flegg, who covers resistance to anti-sex worker rhetoric and transmisogyny in Vancouver, "New Space, Old Politics," in <i>Maisonneuve Quarterly</i> (October 2017). For a source deconstructing the logic of TERFs see Sara Ahmed, "An Affinity of Hammers," in <i>Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility</i> Edited by Johanna Burton, Reina Gossett, Eric Stanley, (MIT Press, 2017), 26.	Karen A. Hagberg's article "Rash of Murders Stirs Feminist Outrage," ran on the cover of the <i>New Women's Times</i> , vol. 5, no. 13 (June–July), under a photograph of Tia Cross, captioned, "April 29, demonstration organized by a coalition of Boston feminist groups in response to the growing number of murders in Roxbury/Dorchester neighborhoods."	22 Morgan M. Page, One from the Vaults, episode 18, "Stormé Weather," 2017 https://soundcloud.com/onefromthevaultspodcast/oftv-18-storme-weather
4	Kai M. Green, "Troubling the Waters: Mobilizing a Trans* Analytic," <i>No Tea, No Shade: New Writings in Black Queer Studies</i> , ed. E. Patrick Johnson, (Duke University Press, 2016), 67.	10 Letter, Barbara Smith to <i>New Women's Times</i> May 26, 1979, Tia Cross Papers 1963–2007, MC 801, Box 9, Folder 18, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA. Other photographers in the Boston area attempting to extend the longevity of these protests who have photographed this sign included Cheryl DeVall, Ellen Shub, and Marcia Stano.	23 Elyssa Goodman, "Drag Herstory: A Drag King's Journey From Cabaret Legend to Iconic Activist," <i>Them</i> , March 29, 2018, http://www.them.us/story/drag-king-cabaret-legend-activist-storme-delarverie
5	Green, 66.	11 Tia Cross, Freeda Klein, Barbara Smith, Beverly Smith, "Unlearning Racism: Face-Face, Day-to-Day Racism CR," (Heresies 15: Racism is the Issue, 1982), 66 http://heresiesfilmproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/10/heresies15.pdf	24 Wendy Syfret, "how instagram can be a weapon against the erasure of lesbian culture," <i>i-D</i> , June 6, 2016 https://i-d.vice.com/en_au/article/vbdnqj/how-instagram-can-be-a-weapon-against-the-erasure-of-lesbian-culture
6	Beverly Smith, in an interview with Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, <i>How We Get Free – Black Feminism and the Combahee River Collective</i> , (Haymarket Books, 2017), 108.	12 Tia Cross, http://tiacross.com/about_us	25 Tabs Benjamin in "Masculinity" <i>Kicking the Kyriarchy</i> podcast, episode 24, August 7, 2018 http://kickingthekyriarchy.org/kickingthekyriarchy/2018/8/7/episode-24-masculinity
7	Combahee River Collective published the pamphlet originally titled, "Six Black Women: Why Did they Die?" in 1979 outlining the conditions leading to the murders, resources such as community meetings, and guidelines to help women protect themselves. Tia Cross Papers 1963–2007, MC 801, Box 9, Folder 18, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.	13 Diana Davies Oral History, conducted by Laura Finkel and Aimee Brown in 2001, (Diana Davies Papers, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, Mass), 16.	26 Saskia Scheffer, interview with author, July 7, 2018. LHA digital collections: http://www.lesbianherstoryarchives.org/digital.html
8	Terrian L. Williamson's essay "Why Did They Die? On Combahee and the Serialization of Black Death," <i>Souls, A Critical Journal of Black Politics, Culture</i> ,	14 Decolonize this Place asked "Can photography be decolonized?" at Photography Expanded: Counter-Histories, May 1, 2018, Magnum Foundation at The New School, New York.	27 A line of t-shirts, tote bags, hats, buttons, designed by erasureoflesbians and sold at Otherwild donates 10 percent of profits to the Lesbian Herstory Archives.
		15 Davies Oral History, 8.	28 Examples abound of images arriving online via community-based and academic archives, and then circulating without requests to recirculate from whoever holds the copyright. The question of how to treat published material that in particular contains lesbian content is explored in Elizabeth Groeneveld's essay "Remediating Pornography: the On Our Back Digitization Debate," <i>Continuum</i> , 32:1, 73–83, 20 Nov 2017
		16 Davies Oral History, 16.	29 <i>The Blatant Image: a Magazine of Feminist Photography</i> was co-edited by Ruth Mountaingrove, Tee A. Corinne and Caroline Overman.
		17 Kady Oral History conducted by Aimee Brown in 2001, (Kady Papers, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, Mass), 13.	30 Joan E. Biren, "Lesbian Photography – Seeing through Our Own Eyes," <i>The Blatant Image: A magazine of Feminist Photography</i> , no. 1 (1981): 52.
		18 Kady Oral History, 13.	31 Here I am thinking of photographs of Sharon Farmer and JEB that publicized Tia
		19 JEB, phone interview with author, October 10, 2017.	
		20 <i>Stormé: The Lady of the Jewel Box</i> , dir. Michelle Parkerson, 1987	
			32 Clarity Haynes, "I'm a Queer Feminist Artist. Why Are My Paintings Censored on Social Media?," <i>Hyperallergic</i> , March 21, 2018 https://hyperallergic.com/433549/im-queer-feminist-artist-t-paintings-censored-social-media/
			33 I've noticed Ian Lewandowski and Paul Mpagi Sepuya, both queer identified portrait studio photographers, who often take pictures of people when they are not wearing clothes, have at least twice had posting of their work taken down from Instagram. Also see Hito Steyerl, "Proxy Politics: Signal and Noise," <i>e-flux Journal</i> 60, (December 2014) https://www.e-flux.com/journal/60/61045/proxy-politics-signal-and-noise/
			34 Maximiliano Durón, "Laura Aguilar, Compassionate Photographer of Marginalized Groups, Dies at 58," <i>ArtNews</i> , April 25, 2018 http://www.artnews.com/2018/04/25/laura-aguilar-compassionate-photographer-marginalized-groups-dies-58/