

## The queer work of photography

Laura Guy, Glasgow School of Art, 2024

On the wall of my office hangs a photograph by Jill Posener. It shows a group of people on a protest, supporting three banners that read 'London and Lesbian Gay Centre', 'Wages Due Lesbians', and 'SM Dykes'. Most of that last word is cut off but I can recognise it, because of familiarity with a community as much as with a research inquiry. The photograph was taken at a Lesbian March in London in Summer 1984. When I show it to a friend, the poet Nat Raha, she points out the car pulling up behind them and the empty road behind it. 'They're at the back', she says. We laugh, sharing a meaningful joke about the place of Marxist lesbians and sex positive dykes in queer and feminist history.

I am gathering up materials that I have collected over the last ten years. Through these materials – images and writing, recordings and anecdotes, magazines and websites, my own notes – emerge stories about photography and queerness. I am trying to grasp something about the kind of work that I and others are engaged in, work that preserves histories and legacies of queer photography. Perhaps this work began for me in 2014 when I was asked to write a feature on queer photography for *Source Magazine*. Perhaps it began for me in 2004 when I came across Del LaGrace Volcano's *The Drag King Book* (1999) in my college library and made a series of photographs of a woman I loved, dressed in a man's striped shirt and suspenders with her hair slicked back.

My work with archives of queer photography, which has focused on a network of photographers associated with the lesbian magazine *On Our Backs*, published in San Francisco from 1984 until 2006, has been a pleasurable undertaking but it has also involved heavy lifting, at times emotional and frustrating. This work – their photography, mine and others' research – is often devalued, representing too queer, too feminised, and too poor, a history of photographic practice despite the pocket of visibility that some queer artists enjoy at present.

What I want to do in this essay is make an argument that this work can be thought of as a kind of queer labour. The sense that queer photography lends itself to thinking about in terms of labour connects it to the history of photography in general, which has tended to have more

commercial and industrial applications than it has art world appearances. Pornography and erotica provided an income for many of the photographers whose work I am interested in. These also were site of struggle, contested practices through which new representations of sex, sexuality and gender were defined at a time when Right Wing politics and censorship coalesced with anti-pornography and anti-sex work perspectives within feminism. Autonomous representation in the lesbian community required - and also enabled - a degree of economic autonomy. Advertisements published in early copies of *On Our Backs* show an emerging scene of small lesbian-run businesses. Entrepreneurship kept the magazine on its feet. By the late 1980s, its sister company, Fatale Media, was the largest producer of lesbian pornography in the market.

From the work of models (who were almost always members of the community) to that of photographers and assistants behind the lens, the photographs that appear in *On Our Backs* tacitly convey forms of queer labour. In some photographs, it is more evident still. A 1984 feature for the magazine by photographer Honey Lee Cottrell depicts clothes wear designer and founder of women's fetish manufacturer Stormy Leather, Kathy Andrew. Andrew is working at a sewing machine, surrounded by models wearing her designs. As a photographer, Cottrell, who often produced promotional material for Andrew, was informed by her involvement in both lesbian feminism and radical sex education in the 1970s. The relationship between these two things is something that she struggled for and which her work as a photographer was central to. The image of Andrew at work explicitly stages different economies of exchange through which lesbian culture thrived in San Francisco in the 1980s, to which photography was an integral part.

Made three years later at another San Francisco venue, Leon Mostovoy's series 'Market Street Cinema' (1987-1988) documents workers of a adult entertainment venue established in 1972. A close friend of Mostovoy's, a dancer who worked at the cinema, enabled access to her friend who had been based in the city since the early 1980s. Like Cottrell, Mostovoy locates his work within the documentary tradition. Some of the photographs in the 'Market Street Cinema' series show dancers front of house, performing for an audience of mainly men watching the women, some captivated, others indifferent. The most compelling images within the series show the dancers backstage, getting made up or playfully posing with one another before the camera. Around their dressing room signs associated with their work can be read. A employee

information policy. A list of rules includes keeping bodies on stage at all times during dances and notifying of inspections before dancers are allowed to go out into the audience. Within this back stage setting, relationships both between these women and one another, and between these women and their employer, are legible. So too is the economic role that sex work played for some lesbians associated with *On Our Backs* at that time.

Cottrell and Mostovoy's photographs belong to a genealogy of photography through which histories of queer community are made. That this work has allowed queer culture to be in some way preserved, connects with the work of preservation necessitated by the archives of these photographers. In the UK, where I am based, a number of recent exhibitions have been integral to the preservation of queer photography. They include 'On Our Backs: An Archive', curated by Jade Sweeting and Janina Sabaliauskaitė at in 2017; Radclyffe Hall's 'Deep Down Body Thirst' (2018) and 'Hot Moment' (2020); the 'Rebel Dykes Art and Archive show' curated by Atlanta Kernick and Kat Hudson in 2021; and Ingrid Pollard's solo exhibition 'No Cover Up', at Glasgow Women's Library, curated by Freya Monk-McGowan also in 2021. All of these exhibitions have been artist and community-led endeavors that actively engaged with archives that are not always held in institutional repositories but are collected in domestic spaces, in the homes of photographers or their friends. Showing materials from these archives requires conversations and time. It can involve producing new prints from old negatives or, where negatives are lost, working from remaining traces of images in the form of slides, prints or even published works. Processes of preservation undertaken as part of these exhibitions have enabled archives to come into being, works to be republished or even collected. Some of the works exhibited have since made their ways into large collections associated with public memory such as TATE, the UK's national collection. When this happens, the queer work of preservation that has enabled this work to be accessible is often erased.

There are many reasons why the recent history of queer photography that I have revisited here is of interest now, post #MeToo, at a time when lesbian identity is often instrumentalised for transphobic allegiances with Right Wing political formations. Only by focusing on the subject of labour can we begin to address the unequal forms of exchange that underpin the queer photographic archive and its knotty promise of visibility. This question of labour, however, should not be detached from the other material properties of the photographs under

consideration. The rich and wonderful aesthetic propositions of these works intersect with the material conditions that surround their production. From within often constrained conditions, new potentialities emerge. Out of the exhibitions mentioned above that revisited the lesbian photographic practices of the 1980s and 1990s, came new work, made by both those who ‘were there’ and those who were not. The ‘Rebel Dykes Art and Archive Show’, featured contemporary work by artists alongside archival materials. Ingrid Pollard, in her exhibition ‘No Cover Up’, revisited her own work produced in the 1980s, enlarging images to form a monumental frieze on the high walls of Glasgow Women’s Library’s central reading space. Pollard also made new portraits that, shown with recorded oral histories, configured the archive as something personal and collective, necessarily held within community by its protagonists.

There are also signs that the lesbian archive is a point of departure for new histories to be made. Janina Sabaliauskaitė, one of the two artists who curated ‘On Our Backs: An Archive’, is a Lithuanian photographer working between her country of birth and her home in the North East of England. For her, histories of queer photography are not straightforwardly signals from another time and another place, but are alive with possibilities for contemporary political and social conditions that constrain queer lives. Between both countries, and others that she visits, her documentation of dyke communities is highly informed by the visual language of her predecessors, such as Cottrell or Phyllis Christopher whose work featured in ‘On Our Backs: An Archive’. Sabaliauskaitė’s work also shares with that archive an interest in the bodies and spaces through which queer relationality is forged. ‘Dovilė in the Early Morning Mist’ (2021) features a queer body in repose, caught alone during the Sapfo Queer Feminist Festival in Lithuania. Signs of dyke sexuality and gender are working here but, held within Sabaliauskaitė’s tender gaze, there is also a sense of quietude, a moment of ease accorded by photographer and camera.

Phyllis Christopher is a photographer from whom I have learnt a lot about the work of queer archives while we were collaborating on her book *Dark Room: San Francisco Sex and Politics, 1988-2003* (Book Works, 2022). Working closely with Phyllis has impressed upon me the emotional intimacies and political possibilities that can register through this kind of archival work. It has also alerted me to the work that it takes for documents and performances of lesbian life to come into being, conjured through the practical labour of printing in home and community dark rooms. Christopher is a skilled printer and it is in the dark room, as well as the camera, that

her work is made. As we worked together on her book, I thought about the handmade as a way of thinking about the labour of making within queer cultures. Christopher's latest body of work allows sitters to take representations of their bodies into their own hands. 'The Body in Peril' (ongoing) observes bodies going through illness, aging and transition. These bodies, and the processes they are going through, proceed the photographic process but they also made and remade through the event of the photograph and the alchemy of the dark room.

In 2021, when I visit the 'Rebel Dykes Art and Archive Show', I see alongside works by many other artists, Rene Matic's 'Destination / Departure' (2020). 'Destination / Departure' is a large scale photograph that shows the bare back of the artist. Wearing combats, they are sitting to take a top off or put it on. On their back is a tattoo that features the far-right slogan 'Born British Die British'. The photograph was taken by Derek Ridgers, a British photographer known among other things for his work documenting skin head subcultures in the 1970s and 1980s. In 'Destination / Departure', Matic subverts a history of racist signifiers that Ridgers captured in that series. As Flora Dunster and Theo Gordon write of Matic's photograph in their recent book *Photography—A Queer History* (2024), the photograph inserts a 'queer, Black subject into this subcultural history... subverting its racist associations. Matic does not just describe themselves as British, but becomes the claim inscribed on their body'. At the 'Rebel Dykes Art and Archive Show', Matic's photograph also works into a history of queer photography, extending its promise of queer world making from and for the place of our political present.

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