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Arts & Culture

Exploring the ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives

By Robby Herbst

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LGBTQ+ Pride

History

The [ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives](#) is sixty-year-old organization. It's both the longest running LGBTQ organization in the country and worldwide the largest repository for LGBTQ materials. It's a wildly diverse collection: leather jackets from gay bike clubs, a large plush-fabric wall-hanging depicting a reclining nude male that formerly decorated the wall of a (now shuttered) L.A. bar, somebody's collection of petrified animal penises, acres of books, ephemera, and personal objects chronicling queer existence in America.

In addition to the [archive itself](#) (housed now in a former USC frat house), the ONE Archive operates [a gallery space in West Hollywood](#) hosting regular exhibitions of contemporary and overlooked queer artists. On staff at the library is curator David Evans Frantz who organizes [exhibitions and projects](#) at the spaces and beyond. ONE has worked and been accessed by such contemporary artists as [Susan Simpson](#), [Eve Fowler](#), [Catherine Lord](#), [Heather Cassils](#), [Zackary Drucker](#), [Chris Vargas](#), [Wu Tsang](#), [Onya Hogan Finlay](#) & Kim Kelly, and [Leah Devun](#).

I spoke with David about ONE and the value of a queer archive for contemporary artists and community.

Can you tell me about some of your favorite items in the archive's collection?

This is obviously a difficult question, the greatest part of working at ONE is the ability to "re-discover" things. Many pre-Stonewall objects are re-discovered here regularly. I do though have

fondness for these items in the collection:



Bachelor, Vol. 1, No. 1 (April 1937). | Courtesy ONE Archives at the USC Libraries.

Bachelor magazine, published out of Philadelphia 1937. It had a very queer wink-and-nod quality to its celebration of "bachelorhood" and living a "cosmopolitan" life, immersed in art and culture. While it only lasted less than a year (I've only been able to find information on six issues), Bachelor was well received. Neel Bate, a gay erotic artist wrote about finding the (then) new slick magazine on a newsstand in Los Angeles: "At my favorite Hollywood Boulevard drugstore, I picked up a copy and thumbed my way into it, barely believing my eyes. Here were artists, writers, photographers, critics, actors, musicians and composers - all of whom we'd heard through the grapevine were gay - all contributors to it, some of them even on the staff." (Neel Bate, "Bachelor Magazine," published in *In Touch for Men*). The magazine included profiles and photographs on "prominent bachelors" such as photographers Cecil Beaton and George Platt Lynes. Its "snob appeal" covering high society, theatre, music, the sports of polo and lacrosse -- this was one of the ways in which it's coded queer language wasn't picked up by those outside "the know."

Edith Eyde's **Vice Versa: America's Gayest Magazine**, is believed to be the world's first lesbian publication. It was produced between June 1947 to February 1948. It's anachronistic but in many ways it could also be thought of as the world's first queer zine. Eyde produced Vice Versa secretly at her job as a secretary at Hollywood's RKO Studios. Using carbon paper Eyde hand-typed two copies, producing twelve total copies of the magazine per issue (two typed, ten carbon). She then distributed these hand-to-hand amongst friends. This was incredibly brave and pretty badass! (if caught Eyde could have lost her job, been arrested, and had her life really destroyed). The magazine included small contributions of poetry as well as theater, book and film reviews, and a few outside submissions from friends. Eyde later wrote for The Ladder, a lesbian homophile magazine published by the Daughters of Bilitis in San Francisco, under the penname Lisa Ben, an anagram for "lesbian."



Flyer promoting the GLF takeover of Alpine County, 1970. Gay Liberation Front (GLF), Los Angeles Records. | Courtesy ONE Archives at the USC Libraries

In 1970, the **Los Angeles Gay Liberation Front** took up the cause of establishing a gay separatist community in Alpine County, California (a sparsely populated county in northern

California). The idea was that if a relatively small number of gay people moved there, they could recall the local government and replace it with an all-gay slate. Originally proposed by activist Don Jackson at the gay liberation conference in Berkeley in 1969, L.A.G.L.F. spearheaded the idea issuing press releases on the project. L.A.G.L.F. utilized this as a rallying tool for the group. Major support to sustain this endeavor was slow to materialize from the gay community; the plan was later dropped. The L.A.G.L.F. collection at ONE contains some really wonderful documents pertaining to the endeavor including: G.L.F. survey photos of the county, ride sign-up-lists for G.L.F. members to carpool up north, letters of support and interest in joining, and various area development ordinance guides. Beyond just the radical imagination of the idea, the records speak to how it inspired individuals outside of L.A. and CA. And, if only for a brief moment, the project spoke to a desire to build a queer world by using the system of the dominant society against itself -- that's just incredibly interesting. And the history of strains of separatism within queer history is also something so complicated and very fascinating.



Mirage, Vol. 1, No. 1 (March-April 1974). A publication of the Transsexual Action Organization (TAO). | Courtesy ONE Archives at the USC Libraries.

My most recent obsession has been trans-activist Angela Douglas who founded the

Transsexual Action Organization (TAO) in L.A. in 1970. Through TAO she published the newsletter Moonshadow and the magazine **Mirage** (two amazing titles!). The publications reported on legal and social issues related to trans liberation during the 1970s and information on the occult and UFO'S (two personal passions of Douglas!). I love that imagining alternative powers and worlds were intrinsic to Douglas' own radical politics. Mirage really speak to a desire to connect with and create a community among trans individuals that was apart from gay liberation, which was not addressing, or was even hostile too the difficulties gender nonconforming individuals. Douglas was a complicated figure and her legacy has remained largely ignored, but I think there is a lot of interest today in recovering and exploring these omitted parts of LGBTQ history. Especially by of trans and gender nonconforming individuals.

How do you imagine that the artists who use, and exhibit, with ONE can inspire new ways of thinking?

Theorist Ann Cvetkovich points to the creative practices, and the avowed personal investments of artists, as their "credentials" for "queer archive activism", seeking to make objects "come out" into the world. Artists bring to queer archives a desire to activate its collections; using the archive as a site of fantasy, intervention, interrogation, or celebration. For so much of ONE's existence its tireless focus had been about holding onto the (often) ephemeral traces of queer life. Now it seems artists are increasingly focused on what all this stuff can mean to us now. For example Zackary Drucker's "[B.Y.O.B. \(Bring Your Own Body\)](#)" focused on the collection at ONE of Lynn Edward Harris, an intersexed individual. Artists are interested in what queer archival practices can be, not necessarily the "stuff" of it all (like Ulrike Müller's "[Hertsory Inventory](#)" project at the Herstory Archives in Brooklyn, NY). They are interested in investigating or performing what the archive lacks -- what histories have been omitted, forgotten, or buried and why (like Heather Cassill's "Becoming An Image").

Becoming An Image



Libraries house significant objects of a community. Contradictorily they maintain a cultural memory and help to create a future for that community. How have you seen this dynamic at the ONE Archives?

With the monumental cultural changes in the United States around gay and lesbian issues, this is a moment when queer issues, and queer histories for that matter, have unprecedented interest and exposure. The assimilation of mainstream gay and lesbian issues into the general

cultural sphere of the US feels pretty inevitable now. I think the most significant issue at hand for the queer community is related to thinking outside of the narrow purview of mainstream gay and lesbian politics. Figuring out how to achieve wider transformative social change. I think the archive has a role to play in thinking through these issues, and complicating our understanding of where we've been and where we're going.

Can you tell me how you do this?

I think of the recent project we did with [RECAPS Magazine](#) as an intervention in the LA Pride Festival called "[reclaim:pride](#)." It demonstrates the ways an archive can act in relationship to contemporary issues. ONE was invited by Christopher Street West to produce an exhibition in a hastily conceived "Arts and Heritage" space at the ticketed festival. While the Pride Parade was founded in 1970 as a transgressive claiming of public space, commercial interests dominate today's event. There ONE and RECAPS Magazine (founded by artist Martabel Wasserman) challenged the corporate and consumer model that Pride has become, while also considering new ways of deploying the archive:

Of the collaboration we said:

"To 'reclaim pride' we dug deep into the archives, crowd sourced, and conversed, in hopes of bridging the event's radical origins with possibilities for queering the present state of LGBTQ politics. We solicited submissions for button designs, posters, artwork, ephemera, and ideas for guerilla performances to present in our booth and now as virtual archive"

The objects we presented related to contemporary queer issues that don't make it into dominant media or corporate spaces such as the LA pride festival: issues such as pink washing, queer critiques of marriage and the prison industrial complex. Also we presented historical materials pointing to histories complicating the supposed linear progress of the gay and lesbian community. It was a small gesture, but the display raised key questions perhaps inspiring some people to think about queer stakes in public space and social justice.



Zach Blas' "Fag Face Booth" part of the artist's "Facial Weaponization Suite," at reclaim:pride, Christopher Street West Pride Festival, June 8 & 9, 2013

How did the ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives come to be?

Throughout ONE's 60+ year history, the organization has been many things. ONE was founded in 1952 in Los Angeles to publish ONE Magazine, the first widely distributed publication for homosexuals in the United States. ONE presented the first case before the Supreme Court involving homosexuality over the organization's right to distribute its pro-homo magazine through the mail (it won!). It later became an educational institute, trailblazing what we were then calling "homophile studies."

Archive wasn't something ONE ever set out to do, though it was always an ongoing, if unplanned, activity of the organization. In its early days Jim Kepner founded a small library at One Magazine's offices in Downtown LA; it was open for visitors to use. Accessing and disseminating hard-to-come-by information were early values of the organization -- obviously this has been carried into the present. Kepner had amassed his own personal collection of materials on homosexuality, anything he could find: books, publications, newspapers, other printed materials, and his own personal paper and records of organizing. Kepner was a passionate and terrific hoarder. His collection included other individuals' possessions, things their families would have destroyed. This is why ONE has artworks, papers, journals and a very detailed log of sexual encounters, from the 1950s, of artist Sidney Bronstein. Before his death Bronstein gave these possessions to Kepner for safekeeping. Kepner's efforts to obsessively document, preserve, and make accessible can't be overstated. Kepner's own archive eventually move into One's storefront space in Hollywood in the 1980s.

In 1994 ONE and Kepner's archive (then called the International Gay & Lesbian Archives) were facing deep financial troubles. The two organization merged, becoming solely a repository for LGBTQ materials. In 2000 the new organization, called the ONE Institute, moved into its current location near the University of Southern California. In 2010 ONE officially became a part of the USC Libraries system. Over the last decade ONE has made monumental strides to become the professional, organized, fully-functioning archive it is today. This can be attributed to the work of its dedicated archivists, board members who helped stabilize the organization and seek out grant funding, and the strong directorship of Joseph Hawkins.

I think the most important thing about a community archive like ONE that cannot be over played in any way is that it is the product of numerous individuals, some who have gone unacknowledged or forgotten. Its power as a collection is in its spirit as an open, inclusive repository of the queer community and its insatiable, unwavering drive to preserve materials that mainstream institutions have historically deemed uncollectable or lacking merit. That's how it has become "the largest and the oldest."

What's the future of the archive? As you point out, because of its underground status, queer culture had been remarkably diverse and your archive truly reflects this. As you've suggested and some have argued, we may be seeing the eclipsing of a wildly heterogeneous queer culture. Take for example the 2012 closing of the 40-year-old Silver Lake gay piano-bar, the Other Side. Some say that in this age of acceptance, the need for these places of refuge are anachronistic. Perhaps with this "normalness" in mind, while welcoming equal-rights, some queers position themselves against this cultural normativity, "the straightness," legal marriage signifies. If historically, ONE's public found it a vital place when the culture placed them "in the closet," how do you think the social space it has offered will continue to thrive now that some perceive "gay" as being in a twilight of counter-identity?

Indeed, dedicated queer social spaces are increasingly few and far between -- not just bars but

also gay and feminist bookstores and even before that bathhouses and other queer spaces of sexuality. They are all less accessible today. It does seem that as these sites are closed off, there is increased interest in the archives. It seems as though the archives, at least, are very much thriving in the face of assimilation. In many ways this is related to generational shifts and a "discovery" of the archives by a queer community of artists, writers, activists, and historians that are invested in unpacking the complicated social changes that have occurred over the period of ONE's existence.

I think many queers recognize that the ever-increasing normalization of queer culture is riddled with problems, and that looking to how queer people, especially those whose lives have not fit neatly into narratives of LGBTQ progress, are important guideposts for thinking about the complexities of queer identity.



The library stacks at ONE Archives. | Courtesy of ONE Archives at the USC Libraries.,
