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Too good to be entirely true (A coda on the pleasure of archives and avant-garde publishing)

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ABSTRACT

How do we engage creatively with archives, in addition to or alongside reading for ‘historical evidence’ or beyond the usual discovery-recovery paradigm, giving ourselves fictional or speculative permissions? This coda thinks about embodied research, performance as publishing, feminist and queer avant-garde legacies, taking up the work of small-press editors and contributors, and bringing that work into mediated circulation again, in a form of homage and even performative séance. How can artworks archive intimacy and desire? Para-fictional, para-academic, and speculative forms of research and creative practice can act as playful and rigorous enquiries into how we read or ‘use’ the past. Reading becomes a form of listening and engaging with other voices on the page. It is about making (new) work *happen* rather than historicise it.

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Over the summer, I received a surprise package in the post: an original copy of the first issue of *Top Stories* (1978–1991), a Buffalo – and later New York City-based magazine edited by Anne Turyn, which focused on experimental writing by women, especially artists who explored language as their artistic medium.¹ The magazine was published *after* the so-called mimeograph revolution and exhibited a similarly exploratory experimental spirit that helped shape US publishing culture in the second half of the twentieth century, with Turyn becoming part of an increasingly long lineage of indomitable

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women editors. Each issue was dedicated to the work of one artist. The first profiled Donna Wyszomierski, later issues published Laurie Anderson, Kathy Acker, Cookie Mueller, Jenny Holzer, Lynne Tillman, Mary Keller, Constance DeJong, among others.

My postal surprise reached me thanks to the generosity and shared magazine-fascination of the poetry cataloguer Edric Mesmer, whom I'd met in 2013 on a research trip to the Special Collections at SUNY Buffalo where Edric works. Knowing about my research interests and creative practice, Edric recently found this *Top Stories* issue in Buffalo's oldest indie bookstore during a storage clear-out. For me, this surprise epistolary gift is one of the enduring joys of archival work and small-press publishing and the conversations they enable. Sometimes what we suspect or indeed do find in archives, is, 'Too Good to Be Entirely True' – to quote Donna Wyszomierski's title for the first issue. In other words, in our search and possible finding, our projection and confusion, we are shaping the object's meaning.

In September 2022, I visited the Goldsmiths Women's Art Library (WAL), expertly curated by Althea Greenan. I had been meaning to visit for a long time and now had two concrete reasons, one pedagogical, one creative. As someone who has spent a lot of time reading, not-reading, (be-)holding, touching, or smelling materials inside archives, I have long been curious about what else they might yield beyond 'historical evidence'. I always thought one (or I) would go into the Archive to find things previously unpublished, deliberately hidden, outrageously forgotten – the 'underbelly' of an artist's practice (to use my friend lee rae walsh's turn of phrase) – to fill the gaps in the canon, settle the score, get it right. I still believe in that discovery-recovery paradigm as one possible mode of working but am also excited about the fictional or speculative permissions the material might give us, some of which might, quite frankly, be resonantly *absent* and should stay that way.

Althea pulls out boxes and folders; points at labels (I ask: *who came up with the design for archive boxes?*); she laughs. I am suddenly aware how archiving has created its own set of particular materials and ways of looking and handling). About ten minutes in, we are ecstatic with the sheer possibilities of what we might do with the MFA (Master of Arts) students I would be taking there this term. We admire and smile at photographs, posters, ephemera, magazines and chapbooks, but also strange objects (food!), and some mystery slides. *We have to include the mystery slides*, I insist.

The library began in 1976 as the Women Artists Slide Library, a collection put together by women artists collecting other women artists' work as documented on slides. What can a slide contain? Could I make slides, I wonder, seduced by their seeming anachronism. How would I perform this type of archive, this record (not just of a particular artist's work, but the act of

care and attention of women creating this space for each other). As is often the case, with any new endeavour, when a community finds itself or seeks a public, the group began publishing a serial, *The Women's Artists Slide Library Newsletter*, later becoming *The Women Artists Slide Library Journal*, then *The Women's Art Magazine*, and eventually *MAKE: the magazine of women's art*. *MAKE*, like the physical slide library, contributed to the important political and aesthetic debates of the avant-garde of their time, leaving behind a feminist (and queer) legacy, and serves to highlight once again the interlinked history of feminist art and politics. That diverse and rich history is palpable as I leaf through the various issues. Issue 9 (Dec 85), for example, describes the Irish women artists project by Anne Talentire and the Black Women Artists Index including Sokari Douglas Camp. Also featured briefly are Carolyn Mather's paintings of the feminist peace camp at Greenham Common. Another issue links back to modernism and dada: issue 19 (Oct/Nov 87) lists an exhibition of historical women artists between 1922–1940, profiles Winifred Nicholson and Rita Keegan, and includes contributions by or about Nancy Spero, Sokari Douglas Camp, Hannah Höch, Jennifer Durrant and 200 years of women's activism in Berlin. These capacious issues embody the do-it-yourself and anything-goes radical spirit we associate with the mimeograph revolution and avant-garde magazines more broadly. Althea tells me that she has several back issues in storage in addition to the archived copies, and *would I like a few?* Being gifted these magazines feels like I can reach back through time and hold hands with or high-five these artists. Almost.

Talking about the tactility of the slide and slide projectors, Althea reminisces that she misses the way people would gather around old slide projectors in educational show-and-tell settings. I share with her that my long-term collaborator Naomi Woo and I have a performance piece that responds to the mail art and lesser-known performance works of the artist Theresa Hak Kyung Cha who often used slide projectors in her performances. This was our first foray into our ongoing project for which we re-perform works which in their original form were not meant for performance or for which little or no documentation exists. We found two short pieces by Cha published in a small-press anthology, *The Kenning Anthology of Poets Theater: 1945–1985* (Kenning Editions, 2010), edited by David Brazil and the late Kevin Killian. Killian and Brazil had found these previously unpublished pieces in Cha's archive in Berkeley, considered them poetic and then labelled them 'poets theatre' (which accidentally reminds me of how David Antin and Jerome Rothenberg used their mimeo-revolution-adjacent magazine *some/thing* to claim works that had 'the sound of a poetry ... whether they were intended as poems or not').² Naomi's and my performative response to this archival discovery is a way of doing embodied research, taking up the work of small-press editors and contributors, and bringing

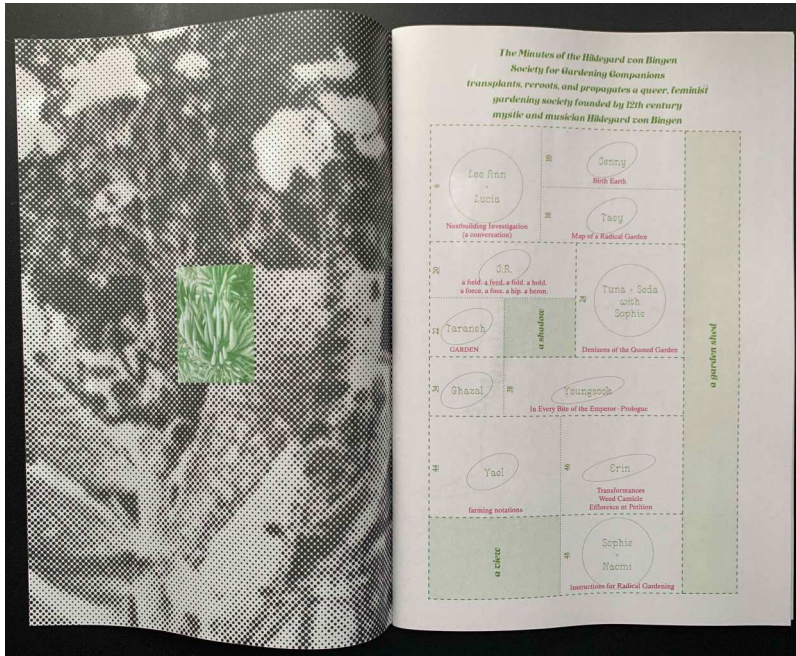


Figure 1. The Minutes of the Hildegard von Bingen Society for Gardening Companions (2022), ed. by Sophie Seita and designed by Yael Ort-Dinoor, first edition of 50, individually numbered.

that work into mediated circulation again, as homage and even performative séance (Figure 1).

About two years ago, Naomi and I expanded our project. In our research and purely through chance, we stumbled across an unfinished archive, begging us to un-archive it. We believe we found a whisper network of queer and feminist artists and gardeners who gathered on and off over the last centuries and across countries all under the tutelage of the German mystic and musician Hildegard von Bingen whose original Society for Gardening Companions was founded in the twelfth century.³ Along with international collaborators, we have since gathered our own community and alternative archive through performances, interventions, a digital garden shed, and also simply through story-telling in meetings. The project requires less academic rigour and instead a good dose of care, patience, gossip, and speculative surrender. Recently, we published a zine, a kind of conceptual allotment newsletter. It included artists from different countries (the UK, US, Iran, Canada, Mexico, Turkey, Korea, Germany, the Netherlands). One of the questions that interested us is an issue that many historical magazine and small-press editors have always faced: how do we care for one another through publishing? How can the tending of a garden (both real

History. ‘Art is an active reworking. ... the work performed by later images obliterates the older images as they were before the intervention’.⁵

Or as Carolyn Steedman notes:

“[N]othing starts in the Archive, nothing, ever at all, though things certainly end up there. You find nothing in the Archive but stories caught half way through: the middle of things; discontinuities,” and “*nothing happens to this stuff, in the Archive*. It is indexed, and catalogued, and some of it is lost. But as stuff, it just sits there until it is read, and used, and narrativized”.⁶

Thinking about the legacy of little magazines, the legacy of any minor avant-garde intervention, like the mimeograph ‘revolution’, I remind myself that the word ‘legacy’ does not only mean to hand something *down* (however tangible or intangible); but it is also related to the Latin *legare* and *legare*, which etymologically leads us to ‘a body of people sent on a mission’. What mission does small-press publishing bequeath us? Perhaps, as Bernadette Mayer put it in $L = A = N = G = U = A = G = E$ in 1978: ‘Work your ass off to change the language [or art or archive or?] & dont [*sic*] ever get famous’.⁷

Notes

1. Each issue measured 5 × 8”, was printed in black and white, with a stapled spine. Content varied between 16 and 80 pages. More information is available here: <https://www.printedmatter.org/catalog/51405/> [Date accessed: 3 February 2023].
2. Jerome Rothenberg, [untitled note preceding] ‘Aztec Definitions: Found Poems from the Florentine Codex’, *Some/thing*, 1.1 (Spring 1965), pp. 1–2 [2].
3. For more information on the society, its origins and reincarnations, and how to join the current chapter, see <https://hildegardsgardeningcompanions.cargo.site/> [Date accessed: 3 February 2023].
4. Aurora Levins Morales, *Medicine Stories: History, Culture, and the Politics of Integrity* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 1998), p. 24.
5. Mike Bal, *Quoting Caravaggio: Contemporary Art, Preposterous History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), p. 1.
6. Carolyn Steedman, *Dust: The Archive and Cultural History* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), p. 45; p. 68.
7. Bernadette Mayer, ‘Experiments’, $L = A = N = G = U = A = G = E$, 3 (June 1978), [1–4 (p. 3)].

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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