

Notes on Counter-Archives: 'Recovering' Queer Memory in Contemporary Art

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Introduction

In Zoe Leonard's photograph of Fae Richards and June Walker, two women wrap their arms around each other and gaze lovingly into the other's eyes. The caption dates the photograph to 1955, Richards's forty-seventh birthday at their shared home. It reads, 'Fae and June met while Fae was singing at the Standard. June sat at a stageside table every night for months, always with a white rose for Fae. By 1947, they were living together, and they lived together until Fae's death'.¹ The photograph itself evinces its age through its weathered appearance: the bottom right-hand corner is ripped and the surface is lined with scratches. The scene is mundane, yet two Black lesbians living and loving happily together in the 1950s is extraordinary.

Fae Richards and June Walker never existed. They were fabricated by Cheryl Dunye to account for a history written out of the archives. If 2SLGBTQ+ people do appear in the dominant archive, it is only through a heteronormative gaze that either condemns or erases them.

The absent archive has always posed epistemological and political challenges. Marginalised communities—those that have been strategically erased from the dominant archive—are left with little history to draw on in the struggle of resistance. The archive, as both a theoretical and material locus of power, is troublesome for marginalised groups that are alienated from vectors of power. Saidiya Hartman's seminal essay, 'Venus in Two Acts', deals with these issues in relation to archives of slavery. Hartman illustrates how histories of erasure necessitate different archival methods. In the essay, Hartman introduces the notion of 'critical fabulation': using archival research alongside fictional narratives to rewrite and

give new life to voices that are absent from the dominant archive. Critical fabulation is the process of working *with* and *against* the archive in order to transgress and extend its borders, thereby destabilizing the imbued authority of the archive. More specifically, critical fabulation elucidates what, by virtue of the archive, has failed to survive. In this essay, I will extend critical fabulation to the realm of contemporary art in order to conceive of 2SLGBTQ+ contemporary artists as archivists of the queer community.²

I will interrogate the role of critical fabulation in creating what I will call a 'counter-archive', an archive that subverts authority and practices of power. I will question how practices of remembrance differ for a marginalised group from the practices of the traditional institutional archive. That is, as accounts of resistance, what modes of representation are taken up by queer counter archives? I will reveal how histories of erasure necessitate creative and imaginative archival methods, exhibiting how contemporary queer artists mine the archive in order to disrupt the authority granted to it as a speaker for History. I will situate my analysis in relation to the works of Zoe Leonard and Cheryl Dunye, Wu Tsang, and fierce pussy;³ all of whom produce a counter-archive in their work through their use of experimental archival methods and critical fabulation.

1 Cheryl Dunye and Zoe Leonard, *The Fae Richards Photo Archive* (Artspace Books 1996).

2 Throughout this paper, I will use queer and 2SLGBTQ+ interchangeably. Although 'queer' is quite widely accepted as an umbrella term for the community (because it encompasses both gender and sexuality, as well as a deviation from heteronormative structure), it is important that we recognize the historical and ongoing harm that the term continues to cause. Many members of the 2SLGBTQ+ community are uncomfortable with the term because it has been historically weaponized against 2SLGBTQ+ people. It is important to be aware of how the reclamation of language is often highly contested and continues to be harmful.

3 Zoe Leonard is also a founding core member of fierce pussy.

In 1996, Zoe Leonard and Cheryl Dunye published *The Fae Richards Photo Archive* alongside Dunye's film, *Watermelon Woman*. Dunye's 'documentary' outlines her search into the history of an African American lesbian actress, Fae Richards; or, as she was billed in movies, the 'Watermelon Woman'. Richards, however, was entirely fabricated by Dunye in order to supplant a lost history. Leonard shot photographs in which Dunye's friends pose as Richards, as well as her friends, lovers, and family. In doing so, Leonard blurs the line between Dunye's personal archive and that of Richards. Leonard and Dunye, thus, use critical fabulation to give voice to erased and forgotten Black lesbians. In doing so, they reveal the extent to which fiction is a necessary tool when archiving queer culture, and propose a new understanding of truth, memory, and the purpose of the archive.

Tsang, as a transgender woman, similarly interrogates which histories are carried forward, and by whom. In this paper, I will focus on her work for the 2012 Whitney Biennial: an installation entitled *Green Room*. *Green Room* functioned as a dressing room for Biennial participants and was also opened to museum visitors when not in use. Inside, Tsang had constructed a two-channel video environment, with the two screens placed on perpendicular walls. She screened her documentary *Que Paso Con Los Martes?*, which recounts the story of a transgender woman who immigrated from Honduras to Los Angeles and found community in a local Latino gay bar, the Silver Platter. Tsang's installation takes inspiration from the Silver Platter in its decor to invite viewer participation in the three-dimensional environment. Tsang, then, explores ways of recording queer history through a documentary-like style while, equally, implicating her audience through the fabricated setting. She draws attention to the distinctions between private and public space, as well as the infiltration of queer safe spaces. I will argue that Tsang's dissolving and blurring of boundaries—the public and private; the fabricated and the real; two-dimensional and three-dimensional—is necessary to the production of a queer counter-archive.

The final group of artists I will be grounding my analysis in is fierce pussy: an artist collective formed by queer women in 1991. Their emergence in the midst of the AIDS crisis informs their project to advocate for 2SLGBTQ+ rights and visibility through their work. Their installations were often public and site-specific, using unconventional materials such as billboards, street signs, and toilet paper in order to integrate their message into various facets of everyday life. I am interested in how their work is suffused with activism, mourning, and memorialization. I will centre two of their projects: *For the Record* and *gutter*. Both engage in critical fabulation by different means: *For the Record* imagines a future for those who died from AIDS; *gutter* edits and rewrites lesbian pulp fiction novels from the 1940s to the 1970s. fierce pussy, therefore, throws into question the heteronormative lens through which the archive has been constructed.

To begin, it is necessary to outline what is at stake in this project. Archives are vital for ongoing queer survival and to our lives in the present.⁴ A queer counter-archive provides the grounds for imagining queer futures and helps to situate queer identity—both past and present. Nayland Blake's article, 'Curating in a Different Light', reveals how queer people do not have access to a private history, and hence require a public one. Blake writes, 'Queer people are the only minority whose culture is not transmitted within the

4 To situate my own perspective, I want to call attention to my identity as a white, Jewish, non-binary lesbian. Throughout this paper, I will refer to the 2SLGBTQ+ community in relational language.

family'.⁵ In that vein, the 2SLGBTQ+ community has needed to find new strategies to uncover and transmit our histories. Historical erasure and ongoing systemic oppression drastically impacts the ability for 2SLGBTQ+ people to accept and live our queer identities. The past has a continuous hold on, and shapes, our present. To live in the reverberations of this violence, as queer bodies, means to feel those effects and affects acutely. An artistic revisioning of histories of erasure, then, fosters precedence for the ongoing struggle to live one's queer identity. Thus, a counter-archival project reimagines the past in order to create a livable present, and is integral to both individual and collective processes of healing.

Memory, Mourning, and Marginalisation

The archive is the ground upon which knowledge is formed and hierarchized; it reveals choices of inclusion and exclusion that are linked to access to power. I will ground my definition of the archive, and its relationship to power, in Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault's respective analyses. Derrida and Eric Prenowitz, in the seminal text, 'Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression', trace the Western archive back to Ancient Greece and the rule of law. The term *archive* derives from the Greek *arkheion*, about which Derrida writes, 'initially a house, a domicile, an address, the residence of the superior magistrates, the archons, those who commanded'.⁶ The etymological root of the archive, then, has two meanings: first, as a structure that houses objects and documents, and second, as the residence of those who command and speak on behalf of the law. The law is the place where people are recognized as agents or not and where personhood is made legible. Therefore, the archive is the house of power and holds authority over memorial processes.

Foucault, in a similar way, locates power in the archive in his essay, 'The Historical *a priori* and the Archive'. Likewise, Foucault describes the archive as the constraints imposed on what is sayable, or as he calls it, 'enunciative'. That is, the archive governs the conditions of power that we inherit. The archive promises agency, and yet, at every turn, denies it. It suggests control over the ordering processes, but only so long as they adhere to historically contingent, pre-existing rules. Foucault states the following: 'The archive is first the law of what can be said, the system that governs the appearances of statements as unique events'.⁷ Hence, the archive reveals the conditions of power in which we find ourselves. It is a site in which we can pose questions about how we inherit and perpetuate power. Moreover, the archive is both the system that exercises control over *what* can be said, as well as the processes surrounding *how* things are understood. The archive, therefore, is not merely an institution or a site, but rather it is the practice of power.

Accordingly, when I refer to a counter-archive, I mean processes that subvert the authority and the ordering processes of the traditional archive. It is necessary to leave this definition vague if we are to resist replicating the methods of the traditional archive. As elucidated by Foucault, the archive imposes a set of conditions upon the sayable in order to preserve discourse that aligns with dominant power structures, casting aside challenges to those structures. In this case, brevity and linearity factor into the reproduction of power because they help create a self-contained narrative and serve

5 Nayland Blake, 'Curating in a Different Light' in David J Getsy (ed), *Queer: Documents of Contemporary Art* (MIT Press 2016) 120.

6 Jacques Derrida and Eric Prenowitz, 'Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression' (1995) 25(2) *Diacritics* 9.

7 Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse of Language* (Pantheon Books 1972) 129.

to separate the past from the present. Rather than utilising the archive's documentation processes—that inevitably efface certain histories—artists engage in creative projects that reconstitute our understanding of the archive. James E Young's essay, 'The Counter-Monument: Memory against Itself in Germany Today', is useful for understanding what I mean when I say 'counter-archive'. Young explores the role of counter-monuments in memorializing the Holocaust and the emergence of the memorial aesthetic in post-war Germany. Traditional monuments tend to memorialize victory, which brings Young to question the way in which Germany has memorialized state-enacted atrocities and mass murder. The traditional monument evades memory through its clear symbolism and lack of ambiguity, thereby doing the memory work for the viewer. The monument, then, becomes a figment of the past and immediately falls outside of our frame of perception.

The counter-monument, on the other hand, is concerned with the ongoing hold the past has on shaping our present. In relation to the long 'Sisyphean' debates about how best to commemorate loss of millions of Jewish lives during the Shoah, Young writes, '[T]he surest engagement with memory lies in its perpetual irresolution'.⁸ That is, resistance to a fixed notion of memory creates new spaces of memorialization. The counter-archivist, then, is highly conscious of the challenges they are posing to our ways of knowing and of enshrining certain histories. Departing from the traditional archive's false claims to objectivity (that conceal its own self-interests in narratives of power), the counter-archive is self-aware of its inability to objectively capture said events.

Consequently, the counter-archive engages the viewer by fostering dialogue. In a similar fashion to Young's counter-monument, the counter-archive implores the viewer to engage in memory work through investment in its own ambiguity and rejection of totalizing narratives. It denies simple resolutions and plain conclusions. Its aim is not to provide answers, but rather to raise questions about how archives have been wielded as tools of selective remembrance and violent oppression. Writing about the counter-monument of the *Harburg Monument against Fascism*—which invites the public to violate the monument by writing on it their own names and committing to stand against fascism—Young elucidates:

[I]ts aim is not to console but to provoke; not to remain fixed but to change; not to be everlasting but to disappear; not to be ignored by its passerby but to demand interaction; not to remain pristine but to invite its own violation and desecration; not to accept graciously the burden of memory but to throw it back at the town's feet.⁹

Counter-archives question the validity of the traditional archive and its omniscient power. They propose that it is not just *what* we remember that is significant, but equally *how* we go about remembering. Young argues that the traditional monument impedes memory precisely because the clarity and authority of the memorial does the work for the viewer, thereby absolving the public of their own responsibility to remember. They foster a view of history that is unambiguous and therefore not a site for negotiation or contestation. The traditional memorial, much like the traditional archive, promotes engagement within a rigid, normative structure.

8 James E Young, 'The Counter-Monument: Memory against Itself in Germany Today' (1992) 18(2) *Critical Inquiry* 270.
9 *ibid* 277.

It rejects ambiguity, precisely because nuance inhibits its own project. Thus, the archive constructs narratives that adhere to and are vested in narratives of power.

Seeing that the counter-archive is concerned not solely with memory, but also with the act of remembering, questions of form are inseparable from the project of remembrance. Indeed, art facilitates questions about the relation between aesthetics and ethics. I will address, in this case, how the language of history and the language of art interact. The task of many contemporary artists is to challenge rather than to affirm cultural rules. Zoe Leonard, Cheryl Dunye, Wu Tsang, and fierce pussy, then, all produce counter-archives by throwing into stark relief the forms and practices of the archive. These artists open up new possibilities for thinking through our queer past, present, and future through their artwork. When art functions as an archival object, moreover, it suggests that artifacts collected and preserved in archives are not innocent but are, rather, charged objects. These artists all blur the boundaries between the artistic and the archival, history and imagination, and fabrication and fact.

Although critical fabulation necessitates invention within a narrative, we must be wary of covering up and erasing loss. When playing with the tools of the archive, one must be acutely aware of the risk of replicating its structures of power. The paradox of critical fabulation, then, is that of writing a narrative, while simultaneously indicating loss and silence. Hartman writes, 'Narrative restraint, the refusal to fill gaps and provide closure, is a requirement of this method'.¹⁰ In this case, leaving space for loss reminds the viewer that critical fabulation cannot offer closure to the dead and to those who suffered in the past. A refusal to romanticise a violent history of oppression is also imperative. Although the project of critical fabulation is based on individual and community healing—'Loss gives rise to longing, and in these circumstances, it would not be far-fetched to consider stories as a form of compensation or even as reparations, perhaps the only kind we will ever receive'—absence is a reminder that this project cannot fundamentally undo an extensive history of violence and oppression.¹¹ Hartman's refusal to expound how to give voice to a profound silence suggests that there is no singular, or prescriptive way, to treat such contradictions. Indeed, the authority on how to write history and loss is central to the archive's own consolidation of power. Consequently, critical fabulation requires the nuance and ambiguity that the traditional archive refutes in its claim to objectivity.

The necessity of maintaining loss as loss, nonetheless, does not undo the reparative nature of this project. The paradox of reflecting a marginalised community back to itself, whilst presenting an abyss, fosters a complex and interesting interaction between the viewer and the artwork. Counter-archives, thus, resist being relegated to the past because they actively engage with and challenge our present. Contemporary artists who create a counter-archive disrupt our conventional relationship to the archive because they force critical engagement, and radically oppose passive acceptance. In promoting a non-linear view of history, counter-archives mimic the traumatic structure that resists a progressive and linear process of healing. Art in the public sphere encourages a stumbling upon it that simulates the experience of flashbacks and of shock that resists stability of meaning. Hence, counter-archives assert the ceaseless irresolution of our own engagement with memory. In doing so, they reckon with the ongoing hold that the archive has on our lived present.

10 Saidiya Hartman, 'Venus in Two Acts' (2008) 12(2) *Small Axe* 12.
11 *ibid* 4.

Ann Cvetkovich's text, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures*, explores the way that archives of trauma often resemble 2SLGBTQ+ archives. Both archives similarly rely on ephemerality and memory, which in their very transience and unreliability, challenge the concept of the archive:

Trauma challenges common understandings of what constitutes an archive. Because trauma can be unspeakable and unrepresentable and because it is marked by forgetting and dissociation, it often leaves behind no records at all. Trauma puts pressure on conventional forms of documentation, representation, and commemoration, giving rise to new genres of expression, such as testimony, and new forms of monuments, rituals, and performances that can call into being collective witnesses and publics. It thus demands an unusual archive, whose materials, in pointing to trauma's ephemerality, are themselves frequently ephemeral.¹²

Cvetkovich notes that sites of grief and trauma are radical spaces, and she questions how we might begin to inhabit these spaces and reclaim agency through them. She begins by arguing for a wider view of trauma, one that moves beyond the extreme and those who experience trauma directly, and towards trauma's seemingly mundane reverberations and those on the border of trauma. fierce pussy—as lesbians on the edge of the AIDS crisis—encapsulate the experience of trauma through their positioning as both insiders and outsiders. Consequently, I will question how creative responses to trauma help us to grapple with immense pain.

To reiterate, Cvetkovich points to the affective power of a 2SLGBTQ+ archive. She illustrates how queer archives position themselves in opposition to the traditional archive because they do not solely document and yield knowledge but, equally and as importantly, feeling. Cvetkovich writes, 'Gay and lesbian archives address the traumatic loss of history that has accompanied sexual life and the formation of sexual publics, and they assert the role of memory and affect in compensating for institutional neglect'.¹³ In this case, personal testimony is vital to the production of a queer counter-archive, precisely because it recentres feelings of love and loss that are integral to the queer experience. Thus, an emphasis on feelings and affects provides the grounds for fostering a queer public memory.

The Feigned Archive: Zoe Leonard and Cheryl Dunye's *The Fae Richards Photo Archive*

Leonard and Dunye's *The Fae Richards Photo Archive* is a record of Black lesbian absence from the archive. Dunye felt disillusioned with the missing presence of Black lesbians in the archive and *Watermelon Woman* chronicles her search for evidence of Fae Richards: the fictional persona that she created to fill this lack. Leonard staged archival material to create evidence of Richards's life for Dunye's film, thereby blurring the distinction between fact and fiction (a dichotomy that the dominant archive is heavily invested in). In the film, Dunye searches for evidence of Richards in the Centre for Lesbian Information and Technology (CLIT), a fictive archive based upon the Lesbian Herstory Archives in New York. The ordering processes of the archive, then, construct narratives

12 Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Culture* (Duke University Press 2003) 7.

13 *ibid* 241.

and shape the way we make knowledge claims. In opposition to the dominant archive, however, a queer counter archive insists on different ordering processes.

In dialogue with Julia Bryan-Wilson, 'Imaginary Archives: A Dialogue', Dunye discusses *The Fae Richards Photo Archive* and *Watermelon Woman*. She states, 'the queerest things about archives are their silences—their telling blanks and perversely wilful holes'.¹⁴ These 'holes', gaps, and silences that Dunye articulates resonate with Hartman. Hartman, in this case, questions how we can bring these impossible stories to the surface. Impossible in the sense that, as much as we might long for such histories, we can never know them. Giovanna Zapperi's essay, 'woman's reappearance: rethinking the archive in contemporary art—feminist perspectives', explores feminist reworkings of the past through contemporary art. Zapperi expresses the impossibility of Fae Richards: 'Fae Richards can only exist thanks to a present-lesbian gaze that is looking at her through the lenses of the liberation movements'.¹⁵ That is, Richards—as a figure documented in the archive—can only exist because activism and political change allowed Dunye, as a lesbian and as an African-American, to be in a position where she could articulate a life for Richards. Hence, the film creates a Black lesbian counter-archive in two ways: in its documentation of Richards, and in its reputation as the first feature film to be directed by a Black lesbian. The importance of bringing Richards to life, however, cannot be understated. Richards acts as a stand-in for Black lesbians whose stories we can never know.

The overlapping of Richards's and Dunye's archive, likewise, is acted out in the photographs themselves. As Dunye's own friends, lovers, and community pose in the photographs, they seem to occupy an atemporal zone. Bryan-Wilson states, 'The fictional patina they had in relation to the film has been overlaid with a different, lived history—[Dunye's]'.¹⁶ The past and present blend, thwarting the dominant archive's claims to linearity. The counter-archive's interactions with memory, history, and the archive, then, resist the distinct dichotomization of history from the present. Similarly, it blurs the line between fact and fiction. Despite the fact that the community depicted in the photographs might not necessarily have existed at that precise date, it nevertheless existed as a vibrant queer community. In several of Leonard's photos, we see depictions of the importance of queer community—alluding to the role the counter-archive's play in constructing queer public culture. In one, a group of five women sit around a table, drinking alcohol, and smiling at the camera. Fae sits on the left-hand side, perched on the lap of her lover and director, Martha Page. She leans in, smiling as her right hand rests on the side of the table, holding a cigarette. The three women to the right of Martha are unidentified, but a scribble in blue ink along the bottom of the image reads, 'Me and the girls at the 'Hotspot''. The women in the photo are unabashedly identified as queer women based on coded signifiers that are recognizable to other queer women: men's clothing, short haircuts, and the way they occupy space in a forward and comfortable way that counteracts the male gaze.

Furthermore, Leonard's use of photography as a medium allows her to critically fabulate the past. Zapperi writes, 'Leonard has been

14 Julia Bryan-Wilson and Cheryl Dunye, 'Imaginary Archives: A Dialogue' (2013) 72(2) *Art Journal* 83.

15 Giovanna Zapperi, 'woman's reappearance: rethinking the archive in contemporary art—feminist perspectives' (2013) 105 *Feminist Review* 33.

16 Bryan-Wilson and Dunye (n 14) 83.

interested in the photographic image's implication in the production of sexual difference, as well as in the way in which photography is concerned with the passing of time'.¹⁷ Photography is entangled with history and imprecise memory. Like the archive, photography often lays false claims to objectivity and seeks to distance the photographer from their subject. Nevertheless, what is made visible—through the lens—and how we interpret images reflect systems of knowledge and power. Acts of seeing are products of tensions between external images and internal thought processes. How we see, then, is socially constructed. Leonard, thus, exposes the medium of photography as something that can be tacitly manipulated in order to convey particular narratives. She simulates a variety of photographic genres (photo booth, family snapshot, film still, press photograph, portrait) in order to appropriate and subvert the methods of the traditional archive and draw attention to its own methods of deceit. Photographs, by virtue of their nature, signify that their subject is important, and Leonard, in this case, asserts the importance of lesbian lives and intimate queer feelings. They also 'conjure up vulnerability, disappearance and melancholia. The images are often damaged, cut or stained, reinforcing their meaning as witnesses of past events'.¹⁸ The wear and tear on the surface of the photographs is perhaps one of their most deceptive elements—their feigned age evokes a nostalgic and affective response from the viewer who is convinced that Fae Richards in fact lived.

Nevertheless, *The Fae Richards Photo Archive* nods to its own artifice. Although Leonard and Dunye play with the viewer's conceptions of fact and fiction by drawing us into the fictionality of Fae Richards as if it might be real, they often subtly gesture to their work as being fabricated. Constructing Richards as an actress allows Leonard to play around with photos of sets and cameras, alluding to processes that she is similarly engaging in and drawing attention to her own situatedness as a photographer. In one photograph, Martha stands with her hands on her hips before a camera. The caption reads, 'Martha Page at Newark Studios. Photographed for the story "The Girl Director of "Jersey Girl" in The Philadelphia Inquirer. October, 1931'.¹⁹ The studio light on the right hand side of the photograph illuminates the image on a diagonal axis. Martha's face and upper torso are clearly visible, while the lower half of the photo slips into obscurity. In the darkness, we can make out the silhouette of a seated figure behind Martha. Their face appears to be covered by a dark piece of fabric, alluding, perhaps, to the individuals whose presences are purposefully obfuscated from the archive. The explicit presence of harsh studio lighting in the photograph, then, draws the viewer's attention to the way that technology is manipulated to control how and what we see. Moreover, the lighting works to cast shadows, creating a doubling of figures and objects in the scene: Martha's shadow and that of the camera are cast onto the brick wall. Indeed, this doubling produces a metapicture.²⁰

Leonard creates a picture within a picture by drawing our attention to the fallibility of photography. She hints to the photographic process to make the viewer acutely aware of their own participation in the image through the act of seeing. As viewers, we are positioned behind the apparatus, which externalises the artistic standpoint. Put in the place of the photographer, the viewer is forced to consider

the decisions that went into producing this image. The meta picture is self-referential: thinking about its own status as a picture, calling attention to its status as 'art', and referring to its own artifice. Leonard is thinking about the tradition of photography—particularly in its intimate relation with the archive—and her own relation to it. Her consciousness of the medium, therefore, necessarily subverts claims to objectivity.

The book itself is constructed in the *modus operandi* of the archive. Dunye and Leonard draw us into the artifice, only to let up their simulation at the end of the book to subvert the fallibility of the dominant archive. The end of the book includes a list of cast and crew, drawing attention to the project's deception. It is also in this list that we learn that Dunye herself appears in an image as 'Black Dyke on Roof #2'. The use of derogatory language in the cast list alerts us to the tendency of the dominant archive to weaponize such terms against queer people. Leonard and Dunye, then, reclaim this language in the same way that they reclaim the archive: drawing parallels between the way derogatory language and the archive are similarly wielded as tools of violence and oppression. Moreover, Dunye's presence creates a slippage between past and present that leads the viewer to question the readiness with which they often accept the claims of the dominant archive. Speaking to Bryan-Wilson, Dunye tells us that the feigned archive is 'a mixture of the truth and fictions in [her] life and how they coexist'.²¹ *The Fae Richards Photo Archive*, thus, challenges our received ideas about temporality, truth, memory, and the purpose of the archive. This project is facilitated by desire and Zapperi writes, 'Desire here is what mediates the relationship between past, present, and future, positioning the artist's subjective voice in the process of constructing alternative forms of knowledge'.²² Thus, layers of queer desire overlap in the relationships portrayed in the photographs themselves, and in the ever-present queer desire to unearth a lost history.

['T]he site of this performance...is not necessarily a safe space for all the communities referenced in this work': Queer Memory and the Museum Space in Wu Tsang's *Green Room*

Tsang's 2012 installation, *Green Room*, creates a queer counter-archive by using critical fabulation to reproduce queer safe spaces within the museum—a historically unsafe space for the 2SLGBTQ+ community, because of its erasure and misrepresentation of queer identities. Unlike Leonard and Dunye, who produce a counter-archive of desire and intimacy, Tsang is interested in queer public culture. Her work plays with the binary of public and private spheres in order to call attention to how gender and sexuality operate within this dichotomy. At the 2012 Whitney Biennial, Tsang exhibited two pieces: *Green Room*, and a feature-length film, *Wildness*, that both centre around the gay bar Silver Platter. Tsang, therefore, archives queer community building practices. She problematizes the paradox of the public/private binary by revealing how queer safe spaces often straddle and deconstruct this binary.

Felix Gonzalez-Torres's essay, 'Public and Private: Spheres of Influence', questions how the binary of public and private is used to preserve heteronormativity and suppress queer identity. He argues that the interests of the public sphere are defended through the regulation of the private: '[T]he bed is a site where we are not only born, where we die, where we make love, but it is also a place where

17 Zapperi (n 15) 28-9.

18 *ibid* 33.

19 Dunye and Leonard (n 1).

20 For more on the meta picture and the way in which art theorises about itself, see William John Thomas Mitchell, 'Metapictures' in *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (University of Chicago Press 1994).

21 Bryan-Wilson and Dunye (n 14) 84.

22 Zapperi (n 15) 27.

the state has a pressing interest, a public interest'.²³ The separation of private and public life is therefore a delusion as it applies to marginalised communities. Gonzalez-Torres uses statistical evidence to support his argument that certain private spaces are more public than others—that is, more subject to state control. He writes, 'There is no private sphere in the modern state. We can only speak about private property. There is no private space, no private entity. At least not for certain groups when it is still legal and endorsed by the state to oppress and discriminate because of who we love in private and, yes, outdoors too'.²⁴ That is, both the public and private spheres have always been contentious for the 2SLGBTQ+ community. Queer private spaces are often highly regulated by state control, while the public sphere has always posed threats of both violence and erasure to queer people. Tsang's *Green Room*, to reiterate, operates as both a dressing room for Biennial performers and as an art piece, open to museum visitors when not in use as a dressing room. Tsang, then, creates an installation that places itself, simultaneously, within both the public and private sphere, thereby collapsing distinctions between the two.

Tsang subverts the assumption that art is inherently decorative by building a space that is both artwork, and functional (i.e. intended to support art). The space held custom designed furniture, mirrors, and carpet, inspired by the Silver Platter, but equally had to be designed to meet the architectural needs of the dressing room space: such as mirrors with vanity lighting, desks, chairs, and clothing racks.²⁵ As *Green Room* demands, and indeed was built for interaction, it gradually accumulates the battering of use and unsettles conceptions of art as being untouchable. Installations often disrupt the traditional museum-going experience by being both experiential and, frequently, ephemeral. Ephemerality—as it has been previously discussed in relation to Cvetkovich's theoretical work—is an oddity in the archive. If the archive relies on permanence, the volatility of ephemera throws archival practices into disarray. As Cvetkovich writes, 'The stock-in-trade of the gay and lesbian archive is ephemera', because they produce 'the unusual emotional archive necessary to record the often traumatic history of gay and lesbian culture'.²⁶ Tsang's work, as an installation, is temporary, which throws into question its capacity to act as an archive. Nevertheless, she plays with these ideas of impermanence and wear in *Green Room* in order to reference the mutability of queer culture.

The wear and tear of the space itself creates a physical archive of utility. As *Green Room* fluctuates between a functional lounge area and an art installation—which equally, and in their own right, demand engagement and use—it forces the viewer to be conscious of the way in which they occupy the space. Like Young's counter-monument, Tsang's counter-archive demands viewer participation. Memory work, that is, demands active engagement and labour on the part of the viewer, which is why I call it memory work. Tsang deconstructs the practices of the archive by allowing, and encouraging, the violation of her installation. Wear and tear make known the history of the space, thereby drawing attention to the history of the museum space as a whole, and its record of violence, erasure, and oppression—a history that parallels, and often intersects with, that of the archive.

23 Felix Gonzalez-Torres, 'Public and Private: Spheres of Influence' in *Getty* (n 5) 90.

24 *ibid.*

25 See image in Julia Bryan-Wilson and Shannon Jackson, 'Time Zones: Durational Art and Its Contexts' (2016) 136(11) *Representations* 11.

26 Cvetkovich (n 12) 243-4.

Moreover, Tsang's nod to gay bars, and spaces of camaraderie (the green room) in her work highlights queer safe spaces that are, and have been historically, vital to the 2SLGBTQ+ community. These spaces provide the ground on which community can be built—returning to Blake's point that queer people do not have access to this in the home/private sphere—by providing a space where those who are forced to hide their identity (often, for their own safety) are able to comfortably inhabit their queerness. By inviting the public into a semi-closed space, Tsang highlights the potential danger posed by the infiltration of cisgendered heterosexual people into queer spaces.²⁷ Tsang questions the ingrained comfort that cis-het people often exhibit in 2SLGBTQ+ spaces without realizing that their presence is often threatening to the community whom that space was built for. Tsang therefore insists on centring queer voices.

In *Green Room*, Tsang screens *Que Paso Con Los Martes?* This two-channel video focuses on the Los Angeles queer community and is specifically centred on the experience of a trans woman who fled persecution in Honduras, finding a vibrant queer community at the Silver Platter. Tsang prioritizes her voice in the space and insists that gay bars provide a haven for queer people from the persecution they face in the external world. Her voice echoes through the room; viewer participation, in this case, hinges on the act of listening to and learning from queer testimony. Tsang thereby questions what voices get to be heard, both in terms of how the archive actively erases and neglects queer voices, as well as in relation to the voice as being culturally and politically constituted.²⁸

Rita Gonzalez's essay, 'Speech Acts' explores how Tsang uses voice in her work in order to disrupt normative notions of gender and sexuality. Tsang is interested in the voice as a culturally and politically conditioned entity. She describes her own artistic practice as invested in exploring the voice as a tool for subverting cisnormativity and rebuking 'normative readings of a feminine or masculine voice, with consideration to the sensitivity around voice and 'passing' in trans communities. Voice can seem to exceed the body, and modes of recording and playback in music and filmic sound can be used to break down normative readings of gender and sexuality'.²⁹ That is, Tsang's use of testimony (and therefore voice) in her work necessarily questions notions of authenticity and the ways in which gender presentation and embodiment are highly regulated into pre-existing cis-normative and binary structures. Gonzalez writes, 'the voice can be used to disturb and contest, but also serves to conform and restrict identity'.³⁰

Accordingly, in *Green Room*, Tsang is not only thinking about the voice as isolated, but rather as highly culturally and environmentally situated. Crafting a three-dimensional environment, while simultaneously screening a two-channel documentary film, allows Tsang to create a fully immersive experience. She states: 'My language is not about designing words or even visual symbols for people to interpret. It is about being in constant conversation with every aspect of my environment, reacting physically to all parts of my surroundings'.³¹ The installation creates a conversation through its various aspects and shifting purposes. The video reflects back on itself through the dressing room mirror, creating the unsettling effect of doubling that which is already doubled through the presence

27 I will henceforth be referring to 'cisgendered heterosexual' as 'cis-het'.

28 Rita Gonzalez, 'Speech Acts' in Elodie Evers et al, *Wu Tsang: Not In My Language* (Walther König 2015) 23.

29 *ibid.* 26.

30 *ibid.* 23.

31 *ibid.* 25.

of multiple display devices.³² Moreover, the film itself shifts between interviews and atmospheric shots of the Silver Platter. Tsang foregrounds the relationship between voice and environment, suggesting that certain environments are more conducive to certain voices being heard. While the dominant archive silences queer voices, Tsang suggests that queer bars might produce their own counter-archive of queer experience.

Furthermore, being brought into the installation implicates the viewer. Tsang's reconstructed physical space of the Silver Platter evokes the highly political history of gay bars. Gay bars have always had strong ties to political activism and in 1969, the gay liberation movement began in retaliation against the police raids of Stonewall Inn in New York City. The viewer necessarily becomes enmeshed in this history upon entering *Green Room*. In 2011, Tsang made a blog post in advance of her performance of *full body quotation* at a New Museum Fundraiser. She reflects on the history of queer voices in the museum space; ideas that she continues to develop through her work in *Green Room*. I would like to end this section with Tsang's statement, because it contextualises acts of seeing in *Green Room*. Tsang forces the viewer to reflect on the social, political, and cultural situatedness of their own gaze and how it affects their engagement with the piece.

Tsang considers the place of queer performers in the museum environment, particularly at exclusive events: 'the role that performance artists often play in [museum fundraisers], as being complicit 'entertainment' jesters for elite patronage of museums'.³³ She considers how best to engage with such a complex issue: not performing, and risking further distancing queer people from museum spaces, or, perform and exposing herself and her larger community to further harm. Tsang, thus, drafts a statement to contextualise her work and force her audience to think critically about the way that they, and museum spaces as a whole, continue to perpetuate violence against the 2SLGBTQ+ community:

Tonight's performance features all misappropriated material. We are channelling voices of people involved in the making of the film *Paris is Burning* twenty years ago. Originally I wanted to keep this source secret because I didn't want you to take these voices for granted as being 'authentic'. But the site of this performance (i.e. a party at the New Museum, Performa, downtown Manhattan, etc.) is not necessarily a safe space for all the communities referenced in this work. If you wanna witness this; please first recognize that we exist. In order to fall apart as complex beings, we need first to be able to live.³⁴

Tsang prompts viewers to consider the way in which they carry forward such a violent history. She relies on behavioural conventions and norms that are at play in the museum space: that people be respectful of and quietly attentive to the art, for example. These conventions have historically made museums more accessible to certain groups of people: white, upper-class, and well educated. Tsang subverts these same norms by using them to encourage people to hear and listen to queer testimony, thereby building a queer counter-archive.

³² See image in Elodie Evers et al (n 28).

³³ Wu Tsang, 'in order to fall apart as human beings, we need first to be able to live' in Getsy (n 1) 211.

³⁴ *ibid* 212.

Rage as Grief in the Work of fierce pussy

fierce pussy formed at the crux of the AIDS crisis in 1991, and as such, their work is highly political and deeply concerned with the advocacy of queer rights and visibility. Their work has often intersected with the archive, and they have worked in the past with the Lesbian Herstory Archives in New York City. In this section, I will be focusing on two of their projects: *gutter* (2009) and *For the Record* (2013), because these works best encapsulate the creation of a counter-archive through critical fabulation. fierce pussy's site-specific work, like Tsang, is deeply informed by the public/private binary. They use public space as a tool for their own activism. Although all the artists I have discussed respectively use their art to advocate for 2SLGBTQ+ rights and visibility, fierce pussy's message is more explicitly directed towards the cis-het outsider in response to the AIDS crisis. Cvetkovich writes, 'The AIDS crisis offered clear evidence that some deaths were more important than others and that homophobia and, significantly, racism could affect how trauma was publicly recognized'.³⁵ Their work, then, is informed by this period of national trauma and mourning for the 2SLGBTQ+ community. Additionally, Cvetkovich's work on trauma takes interest in those living in proximity to trauma, including lesbians on the edge of the AIDS crisis. She is interested in the roles lesbians played 'as caretakers and activists' and how this legacy is pervaded by 'the privilege of moving on because they have remained alive'.³⁶ fierce pussy's own work, in this case, must be analysed through the spectre of death from which they arose.

Cvetkovich traces the queer archival impulse to the reckoning with death and mortality in the wake of the AIDS crisis: 'This encounter [with mortality] produces the archival impulse, the desire to collect objects not just to protect against death but in order to create practices of mourning'.³⁷ Death thus provides the impetus for recording one's history. In the reverberations of loss, the desire to record a social and cultural history strengthens. All the artists I have discussed, in this sense, are grappling with profound loss; be it death or archival absence, they similarly signify the pressing need to create a queer counter-archive. Nevertheless, the AIDS crisis made apparent that this project is not solely concerned with documentation, but rather, and perhaps more pressingly, activism. Queer artists create a counter-archive precisely because the dominant archive lacks the means to capture the grief, trauma, and oppression that it inflicts: 'We knew deep down that we had to create our own rites and rituals if we were to truly honour and acknowledge our grief'.³⁸ This search for new modes of mourning is consistent with a counter-archival project, which seeks to create new processes of remembering that arise out of an effaced history.

Although fierce pussy's work is permeated by feelings and affects generated by the AIDS crisis, *For the Record* explicitly confronts the profound loss caused by the epidemic (and the government's failure to adequately respond). Produced in 2013, it is the more recent of the two projects that I will be touching on, but I want to begin here because of its direct link to the AIDS crisis. The project was centred around an exhibition at Printed Matter, but also featured a series of posters, stickers, postcards, and downloadable broadsides.³⁹

³⁵ Cvetkovich (n 12) 6.

³⁶ *ibid* 160.

³⁷ *ibid* 269.

³⁸ *ibid* 266.

³⁹ fierce pussy, 'projects' <<https://fiercepussy.org/projects>> accessed 10 March 2022.

fierce pussy's work relies on text, often using succinct, clear, and resonating language to convey their message. These tactics resemble practices traditionally associated with advertising, which is also consistent with their use of spaces designated for advertising (e.g. windows, alleys, and billboards, etc.). In *For the Record*, they repeat the tagline: 'if [he/she/they] were alive today'. fierce pussy's use of language, therefore, creates a counter-archive of loss, even as they refuse to name victims. While the refusal to name might first appear as a depersonalization of the trauma, I argue that it accentuates the widespread nature of the crisis. The loss of lives, then, is equally the loss of records, names, and a culture.

The generalising language, moreover, is undercut by the following statements; often intimate, they implicate the viewer. Phrases such as: 'you'd be texting her right now', 'you'd be so her type', 'he would have you on your knees', 'you'd still be arguing about that', and 'he'd have his arm around you' suggest familiar, unremarkable actions (texting, dating, sex, fights, touch). Nevertheless, along with the repetition of 'you', the statements suggest attachment. The viewer, then, feels the loss as if it was their own loved one and is forced to reckon with their own relation to the crisis. To return to Hartman, although the act of critical fabulation cannot possibly liberate the dead, its resonances are felt in the living that are finally given the opportunity to heal. *For the Record* mourns friends, families, lovers, artists, and activists through the language of lives cut short. The declarations imagine a possible present that the 'if' reminds us is impossible. The font is printed in a black, sans-serif typeface, apart from the word 'AIDS', which is printed in red. The posters state, 'if he were alive today he'd still be living with AIDS'. The emphasised 'AIDS' suggests the incoherency of living with a disease, so long considered a death sentence. Moreover, it serves to make AIDS, which is often invisible, visible. The lack of punctuation, moreover, implies a kind of urgency—that of a crisis improperly handled by the state, because of whose lives were being lost. fierce pussy, thus, draws attention not only to the act of dying of AIDS, but also to the ongoing struggle for those living with the disease in the present.

fierce pussy's work is suffused with rage and militancy as a response to trauma and frustration. Cvetkovich draws on Douglas Crimp, finding that trauma often elicits 'militancy as an emotional response and a possible mode of containment of irremediable psychic distress'.⁴⁰ Anger, in this case, saturates queer mourning rites in response to the AIDS crisis. The state's response to the AIDS crisis was informed by homophobia and racism; because marginalised communities were disproportionately affected by AIDS, the state felt no urgency to respond. The discourse surrounding the crisis, then, centred around bigotry. fierce pussy's public advocacy for queer rights asserts that visibility and perception matter. In an interview, they iterate their interest in public space, stating, 'We don't see public space as neutral or abstract'.⁴¹ Similar to Gonzalez-Torres, fierce pussy is thinking about public space as paradoxical for the 2SLGBTQ+ community: 'Historically, public space has held a contradiction for queer people; on the one hand we have been invisible and on the other hand we are frequently the target of violence in public'.⁴² They respond to this contradiction through their art, that inserts queer narratives into the public sphere. *Gutter*, like *For the Record*, relies on language and storytelling. By rewriting and editing lesbian pulp fiction novels from the 1940s through 70s, fierce pussy gives lesbians a chance at a happy ending.

40 Cvetkovich (n 12) 162-3.

41 fierce pussy, 'Interview' in Getsy (n 1) 223.

42 *ibid* 223.

Gutter arose out of fierce pussy's residency at the Lesbian Herstory Archives and was originally shown in 2009, at the exhibition 'Tainted Love' at La Mama Galleria. In the adjoining alleyway, Extra Place, they hung their posters along the brick wall to create a public mural. The novels, not necessarily written by lesbians, are consistent with mainstream media's tendency to 'leave lesbians sad, lonely, or dead'.⁴³ Cvetkovich argues that these representations have 'become part of the archive of lesbian culture'.⁴⁴ The literary trope, 'Bury your Gays' (also called 'Dead Lesbian Syndrome'), emerged as a way to write 2SLGBTQ+ characters, without breaking decency laws that forbade the promotion of 'perverse acts'.⁴⁵ 'Bury your Gays' alludes to the tendency to kill off queer characters as punishment for their homosexuality and/or gender deviance, presenting such traits as inherently immoral and undesirable.⁴⁶

fierce pussy mines the archive of lesbian pulp novels, tainted with moral deprivation, condemnation, and misery. They redact and edit texts to reveal a counter-archive of language, one where lesbians are allowed to experience pleasure. fierce pussy states, 'From the position of the reader we become the writer; by crossing-out and underlining we re-edit these stories to more accurately reflect our experience and desire. In our version, women can have hot sex and 'happy endings'—in both senses of the word'.⁴⁷ I want to pause my analysis of *gutter* to problematize 'happiness' and 'happy endings'. To embark on an analysis of queer happiness, we must explore what the term implies outside of a heteronormative structure. Sarah Ahmed's 'Killing Joy: Feminism and the History of Happiness', problematizes who is allowed to be happy. Ahmed uses the example of one's wedding day, often described in advance as the 'happiest day of your life'. That is, happiness promises itself as a reward for following a set path, one that is inherently cisgendered and heterosexual. Ahmed writes, 'Affect aliens, those of us who are alienated by happiness, are creative: not only do we want the wrong things, not only do we embrace possibilities that we are asked to give up, but we can create lifeworlds around these wants'.⁴⁸ fierce pussy, then, subverts the expectations tied to happiness that often deny it to queer people. They suggest that happiness, like the language that they manipulate, is malleable and holds a multiplicity of meanings. In writing out negative emotions, they do not negate or dispel negative affects, but rather present lesbians with the possibility of happiness in a way that deviates from heteronormative standards.

In opposition to the happy endings it presents, *gutter* is saturated with rage. The blacked-out text implies frustration and anger. fierce pussy states, 'The way history is written often denies our existence. We go back into these texts to reinsert the lesbian experience: our anger, our desire, our impact, our lives'.⁴⁹ Hence, they disrupt the erasure of queer voices in the archive through their own erasure of text. Like Tsang, fierce pussy is concerned with *whose* voices get to be heard. They question notions of authorship by upturning the process of reading into one of writing. Reading, then, rather than being prescriptive, becomes innovative. In *gutter*, texts that have historically worked to suppress queer identity, become liberatory as they open up spaces of exploring queer desire.

43 Cvetkovich (n 12) 253.

44 *ibid* 253.

45 Hailey Hulan, 'Bury Your Gays: History, Usage, Context' (2017) 21(1) McNair Scholars Journal 18.

46 In contemporary media, queer characters are still killed off at inordinate rates. Cf. *ibid*.

47 fierce pussy (n 39) 223.

48 Sara Ahmed, 'Killing Joy: Feminism and the History of Happiness' (2010) 35(3) *Signs* 593.

49 fierce pussy (n 39) 224. Emphasis added.

Furthermore, the act of opening up new spaces is mirrored through fierce pussy's use of the public sphere. They locate queer sex acts—'Drop your skirt. Now step out of it'—in the public sphere, thereby questioning the erasure of queer identity from public space. 2SLGBTQ+ people are often either required to suppress their own queerness in public settings, or on the other hand, it is actively erased through normative presumptions of sexuality. fierce pussy takes private acts and transforms them into a public, shared experience. About their own work, they write, 'It is often through the act of reading that young people first find possible reflections of their identity. From the first time one looks up the word 'lesbian' in the dictionary, the pages of books provide a safe and secret space to explore one's fantasies, desire and identity'.⁵⁰ In *gutter*, they move this hidden act into view by building a queer counter-archive for future generations of lesbians, who will hopefully not have to live in such a hetero-saturated world. fierce pussy makes space for queer visibility, which they define in opposition to gay visibility: 'Today, 'gay visibility', which is more about assimilation and gay marriage, has replaced queer visibility and a vision of radical social change'.⁵¹ This vision that fierce pussy articulates in their work is akin to the counter-archival project that denounces normative archival practices in order to make new spaces for queer identity. Fostering a queer public memory is more important than being palatable to the dominant culture.

Conclusion

The artists discussed in this essay delineate a counter-archive through their use of critical fabulation to 'recover' an unrecoverable past. They question the imbued authority of the archive to give voice to certain histories, and inevitably, to silence others: 'The archive is, in this case, a death sentence, a tomb'.⁵² The archive, therefore, is problematic for 2SLGBTQ+ people who find ourselves actively erased and persecuted in dominant discourse. Leonard, Dunye, Tsang, and fierce pussy create new narratives of queer memory through contemporary art. In doing so, they fabricate an atemporal zone in which queer voices can be heard. Their art is situated outside and between the past, present, and future of queer identities. From a space of trauma, they use their art to reclaim agency and unveil power relations in the archive.

Leonard and Dunye's *The Fae Richards Photo Archive* fabricates the archive of Fae Richards to produce unstable images that are as much tied up with our present as they are with the past. By bringing to bear the methods of the archive, they expose its very precarity and artifice. They give life to Fae Richards in the present—as a stand-in for the many Black lesbians that have been denied a presence in the archive—and yet disclose her fictionality to indicate loss and reveal the impossibility of redeeming the lives of the dead. In Tsang's *Green Room*, she creates a fabricated setting rather than a fabricated persona. Tsang displaces the politics of the gay bar into the museum space, in order to reveal the intimate ties between 2SLGBTQ+ oppression and artistic representation. She centres queer testimony in order to question associations between voice and authenticity. Displacement, then, also exposes certain environments as houses of power, namely the museum and the archive. Tsang's interest in the public/private binary and how it has been historically contentious for queer people is also a factor in fierce pussy's work. They exhibit site-specific work to implicate cis-het outsiders in queer trauma.

By moving private queer experiences into the public sphere, fierce pussy creates new spaces for queer visibility. Like Tsang, they problematize the paradox between safe and unsafe spaces. Safe spaces, that is, are always under attack and risk infiltration and gentrification if they belong to a marginalised group. In this case, there is no way to guarantee safety without radical social change.

These artists play with memory in order to create stories that trouble received ideas of truth and objectivity that are rooted in the archive. Artistic practices allow the past to be written anew by virtue of the conditions in which we now find ourselves, in the wake of the queer liberation movements of the late twentieth-century. Creativity and imagination are thus necessary in the production of a counter-archive. Leonard, Dunye, Tsang, and fierce pussy respectively produce counter-archives of queer genealogy. Critical fabulation is a restorative practice for the living, providing the means for individual and collective healing. Through the act of fabricating new narratives, we are able to facilitate new ways of mourning lost memories.

⁵⁰ *ibid* 223.

⁵¹ *ibid* 224.

⁵² Hartman (n 10) 2.