

ulrike müller

NOTES ON HERSTORY INVENTORY, A COLLABORATIVE WORK IN PROCESS

For the ongoing collaborative project *Herstory Inventory*, Ulrike Müller invites artists to re-imagine historical feminist imagery as drawings. The *Inventory* is based on a list of image descriptions Müller found while conducting research at the Lesbian Herstory Archives in Brooklyn. This list, which forms part of the inventory for the archive's extensive collection of T-shirts, was most likely compiled by a volunteer archivist and describes the images and graphic elements on the T-shirts in a meticulous, yet inconsistent, way. Since 2009, Müller has been asking feminists, queer artists, and other interested people in New York and elsewhere to translate these written descriptions into new images.

Is There A Queer Aesthetic?

I believe that feminine artistic production takes place by means of a complicated process involving conquering and reclaiming, appropriating and formulating, as well as forgetting and subverting.

–Silvia Bovenschen, “Is There a Feminine Aesthetic?” (1976)

May 14

The deadline for this text about lesbian archives is tomorrow and I've been in a kind of research tizzy. I'm trying to remember everything I've ever read about feminism (a lot) and archives (not so much). I keep pulling books and magazines off the shelves and gradually work myself into a panic – the silence of archives, queer politics and images, feminism and representation. And what do these things have to do with the separation or merging of art and life? I skim texts and copy passages in my notebook, but there's no red thread in sight that can pull everything together.

May 15

Following up on some references, I spend the afternoon at the New York Public Library, and for the first time I begin to feel that writing about this work in process could be productive after all. I develop some perspective: *Herstory Inventory* is less about “the archive” (a topic as daunting as “the collection,” or “the body”) and more about queerness and representation. I draw the connection to how images from the lesbian feminist archive appear in the artistic production of my friends, peers, and extended community.

If queer collectivity is defined as an alliance based not on identity but rather on a deeply felt opposition to patriarchal norms and on the urgent need for lived alternatives to heteronormative ways of relating, it would seem impossible to devise any one image to represent the multitude of queer subjectivities. Is queerness at odds with representation?

There is a link between representation, stereotype, and cliché. Cliché seems to be the uncomfortable destination of gay visibility, like an ill-fitting garment supposed to fit all bodies. But maybe cliché also constitutes a potential space of transformation because it is where one confronts one's own internalized homophobia to its fullest? I'm thinking of seeing one's self reflected in the larger social mirror, of Googling “lesbian” and being confronted with all these images of happy couples. So that's who we are? And this is what we want? In any case, it is not enough.

In the image archive of lesbian herstory my desires and phobias encounter innumerable well-meaning, affirmative images of women, womyn, wimmin. To what degree can I recognize myself in each one of them? How to relate?

A women's symbol with four women standing on it, in a circle, holding each other around the waist and looking up. Woman's face and hair creating mountains and forest. Large women's symbol in center the body of a woman lying on her stomach, creating the body of a motorcycle, hands meld into the front wheel, legs meld into the back wheel.

Working on the performance version of *Herstory Inventory*, Emma Hedditch, Nancy Brooks Brody, Zoe Leonard, MPA, and I read a long sequence of descriptions of historical lesbian feminist imagery out loud to each other in an improvised call and response format, over and over again. We took to calling this collaboratively voiced text, “the visual imaginary of our people.”

I'm thinking of figurative painters like Leidy Churchman and Celeste Dupuy-Spencer, and I decide to ask them how they think queerness in their work. (“To make queer paintings rather than relying on gay subject matter,” as Celeste has put it). I'm also thinking of MPA's performance work, A.K. Burns and A.L. Steiner's epic sociosexual video Community Action Center, and the work of many others, whose art enacts, stages, performs, or is somehow fueled by, gay and lesbian archives.

I ask Celeste about this late at night. She talks about color, and about how abstraction enters into her imagery; then ties the conversation to unlikely combinations of marks and the materiality of paint. A queer facture? We decide to talk more at another time, when we are awake.

May 16

The lesbian archive is a powerful reminder that queer lives are more than just aesthetic choices, or, rather, that our aesthetic choices are political.

Phone conversation with R., who is interested in including *Herstory Inventory* in a group show in New Mexico this fall. She offers the funding to organize an event around the piece, as well as an opportunity to try out installation ideas.

When it comes to *Herstory Inventory* I'm confronted with two desires. One for recognition – and that includes institutional recognition – for all the drawings in the collection, for every contributor, for the collaborative effort, for the issues at stake. On the other hand, I have an urge to protect this self-organized effort from the cultural and symbolic burdens of established institutions. These two desires will have to be carefully negotiated as *Herstory Inventory* enters the world.

To start from one-on-one interactions, in which I often ask awkwardly: Do you make drawings?, and to arrive at a celebratory collectivity, a space that is genuinely ours and in the spotlight.

May 17

Feminist archives as historical correctives, as strategic interventions into an art history that claims that there have been no great women artists. Linda Nochlin and Ann Sutherland Harris's *Women Artists from 1550-1950* (1976); Ute Meta Bauer, Tine Geissler, and Sandra Hastenteufel's *Informationsdienst* at Dokumenta 9 (1992).

What happens if we accept that sometimes art will be feminist but not activist? As feminism aims to revolutionize our deepest selves, and the most universal and private aspects of life, art becomes a place to exercise new perceptions, new kinds of awareness, new feelings.

Walking in the park in the rain, I observe that as I get older, experiences become much more complex and layered, but no less immediate.

Herstory Inventory uses image descriptions culled from the inventory list of the T-shirt collection at the Lesbian Herstory Archives as the starting points for an investigation. One might assume that the path would lead deeper into the archive as research generates further research, but in this case I have found it important not to go back and look at the actual images. Instead, *Herstory Inventory* seems to be putting distance to work. Is it possible to move at once away from, and toward, the archive?

In therapy, S. suggests that my difficulty in writing this text, and my panicked feelings of inadequacy over the weekend, have something to do with emotional and intellectual loss – the end of LTTR's collaboration and my breakup with G., both around the same time, about two years ago.

May 18

I'm interested in attempts to make visible what exists but cannot be seen. Things that are intensely felt but that cannot be pinned down. Iconographies of what could be, under other political conditions.

How is an archive a queer space? How not?

May 19

Conversation with Ann: impossible archives and counter-archives. Ann is interested in why my lesbian queer community so wholeheartedly and enthusiastically relates to historical lesbian imagery and literature, where the generation before felt a strong desire to criticize these “positive images” and their political underpinnings. This shift seems to be one of the effects of a thorough and lived deconstruction of gendered identities – somewhere in this process, many of us came across new, different, and playful ways of relating not only to concepts like “woman,” “lesbian,” and “feminist,” but also to images thereof. The pleasures of discovery and of sharing discoveries; earlier versions of what our lives could be; imaginary spaces; what was and what can be, now.

Writing in 1991, Jan Zita Grover qualifies positive lesbian images as “subjective images ... hurled toward the future cast ahead of us as visual guideposts to what we hope to become.”

It's as if some basic power dynamic has been reversed. To no longer be the effect of images, but to feel empowered to take images and act with them. To honor the lesbian archive for what it envisions and what it desires. But to also switch up and reinvent the archive – to revere and critique it simultaneously.

It's not a question of abstraction or representation; it's a question of queer figurations, of how our bodies are implicated beyond images.

May 20

The notion that I should not include Herstory Inventory in a museum group show at this point steadily solidifies. I'm thinking about the material and physical presence of the piece, its vulnerability, how it is growing and in the making, and about the importance of timing, of who gets to see what when. A celebratory premiere in New York City, where many of its contributors will be able attend, is what this piece needs.

May 21

Finally sent out drawing assignments to J. and A. I think/hope I found good ones for both of them. It seems harder when I don't know people so well, but it can be surprisingly difficult even with close friends. I enjoy making good matches, and the process of negotiating.

Lots of triangles in pink, black, and white; a background of polka dots and a sky with clouds, and the triangles look like they are busting through a wall and into the sky. The "V" in LOVE is an inverted triangle.

All images fix something, but they are also ambiguous. From image to text to image; what is unmoored, what is tied down in this game of echo and translation?

May 22

Skype conversation with Leidy. He says that representing queer bodies is not inherently difficult. One can come up with images of deviant male female women, or, when referring to historical gay imagery (e.g. Tom of Finland), one can integrate the way one thinks and feels about what's depicted into the image itself, thus bringing it new life. But he also says, "In some way, making paintings to please my community seemed almost too easy, and perhaps also too self-congratulatory." Looked at his new video, a succession of actions with paint, objects, and painted objects framed by a stationary camera. We talk about how this work engages the world in a queer way without depicting a body.

Leidy: Queerness in relation to art-making as a never-ending process, one in which there are always new places and ideas to explore. "It is how I act in the world and has its own engine."

May 23

Queer aesthetics seem invested in not finishing the picture; not letting representation settle and solidify into any one image; keeping the making, acting, doing – the materiality and mutability of bodies – in the picture. Not representing (explaining and perforce simplifying) who we are (and as a consequence suffering from the fallout of this distortion of our images of ourselves). Making work with our friends in mind, but operating with the assumption that strangers are friends that we haven't yet met. To approach the world with an open, curious mind, or as Leidy says about his method, "to keep going without rules or repetition;" to have no predetermined mode of communication; to hail specific queer bodies rather than drawing an outline from memory or from imagination.

Tea with Brody: Archive as poetry; activist struggles to change language as struggles over representation. Brody speaks of being sensitive about and exhausted by how women have recently been represented in media reports, and about the lack of public response/rage. Kate Swift, the co-author of *Words and Women* (1976) died earlier this month. Brody reads passages from her obituary in the May 9 issue of *The New York Times*. The last paragraph ends on a taming note that belittles the importance of Swift's radical project.

Brody: The critique of "essentialist" lesbian feminist imagery as an effect of homophobia and misogyny. She tells me an amazing story about meeting Joan Nestle, now in her 70s, at the Lesbian Herstory Archives while installing fierce pussy's exhibition Mining the Archive. "It's about how we relate to our elders."

May 24

I check my impulse to make a sweeping argument against representation and to link this to a call for distinguishing more clearly between "queer art" and the way in which we live our lives, even though sometimes I really want to say that. But this text is not the moment or the space for a manifesto, or for excluding possibilities.

The archive oscillates between a graveyard of facts and a garden of fictions.

- Wolfgang Ernst, *Das Rumoren der Archive (Archive Rumbblings)*, 2002

Meeting with MPA in her studio. In a recent dinner conversation she talked about how, as a performer with a radical desire to support trans, non-white, non-normative body politics, she had to contend with the gendered, cultural, and racial specificity of her own bodily appearance. Queer histories and knowledges as a collaborative project continually under construction by our friends, a project to actively position, inscribe, and relate oneself. Herstory Inventory makes literal something already at work among us. Knowledges

Page 138, Left: Nicole Eisenman, *A Woman in a Police uniform holding a nightstick with a nail in it and standing over a man lying on the ground*, (drawing from *Herstory Inventory*) 2009-ongoing, a project organized by Ulrike Müller.

Page 138, bottom left, Myriam Lanau, *A Vagina encircled by a chain and two whips plus handcuffs, one part of which forms the 'O' in 'Outcasts'*, (drawing from *Herstory Inventory*) 2009-ongoing, a project organized by Ulrike Müller.

Page 138, top left: Simone Bader, *Woman with arm in the air with clenched fist*, (drawing from *Herstory Inventory*) 2009-ongoing, a project organized by Ulrike Müller.

contained in objects, and how these objects trigger the imagination (MPA: Fantasies triggered by finding a 1970s lesbian feminist T-shirt in a thrift store).

Not wanting to gather under any one banner, being suspicious of the idea: the banner of fixed identity; the banner of rainbow diversity; the banner of gay equality.

The archive as a paper body, as a shadow, but also as a site for the search for the flesh body:

Archive □ drawing (paper)

T-shirt □ drawing (act)

In the present tense of the archive, all tools become available, even positions that once seemed incompatible, or to exclude one another.

MPA: If the drawings don't primarily intend to represent, they become less about survival and more about celebration.

May 25

My anxiety about writing this text has something to do with my ambivalence toward lesbian feminist imagery; it is about wanting to belong but at the same time desiring a picture that's both fuller and more open-ended. Historical narratives, rational discourse, and theoretical frameworks don't account for the emotional impasse I encounter when trying to figure this out (knowing full well that figuring "it" out is not the point)...

Instead, working through issues, ideas, images, with the help of friends and strangers.

Conquering and reclaiming, appropriating and formulating, as well as forgetting and subverting.

Many hands, many minds, all the time.

Ulrike Müller, in conversation with
Ann Cvetkovich, Celeste Dupuy-Spencer,
Leidy Churchman, MPA,
Nancy Brooks Brody, and many others.

Brooklyn, May 2011

Page 139, top left: Linda Bilda, *Two women with guns*, (drawing from *Herstory Inventory*) 2009-ongoing, a project organized by Ulrike Müller.

Page 139, bottom left: K8 Hardy, *A vagina shape*, (drawing from *Herstory Inventory*) 2009-ongoing, a project organized by Ulrike Müller.

Kate Huh, *Mermaid with wings holding a labyris*, (drawing from *Herstory Inventory*) 2009-ongoing, a project organized by Ulrike Müller.

