

A GIRL'S JOURNEY INTO THE WELL OF FORBIDDEN KNOWLEDGE

Ann Cvetkovich with Allyson Mitchell

In *A Girl's Journey into the Well of Forbidden Knowledge*, her 2010 installation for the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto, Allyson Mitchell re-creates a version of the reading room of the Lesbian Herstory Archives by covering the walls with trompe l'oeil wallpaper that displays a lesbian feminist library. Although the books themselves are not present, the reproduction of their spines acknowledges that the visual look and feel of books can be as much a part of their magic as the worlds inside the covers announced by their titles. Whether the titles are familiar or unknown, conjure fond memories of past reading experiences or promise new knowledge, these wallpaper shelves do more than provide an invaluable bibliography of lesbian feminist authors, subjects, genres, and presses; they also suggest the passion inspired by the Lesbian Herstory Archives as a repository of not just books but lesbian lives.

Mitchell's "cover version" of the Lesbian Herstory Archives is another in her series of utopian spaces, which are frequently constructed from crochet, textiles, and thrift-store craft so as to make sanctuaries that can be felt.¹ Inspired by her background as a fat activist, her installations have often included giant creatures and lesbian monsters, such as Lady Sasquatches and big-brained women. This time around, in a plus-sized version of a sculpture gallery, two large nude ladies in luminescent gold and silver hold hands but turn from each other to face the shelves; they are also attached via crochet ropes that link their crotches to a giant crochet brain overhead, as if to suggest that sexual and intellectual desire

are intertwined in their affection for books and for each other. One of them is holding a replica of *Janson's History of Art* burning with crochet flames, and the other is holding a replica of my own *An Archive of Feelings*, whose title concept aptly describes the installation. In a variation on the animal familiars that accompany Mitchell's *Lady Sasquatches*, two gold and silver cat statues stand guard at their feet in affirmation of the pussy power on display.

A Girl's Journey manifests the sensibility of Mitchell's Deep Lez manifesto, reproduced below, which calls for new combinations of 1970s lesbian feminism and contemporary third-wave, trans, and queer activism. While paying homage to the lesbian separatist values of the Lesbian Herstory Archives, Mitchell is also willing to transgress the boundaries of the original, which is open only to women, to bring it to a larger public. On the ground floor of the art gallery in a room with full-sized display windows that face onto a busy street, the installation is visible to anyone who passes by, providing an all-access public library dedicated to lesbian feminist culture.

The act of drawing is central to the labor of love that transports the Lesbian Herstory Archives into the gallery's public space. Working from photographs of the actual bookshelves, Mitchell has painstakingly redrawn the spine of each book in a process that resembles Alison Bechdel's use of drawing in her graphic narrative *Fun Home* to preserve the affective power of archival documents.² The handcraft of drawing slows down the instantaneousness of the photograph or photocopy to enable an extended and intimate encounter with each book. The details that might come through in a photograph don't matter because the black-and-white drawings capture the iconic features of the typefaces and logos, rendering familiar titles instantly recognizable.

Mitchell enlarged the thirty-eight original black-and-white drawings (some of which are reproduced here) for the wallpaper, making the books, like the sculptures, larger than life. They are further embellished with a wash of lesbian feminist lavender and gold and silver leaf accents. Far from being superficial, this decorative surface enhances the meaning of the books and suggests that the visual environment of libraries, both public and private, is central to their appeal. Even when books are not actively read, they add to the atmosphere of a room and constitute an "archive of feelings" that represents a collector's knowledge, passions, and history. Other items on the shelves, such as the jar labeled "donations gratefully accepted," further capture the character of lesbian feminist space, as do the signs, also carefully redrawn, that remind visitors to pick up after themselves and that explain the idiosyncratic filing system.

In Mitchell's installation, you *can* judge a book by its cover, especially

since the titles, authors, and presses are historic. Indeed, Mitchell's reproduction of the archive sustains the value of the Lesbian Herstory Archives as a research tool, as well as its status as the site of pilgrimage for the many who have come to the house in Brooklyn simply to touch lesbian lives and histories. The shelves introduce viewers to the rich variety of writing by women: canonical lesbian modernism by Radclyffe Hall and Gertrude Stein; new forms of autoethnography by women of color like Audre Lorde and Gloria Anzaldúa; feminist classics by Betty Friedan, Germaine Greer, Shulamith Firestone, and Jill Johnston; queer theory by Judith Butler, Judith Halberstam, and, signaling trans-inclusion, Kate Bornstein; as well as popular genres from pulp fiction to comics, from erotica to self-help books. (Drawing the archive also enables Mitchell to transform it, and she has, for example, highlighted the Canadian content by including authors such as Didi Khayatt and Chloe Brushwood-Rose.) The shelves also acknowledge the small independent presses — Crossing Press, Firebrand, Seal — that helped make feminist literature possible. Moreover, the repetition of the words “lesbian” and “woman” over and over again in the titles linguistically calls into being a world where the dream of visibility has been achieved. These books form what Kristen Hogan, writing about the feminist bookstores that have served, like the Lesbian Herstory Archives, as alternative libraries and community centers, has called “the feminist bookshelf,” the collections of books that cumulatively constitute not only a body of knowledge but a collective movement.³ This “well of forbidden knowledge” is no longer a “well of loneliness,” since the visitor can find company on the shelves and with the large-bodied big-brained readers who lead the way.

Mitchell preserves a world that is rapidly disappearing with the loss of feminist institutions such as presses, record labels, and bookstores. She joins a younger generation of lesbian artists who have been not only using the archive for inspiration but making art as a way of making an activist archive. Ulrike Müller's *Herstory Inventory*, for example, began as an audio installation based on a reading of a list describing the Lesbian Herstory Archives' T-shirt collection, and Müller is now commissioning artists to create new designs based on the descriptions. Other examples include Tammy Rae Carland's photographs of queer and feminist books and riot grrrl cassette tapes in “An Archive of Feelings”; Onya Hogan-Finlay's exhibition “My Taste in Men,” which incorporates materials from the ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archives at the University of Southern California; and the Mobile Homecoming Project and Catherine Lord's dedication pages described in this issue's Moving Image Review on lesbian archives.⁴ Artists are re-creating queer archives to bring them to affective life beyond the closed stacks and to create new publics.

For this *GLQ* issue featuring Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Mitchell has drawn a shelf of Sedgwick's books for our cover. Mitchell initially suggested her as a possible commentator for this Gallery because Sedgwick has been such an inspiration for her own work as a fat and craft activist. When I inquired, Eve was too ill to write, graciously responding that she had only a "teaspoonful of energy" each day. I like to think that Mitchell's self-proclaimed maximalism finds its counterpart in Sedgwick's love of the large sentence, full to the brim with evocative turns of phrase. Their shared love of craft also bridges any apparent discrepancies between Eve's affection for gay male poets such as James Merrill and Mitchell's affection for lesbian feminism. Further reflecting a deep lez investment in making queer connections, I am delighted to bring them together in the pages of *GLQ*.

Note: The images in the Gallery are photographs of Mitchell's installation taken by Cat O'Neil, with the exception of the drawings by Mitchell on pages 613–18, which were used to make the wallpaper for the installation.

Notes

1. See Ann Cvetkovich, "Touching the Monster: Deep Lez in Fun Fur," in *Ladies Sasquatch* (Hamilton, ON: McMaster University Art Gallery, 2009); and Cvetkovich, *Depression: A Public Feelings Project* (Durham: Duke University Press, forthcoming). Mitchell's work is also discussed in Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010) and in Lisa L. Moore, *The Sister Arts: The Erotics of Lesbian Landscapes* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).
2. See Ann Cvetkovich, "Drawing the Archive in Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 36, nos. 1–2 (2008): 111–28.
3. See Kristen Hogan, "Reading at Feminist Bookstores: Women's Literature, Women's Studies, and the Feminist Bookstore Network" (PhD diss., University of Texas at Austin, 2006).
4. For more on Tammy Rae Carland's "An Archive of Feelings," see Ann Cvetkovich, "Photographing Objects as Queer Archival Practice," in *Feeling Photography*, ed. Elspeth Brown and Thy Phu (Durham: Duke University Press, forthcoming). For more on Ulrike Müller's *Herstory Inventory*, see um.encore.at/works.



Deep Lez I Statement

Deep Lez is an experiment, a process, an aesthetic, and a blend of theory and practice. Deep Lez is right this minute, and it is rooted in herstories and theories that came before. It is taking the most relevant and capable ideas and using them as tools to create new ways of thinking, while still clinging to more radical politics that have already happened but definitely aren't over yet. Part of the deep of Deep Lez is about commitment, staying power, and significance. Part of the deep of Deep Lez is about philosophies and theories, as in, "Wow man, that's deep."

Deep Lez uses cafeteria-style mixings of craft, context, food, direct action, and human connections to maintain radical dyke politics and resistant strategies. Part quilting bee, part public relations campaign, and part Molotov cocktail, Deep Lez seeks to map out the connections between the second-wave feminisms that have sustained radical lesbian politics and the current third-wave (and now fourth-wave) feminisms that look to take apart the foundation on which those politics were built.

This ability of third-wave politics to find the fissures and fault lines in our herstories has been a gift, fresh eyes on an imperfect time. Lines were drawn and mistakes were made. We learned. (We grew? We broke down?) The third wave has muddied up what was supposed to be a tidy politic, and thank goddess. Unfortunately, this overhaul has meant for some the wholesale dismissal of a radical lesbian practice and identification. Deep Lez is situated not simply to hold on to history but to examine how we might cull what is useful from lesbian herstories to redefine contemporary urban lesbian (and queer and bi and trans) existence. In so doing, "lesbian" is resurrected as a potential site of radical identification, rather than one of depoliticized apathy.

Deep Lez began as a cultural project that informed my art practice. I make lesbian feminist monsters using abandoned domestic handicraft. This has meant the creation of giant 3-D Lady Sasquatches and room-sized vagina dentatas. The objects and environments that I create are about articulating some of the ideas

and imaginings from second-wave feminisms that were so foundational to me while still remaining committed to an inclusive third-wave (and beyond) theory and practice.

In a short time, Deep Lez grew beyond my own practice and started taking hold beyond my immediate world. The language of Deep Lez, for example, has been adopted by some of the folks involved with Camp Trans and those at the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival who lobby for trans solidarity. Here Deep Lez is mobilized to move radical lesbianism and identification with (or allegiance to) trans communities out of the realm of *either/or* and into the space of *and/both*.

Deep Lez has been used as a platform for art exhibitions, parties, performances, and other gatherings in which lesbian identification is to be explored as a relevant and strategic site of queer urban, rural, and suburban politics.

Deep Lez is meant to be a macraméd conceptual tangle for people to work through how they integrate art into their politics, how they live their lives, and how they get fired up about ideas. Deep Lez can offer alternative ways of imagining the world and who we are. It is meant to be passed hand-to-hand from crafter to filmmaker to activist to student to teacher to leader to farmer to curator and back again.

Deep Lez is not meant to become its own dogma but to encourage thinking about new strategic positions. Every Deep Lez moment is different because it is contingent on the contributions and participations of many, and because it is accumulating and discarding as it goes. We can band together through Deep Lez to imagine and realize our way out of this dysfunctional habitat—to create new ecologies, new policies, and new styles without war, poverty, violence, and waste.

Signed in solidarity for a new kind of sisterhood that isn't based on gender and privilege and a new kind of brotherhood that isn't based on rape and pillage.

—Allyson Mitchell





















