

In Herzog's Hands

Transtextuality (Senate Bill 48)

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Abstract In her critical review of Katie Herzog's art installation *Transtextuality (Senate Bill 48)*, Jessica Lee Mathiason argues that the artist's collection of forty-eight portraits transforms the archive into an artwork while questioning institutional boundaries and disrupting its previous stability, position, and purpose. A reimagining of Gerhard Richter's 1972 installation of *48 Portraits* of men of letters, Herzog's piece sets itself apart from the original through its commitment to materiality. While Richter removed all brushstrokes from his portraits, making them closely resemble the encyclopedia photographs he used as models, Herzog instead embraces the hand with her long, sweeping, and visible strokes. Using her unmistakable indentations, daring lines, and stylized portraiture to foreground the contractedness of art and the archive, Herzog challenges Richter's methodology and disciplinary modes of historiography, which have systematically excluded LGBT persons from our encyclopedias, textbooks, and collective memory.

Keywords transgender, archive, transtextuality, art, LGBT history

Forty-eight black-and-white portraits of transgender “people of letters” overwhelm the Night Gallery's stark white walls as they wrap themselves around the exhibition space, equidistantly aligned in two horizontal rows. The gallery's rafters and unfinished lighting fixtures complement the gritty materiality of Katie Herzog's monochrome portraits. Through her bold lines, thick brushstrokes, and dramatic use of shadow, the details of her subject's faces stand out. While initially struck by the sheer number and scale of the portraits, the viewer is quickly drawn in by the expressivity of each face.

Herzog's art installation *Transtextuality (Senate Bill 48)*, since acquired for the permanent collection of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, is a reinterpretation of Gerhard Richter's *48 Portraits*, displayed at the German Pavilion of the Venice Biennale in 1972. Richter's work consists of forty-eight paintings of white, cis-gendered “men of letters” whose names and visages he found while combing the encyclopedia's pages. As a twentieth-anniversary rejoinder, Gottfried Helnwein installed forty-eight portraits of women of letters, painted in

monochromatic red. Displayed directly opposite Richter's originals at Galerie Rudolfinum, Helnwein's portraits provoked a confrontational response. Another twenty years later, Richter's portraits are again in need of artistic, social, and political revision. Herzog's 2013 reimagining sets itself apart stylistically from both early sets of *48 Portraits* through its commitment to materiality. While Richter chose to remove all brushstrokes from his portraits, making them closely resemble the encyclopedia photographs he used as models, Herzog's instead embrace the hand with their long, sweeping, and visible strokes. Herzog thereby calls attention to the hand itself—both the “hand” that constructs the archives and writes our history and the “hand” that serves as a visual metaphor for action. As Herzog herself elaborated in my interview with her, “whereas in Richter's work the encyclopedia equals history, in my work the encyclopedia is inherently inadequate due to its omissions and therefore realism is an inadequate visual language to employ” (Herzog 2015). Herzog is not only rewriting the archive through her installation of forty-eight trans “people of letters” but also foregrounding the constructedness of art and the archive through her unmistakable indentations, daring lines, and stylized mode of portraiture.

Herzog's title, *Transtextuality (Senate Bill 48)*, turns upon the dual invocation of the trans community and Gérard Genette's concept of “transtextuality.” In his book on literary criticism, Genette (1992: 81) writes that textual transcendence embodies “everything that brings it into relation (manifest or hidden) with other texts.” Herzog's “manifest” textual references are Senate Bill 48, which calls for the teaching of LGBT history and historical figures in California public schools, the allusion to Richter and Helnwein, and the title's own transtextual reference to the transgender community. Looking at the portraits, however, I am struck by what might be their “hidden” references or influences, as the content of some of her subjects' theoretical contributions appear to have found expression in her work. For example, as Stephen Whittle (2006: xii) writes in his foreword to *The Transgender Studies Reader*, in the last twenty years (precisely the time between Helnwein's and Herzog's reinventions), the role of trans individuals in mainstream Western culture has undergone a “fundamental shift.” They have transitioned from functioning as objects of academic and medical investigation to becoming producers of theoretical, literary, and scientific insights. From their contributions, “a new scholarship informed by community activism” has emerged (xii). It is precisely this shift—from serving as *objects* of knowledge to becoming *producers* of knowledge—that I see in Herzog's work. Not only have her forty-eight subjects helped shape our understanding of gender, sexuality, and our bodies, but they have also made lasting contributions to philosophy, literature, and scholarship. It is precisely these accomplishments Herzog is celebrating by framing them as “people of letters.” Moreover, by cutting her portraits off at

the shoulders, Herzog prevents her subjects' bodies from reverting to objects of display, investigation, and critique.

What most strikes me about Herzog's work is her deft traversal across media: a manifestation of her commitment to "transtextuality." While *Transtextuality (Senate Bill 48)* works effectively as a stand-alone art installation, its deeper commentary on language, canonicity, and the (re)writing of LGBT history unfolds when reinserted into her oeuvre. Herzog is adept at "performing the archive" not only through painting but also through activism and scholarship. In *Queers Online: LGBT Digital Practices in Libraries, Archives, and Museums* (Wexelbaum, Herzog, and Rasberry 2015), Herzog coauthors a chapter on the "Queering Wikipedia Edit-a-thon" she organized at the Tom of Finland Library in Los Angeles. In July 2012, she and a dozen other activists sat in at the library to write queer history into electronic encyclopedia existence. The "hands" typing Wikipedia entries at the library mirror the "hands" painting the forty-eight portraits, each using dynamic strokes to "perform" a new, LGBT-inclusive archive. A term introduced by Simone Osthoff, "performing the archive," refers to how an artist's performance "in, with, and of the archive produce[s] an ontological change—from the archive as a repository of documents to the archive as a dynamic and generative production tool" (2009: 11). Herzog's forty-eight portraits transform the archive into an artwork while questioning institutional boundaries and disrupting its previous stability, position, and purpose. As Osthoff contends, "performing the archive" through art generates a "change in the archive's ontology, produced in part by the contamination between artwork and documentation, position[ing] history and theory neither completely outside the realm of art nor entirely inside of it, but in continuous relays. Thus suggesting that history and theory can, at least on occasion, function as dynamic media" (11–12). In this way, Herzog functions simultaneously as historian, activist, and theorist, destabilizing the archive while challenging Richter's methodology and disciplinary modes of historiography. Through her art, her digital fingerprint, and her scholarship, Herzog preserves the contributions of LGBT "people of letters." *Transtextuality (Senate Bill 48)*, in particular, "performs" the notion of a queer historical archive enacted by Senate Bill 48 while, practically, suggesting forty-eight trans authors, scholars, and political activists for inclusion in the K–8 textbooks, currently being revised for Fall 2015.

Herzog's installation "performs the archive," but it deconstructs it as well. As Whittle explains, through the postmodern process of deconstruction, "modernity and its values, including gender, have been stripped away. The question of postmodern analysis is whether any reconstructive process can exist" (xii). Herzog's portraits, I argue, attempt just such a reconstruction.

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