

STILL WORKING

On Richard Meyer and David Román's *Art Works, Parts 1 & 2*

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"Art Works, Parts 1 & 2," special issue edited by Richard Meyer and David Román. GLQ 12.3 (2006).

"Under my bed. In the studio" (Middleman 2006: 474). This was the answer Glenn Ligon gave when asked about the location of a rarely exhibited series titled *Lest We Forget* (1998). Occasioned by a residency at Artpace in San Antonio, Texas, Ligon produced a set of five metal plaques—the kind most commonly associated with monuments—and placed them around the city, using double-sided tape to attach them to their supports. Each had a title and text of its own, broadly evocative of the "aesthetics of existence" that John Paul Ricco (2016) has called the consummate cruise, "a sense of incommensurability and an equality of inequivalence that is shared between you." Yet Ligon's plaques consistently end in disappointment, or at least a turn toward self-doubt and the quotidian business of living. For example, here is how the plaque titled "Hunky Guy" reads: "Hunky guy wearing sandals that scuff the ground as he walks. Long hair, black, shiny eyes. He looks at me as he's walking by. A little something-something between us, but so brief that I can't be sure if anything really happened beyond what I felt." I find it remarkable that such a text should live under someone's bed—the site of recuperation and sexual encounter, nested within the ostensibly productive space of the artist's studio.

Here is what is under my bed: five pairs of shoes, a twin foam mattress (for nonhunky guy guests), and a small stack of books and journals. To be fair, the books and journals are scattered all over my house and office, stacked two deep on bookshelves, and in random piles on my kitchen table and desk. But one of the journals under my bed is the second of two special issues of *GLQ* edited by Rich-

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ard Meyer and David Román (2006: 349) dedicated to unspooling “visual objects and cultural episodes as a queer way of knowing.” When I initially bought these issues, over a decade ago, I was a PhD student in art history. I remember purchasing them on a research trip to Los Angeles while I was feeling particularly low—I had recently run up against some institutional barriers concerning what I wanted to study: the visual and material cultures of BDSM communities of the 1970s and 1980s, and the contemporary artists who engaged and renegotiated these historical aesthetics. Was such a thing art history? I thought so, but many others told me no. What I was doing, they said, was cultural studies, or visual studies, or visual cultural studies, but it was not art history. Policing of disciplinary boundaries is a mainstay of academic work, but, of course, these parsings felt personal. Which is why Meyer and Román’s issues were a relief—calling in those who didn’t quite fit within their disciplinary contexts. To my mind many of the articles in these issues would equally be at home in disciplinary journals—ones dedicated to art history or theater or performance studies. That such work was gathered together, and deserved not only one, but two, specially themed issues, was a symbolic and realpolitik gesture of affirmation and generosity.

In their first joint introduction Meyer and Román (2006: 167) posed two questions that remain relevant: “How have the visual and performing arts reshaped the governing terms of gender and sexuality? How have the arts fashioned a queer world, both in the past and the present?” To answer these questions, the issues’ editors and authors turned to archives of various kinds, illuminating the vast methodological map/morass of queer possibility. Looking back now, I see that the issues’ foregrounding of questions of the archive, and the dynamic relation of archives to queer thought and performance, captures a particular moment, or turn, in queer studies when archival methods and objects were under a new embrace and scrutiny.¹ The contents of the first of these special issues circled around questions of authenticity, absence, presence, and the seeming illegibility of rural and international queer lives: from the theatrical repositioning and ostensibly mainstream acceptance of the life of Charlotte von Mahlsdorf, “an East German transvestite”; to the censorship surrounding the fin-de-siècle photographer Wilhelm von Gloeden; from the archival findings (now validated by other scholars many times over) suggesting the depth and breadth of the artistic collaboration between French surrealist photographers Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore; to Michael Meads’s photographs of Alabaman white men that “suggest and surpass homosocial bonding.”

Photography and the circulation of photographic reproductions through periodicals are recurring concerns across the two issues. Photography’s truth-claims have long been interrogated, and that line of critique found extensions in

Richard Meyer's article "Gay Power circa 1970," addressing (in part) Fred W. McDarra's photographs of the exterior and interior of the Stonewall Inn, New York, and Ricardo Montez's read on a description of a Tseng Kwong Chi photograph of the artists Keith Haring and Angel Ortiz (better known as LA2) posing beside each other. Meyer's discussion of McDarra's photographs and the self-representation of the Gay Liberation Front have been valuable in reassessing the visual cultures of gay liberation. Of particular interest is Meyer's (2006: 459) discussion of a handful of publicity ads published in "Gay Power," in which naked people (mostly, but not exclusively men) read the publication—the upraised newspaper masking their faces and evidencing the tension between "collective power and presence [and . . .] individual liability and restriction." You can see the influence of Meyer's archival findings in the work of the photographer and medieval scholar Leah DeVun, who created a body of work while she was in residence at ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archives in 2012.

In a photograph from the resultant series titled *Latent Images*, two women read a copy of the feminist periodical *Everywoman*. Unlike the publicity ads for "Gay Power" in which every reader grasps a copy of the periodical, the two figures in DeVun's photograph share in the task of reading—their two heads peeking above the top horizon of a single upraised newspaper, leaning on each other. Their closeness seems to contradict the issue of *Everywoman*'s hetero-dyadic headline: "Woman as Masochist / Man as Sadist." Another of DeVun's photographs, this one featuring a single reader, appears elsewhere on the cover of a 2014 special issue of *Radical History Review* dedicated to "queering archives" (Murphy, Marshall, and Tortorici 2014). I notice and read these as critical expansions on Meyer's project, additions, and echoes of his archival findings and readings.

The best inclusions of this special double issue of *GLQ* are the ones where a writer's vulnerability and pizzazz are allowed to break through the sometimes deadening curtain of academic style. The republication of a long blog entry written by Jill Dolan on the Five Lesbian Brothers' play *Oedipus at Palm Springs* is admirable in this regard. In it, she considers the production alongside her own expectations, and in doing so she worries about the Brothers' growing mainstream acceptance. In her writing I find a Brothers' lover, a fan and a friend, and an incisive theater critic not complacent with coasting. Then there is Deborah Bright and Erica Rand's "Queer Plymouth," a collaborative look at the "queer history of Plymouth," a place of mythological pull on the political imaginary of the United States. Reading their accounting of the monuments of Plymouth and their appearance in popular culture, for example, on television reality shows such as *The Real World Philadelphia* and *Colonial House*, the duo's self-described "lovely buzz that ani-



Figure 1. Leah DeVun, *Everywoman* (2012), C-print, 23.5" × 31".

Courtesy of the artist

mates our pal-dom”(Bright and Rand 2006: 259) comes through loud and clear. In sections titled “Booty” and “Clothes Make the White Man,” Bright and Rand inhabit the tourist’s temporal drag (“We are dykes who found tourist thrills that might not match our personal ads . . .”) (2006: 273) to enact a critique of historical sites central to the fictive coherency of nationalist discourse. Both articles end with similar sentiments (Dolan: “Blog on.”; Bright and Rand: “Rock on.”), and they remain for me exemplary of writing that, in the face of having to decide between rigor and humor, chooses both.

Embedded in the first of these two issues was a special section curated by Meyer and Román (2006: 279) addressing the twenty-fifth anniversary of “living with AIDS.” The three articles in this section included Román’s rumination on Craig Lucas and Norman René’s 1990 film, *Longtime Companion*, analyzing Vito Russo’s embrace of the film’s portrayal of homosexuals as “white, handsome, and upscale professionals” and instead offering a reading of the film emphasizing AIDS as a “collective social experience.” Lucas Hilderbrand (2006: 310) reviews the literature on AIDS activism and enters the fray as a person generationally removed from the inception of ACT-UP, arguing for video as a technology that “presents our most immediate connection to this earlier moment.” And, finally, Alexandra Juhasz’s article, “Video Remains: Nostalgia, Technology, and Queer Archive Activism,” connects Hilderbrand’s enframing of activist videos as profoundly necessary texts to the messy media temporalities that make such attachments possible. She writes of video as “both duration and action machine that allows us to embrace responsibility and interactivity in the face of mourning” (Juhasz 2006: 236). In each of these articles the authors grapple with the moving remains of an activist moment that each seems to believe had already passed on. Of course this is a handy fiction, one that puts in abeyance the activist geometries of the present—but then again, reexamination and reevaluation are necessary for projects that seek to redress the present from another angle, one at a historical “remove” from the subject in question.

Like how some things find their way under your bed, so that one day, you might remember them again.

Note

1. Key texts here would include Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (2003); Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (2003); and J. Jack Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (2005). For a critical historiography of this literature, see Kate Eichhorn, *The Archival Turn in Feminism: Outrage in Order* (2013), especially Eichhorn's introduction.

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