

Transtextuality (Senate Bill 48)

Recovering and Reimagining Trans Histories

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Abstract Katie Herzog's *Transtextuality (Senate Bill 48)* is a collection of paintings that functions as a record of transgender history. Herzog's portraits of trans people of letters point to the work we must perform to create documentation of our communities when no trace of our existence shows up in the archives. Her project engages the transformative educational potential of the archives to record, remember, and reinvent our trans histories while it builds imaginings of future articulations of our records.

Keywords transgender, archives, trans, record keeping, documentation

I met Katie Herzog in 2008 at the Tom of Finland Foundation in Echo Park when I began work with her and Allison Schulte on building the foundation's library and archives. Our work together was inspired by the foundation's original purpose at its inception in 1984: to preserve for posterity Tom's vast catalog of his own drawings as well as holdings of homoerotic art by other artists (Tom of Finland Foundation 2015). Although Herzog, Schulte, and I could not claim any primary, individual ownership of the foundation's collections or a special authority on the gay leather subculture, we gathered volunteers and built a library, which is now accessible via the Online Computer Library Center (OCLC). This act of community organizing cum archival processing, aside from being the product of a great deal of brute force labor, represents a model of activism, an intervention in the present that transforms evidence of the past into an intellectual and cultural edifice for the future. A similar logic organizes Herzog's *Transtextuality (Senate Bill 48)*, a collection of paintings that functions as a record of transgender history. Herzog's portraits of trans people of letters point to the work we must perform to create documentation of our communities when no trace of our existence shows up in the archives.

Herzog's project engages the professional discourse and practices of archival science in several registers. This work functions as a commemoration or

memorial, but it has another function as well. It presents itself as documentation, as a set of access points to transgender histories. This function is critically important for a community that has been violently misrepresented by the record-keeping practices of the police, the medical establishment, and the mental health professions, to name but a few sites of gross mistreatment. The trans community has precious few avenues for the creation of records that express any part of the tremendous diversity of our lives. Herzog's work illustrates Sue McKemish's concept of record keeping as a personal and political act "of evidencing and memorializing our lives—our existence, our activities and experiences, our relationships with others, our identity, our 'place' in this world" (1996: 29). The collected portraits and, perhaps more importantly, the implied relationships among and between subjects and viewers, create useful entry points for transgender-created counter narratives that resist traditional and popular narratives always already marked by violence, pathology, and death. While the subjects of Gerhard Richter's *48 Portraits of Men of Letters* were sourced from encyclopedia images of great white men, Herzog's work could resort to no such hagiography. The source images for the piece are tiny, low-quality JPEG digital files. These are trans subjects rescued from the gradual erasure of digital oblivion. Part of the project then is to invest these trace images with something of the dynamism and complexity of life, to hint at what was once present and what might be.

Herzog's project of recovery, reinvention, and reinscription works toward creating historical evidence of our existence within records that hold and share the complexities of our collective memory, the totality of our trans bodies, experiences, cultures, histories, and lives. While Terry Cook critiques the archivist as an instrument in the creation or destruction of collective memory through politicized decisions of inclusion and exclusion, Herzog's portraits provide an archival intervention that gestures toward our collective memory and enables a multivocal remembering or shared recollection of our past (1997: 18–19). It also creates a portal through which we may imagine our futures. The Los Angeles County Museum of Art's November 2014 acquisition of *Transtextuality (Senate Bill 48)* for its permanent collection represents the fruition of an archival impulse to communicate through time, to prevent the forgetting and loss of transgender history. The names, birth dates, and professions of the subjects contained in the series—their intellectual work, their lives, their relationships—serve as indexical anchors for the creation of a new story, a more inclusive and nuanced picture of trans people. The title of Herzog's work opens access to her paintings as official records in conversation with other documents such as California Governor Jerry Brown's Fair, Accurate, Inclusive, and Respectful Education Act (also known as the FAIR Education Act, the LGBT History Bill, and Senate Bill 48), Richter's *48 Portraits of Men of Letters*, Gottfried Helnwein's response with his *48 Portraits* of famous

women, as well as an entire documentary universe of unofficial records of our existence, records yet to be uncovered or not yet written.

Herzog's work to create opportunities for historical trans documentation from degraded digital traces of our existence is also in conversation with our antiessentialist work at the Tom of Finland Foundation and my own work in the creation of a trans living archive. Her work has proven controversial in certain quarters of the broader trans and LGBTQ communities. Some have criticized this work as exploitation, since the artist cannot claim a trans identity to legitimate her work in this area. For some believe that only trans people should do the work or speak for the trans community, ignoring the ways this work functions through time, bridging past and future. *Transtextuality (Senate Bill 48)* creates the possibility for past, present, and future connections with trans histories and builds imaginings of future articulations of our records, evidence of our existence that moves beyond our historical absence from the archival record into a space where we ourselves tell stories and speak truth to power in the creation of ourselves and our communities.

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