The Archivettes

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by

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ABSTRACT

*The Archivettes* is a feature-length documentary film about the Lesbian Herstory Archives and the personal lives of the women involved in it. The film provides a comprehensive look at the history of the group, the materials it protects and the challenges arising as the founders face their final years.

The Lesbian Herstory Archives began in 1974, when a group of women involved in the Gay Academic Union realized that lesbian history was disappearing as quickly as it was being made (Edel). It is now home to the world's largest collection of materials by and about lesbians and their communities.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Lesbians have long felt invisible within the larger LGBTQ community. As Liz Hendrickson, a former executive director of the National Center for Lesbian Rights, told a Los Angeles Times reporter in 1993: “When you think of the symbol for gay rights, you think of a white man. I think at its broadest, the lesbian agenda is to change that symbol” (Boxall).

That feeling of invisibility persists and is borne out in data about media representation. According to GLAAD’s annual “Where We Are on TV” study, lesbians in 2016 accounted for 17 percent of regular and recurring LGBTQ characters on broadcast television, a drop of 16 percentage points from the previous year (GLAAD).

Visibility is not the only challenge lesbians have faced. In 1967, seven years before the Lesbian Herstory Archives was officially founded, a CBS poll reported that “two out of three Americans look[ed] on homosexuality with disgust, discomfort, or fear” (Morgan, Peters, Wal-
lace). As is reflected in films about the gay rights movement, gay men and lesbians faced broad and intense negativity well into the 20th century. *The Homosexuals*, the first network news program about gay people, portrayed the lives of homosexuals as being filled with pain, horror and failure. Through its visual representation of its (exclusively male) subjects, *The Homosexuals* affirms negative attitudes: The filmmakers, for example, went to great lengths to keep subjects anonymous — at one point awkwardly placing a houseplant in front of an interviewee — rendering men as faceless, nameless nonpersons. But the portrait of the gay community painted by *The Homosexuals* was not uncommon at that time. “Historically, the image of the homosexual … has consistently suffered from stereotypical distortion, derision, and condescension” (Atwell 50).

By the early 1970s, the Stonewall uprising had put gay rights on the map. That event, in which a group of people fought back against a police raid of a gay bar, was a catalyst in an emerging movement that led in 1973 to the removal of homosexuality from the American Psychiatric Association’s official list of mental disorders (Davis, Heilbroner). At the same time, the women’s liberation movement was in full swing. Women were beginning to question their traditional roles as mothers and housewives in a substantial and public way. It was at the intersection of these two movements that the Lesbian Herstory Archives was founded in New York in 1974. Through the years, the archives has helped gay women gain visibility and fight discrimination.

The first time I entered the Lesbian Herstory Archives, I felt like I was coming home. I had no knowledge of lesbian history before going there and have found myself and my own history in these archives. It was this feeling that inspired me to make three short films about the archives.
I produced *A Lifetime of Making Change*, a three-minute film about Maxine Wolfe, one of the coordinators of the archives, for a scholarship application before enrolling in the IMA program (e.g. see fig. 1). I worked on *Love Letter Rescue Squad*, a six-minute profile film about Deborah Edel, a co-founder of the Lesbian Herstory Archives, during Professor Michael Gitlin’s sound fields course. I also partnered with the Lesbian Herstory Archives on my collaborative residency to create a short film that visitors can watch before touring the archives. With each short film I made about this group of women — who call themselves “archivettes,” a tongue-in-cheek diminutive form of “archivists” — I gained a fuller understanding of the depth and breadth of their story. This potential, coupled with my personal goal to create a feature-length film, led to *The Archivettes*.

Fig. 1: Maxine Wolfe poses in front of the Lesbian Herstory Archives in *A Lifetime of Making Change*. Megan Rossman, 2015.

As President Trump and his administration work to dismantle LGBTQ health initiatives and other protections, there is a sense of urgency to understand past struggles of the movement (Diamond). Joan Nestle, a co-founder of the Lesbian Herstory Archives, wrote in 1990, “Always
our goal is to connect the present struggles of lesbian women of all backgrounds to the past, to show the legacy of resistance and to give the keys needed to unlock the sometimes coded language of liberation battles of another time” (Nestle 91). *The Archivettes* explores the history of the archive, and through that, the personal and political struggles of the women involved in it.

The coordinators of the archives made strategic decisions to ensure the safety of their organization. Even though the archives exists for educational purposes, “we have had to call ourselves a not-for-profit information resource center because the New York State Board of Regents maintains control over educational institutions and could therefore confiscate the collection for ‘just cause’” (Nestle 92). In addition to their daily work, the group that runs the archives plans for the worst, such as if they were to lose their not-for-profit status.

Works about the Lesbian Herstory Archives have taken many forms over the years, including theater, written articles and oral histories. I chose to make a film because the topic is inherently visual. The archival materials come to life in front of the camera, as interns digitize audio tapes, volunteers review photo albums and visitors see VHS recordings of the archivettes themselves.

**RESEARCH ANALYSIS**

There are three major areas of research that I explored in making *The Archivettes*: the woman’s liberation movement, the gay rights movement and the history of the Lesbian Herstory Archives. I read articles, essays and newsletters about the archives, including academic journal entries from coordinators Joan Nestle, Judith Schwarz and Rachel Corbman.
I read works from well-known lesbians who have conducted research in or donated materials to the archives, including Bettina Aptheker and Audre Lorde.

I spent many hours at the Lesbian Herstory Archives reviewing material in the photograph, T-shirt, spoken word and videotape collections. I reviewed special collections from all coordinators who donated materials. I watched more than 20 hours of raw footage from home videos filmed at different events at the archives. I read personal diaries of women such as Marge McDonald, who came out as a lesbian in the 1950s in Ohio (e.g. see fig. 2).

I visited the National Archives in Washington, D.C., to explore footage of the civil rights movement, in which some early archivettes were involved. I spent time at the New York Public Library reviewing the AIDS Activist Videotape Collection.

I watched films that document the history of the women’s liberation and gay rights movements. Works such as *How to Survive a Plague* and *She’s Beautiful When She’s Angry* take similar approaches, using archival footage as well as sit-down interviews to tell the story of a group. I found no films exclusively focused on lesbians’ role in the gay rights movement. Pieces
such as *Before Stonewall* and *Word Is Out* included lesbian voices but were more heavily focused on male characters. I watched several films that profile prominent lesbians, including *The Edge of Each Other's Battles: The Vision of Audre Lorde* and *Hand on the Pulse*.

In addition, I explored the structure of films that stylistically aligned with my vision, such as *Obit*, which focuses on the obituary desk of the New York Times. This film relies on an older generation of obituary writers to share a story about the history of the department.

My research confirmed that lesbians are not thoroughly represented in the narrative of the gay rights movement, and the scarcity of comprehensive works about lesbian history compounded my desire to make *The Archivettes*. At the same time, I recognize that “the very idea that a single film could ‘speak for’ an entire community of interests reinforces the perceived secondariness of that community” (Julien and Mercer 4). My ambition for *The Archivettes* is that it will function as one space among many in which these women can tell their stories about the struggle for equality and be one of many ways in which their work is acknowledged.

**THESIS PRODUCTION PROCESS**

This film unfolds through the women whose stories live in the Brooklyn brownstone that houses the collection. It follows a chronological structure that builds on the history of the Lesbian Herstory Archives and lesbian and gay culture.

Recognizing that “[those] who preserve the remnants of lesbian and gay history face tremendous dilemmas over issues of confidentiality and individual privacy when people’s lives may depend upon the security of their deepest held secrets” (Schwarz 186), I needed to take a thoughtful approach to gaining permissions. Today, donors are required to complete paperwork
to specify permissions and copyright before items can be accepted into the archive. However, for the first 10 to 15 years of the archive, no such paperwork existed. There is very limited information on early donations. Many items do not have a date and are not credited (e.g. see fig. 3). We have made significant progress in the fight for gay rights, but that does not mean that every lesbian is comfortable being publicly identified as such. I did not want to be responsible for outing anyone in the film. “Documentarists…are working with people who…know less than they do about the ramifications of the filmmaking process. It seems appropriate that an additional ‘duty of care’ be required of them” (Winston 52). I agree with Winston, and considered it my duty to track down the women who made these donations.

![Fig. 3: Stahimili Mapp and Shawn(ta) Smith-Cruz review undated material at the Lesbian Herstory Archives. Megan Rossman, 2017.](image)

In Andrew Lund’s rights and revisions course, I developed a suite of legal releases including a licensing agreement, personal release, materials release and crew deal memo to help guide my decision-making process and ensure that the project itself is protected.

The founders began by putting their own collections into the archive. If one woman contributed her personal journal, the thought was that she would encourage another to do so. By
connecting first with the women who were involved at the start of the organization, I was able to gain access to the materials they themselves had donated.

Although I approached my characters’ privacy with thoughtfulness, I agree that “with the best intentions in the world, filmmakers can only guess how the scenes they use will affect the lives of the people they have photographed” (Pryluck 23). I focused not only on gaining permission to show these items, but also on how using them within the narrative of my film could affect the subjects. I chose to include materials from many woman who have died, knowing that their legacy will live on if their stories are shared and that their lives would not be directly affected by inclusion in the film.

Stylistically, there are three main elements of the film: traditional sit-down interviews, details of the materials and women exploring them, and cinéma vérité footage of happenings at the archive and the organization’s participation at events such as the Dyke March (e.g. see fig. 4).

I spent a good deal of time during pre-production visualizing how these interviews would be set up. I wanted to show off the full space of the archive by conducting each interview in a
different room. I photographed each area and sketched out how an interviewee would be placed in the frame. I asked subjects which parts of the archive they felt most connected to. For example, Polly Thistlethwaite felt especially comfortable in the basement: With the help of others, she spent many hours finishing what was once an unfinished space during a renovation in the early 1990s (e.g. see fig. 5).

Fig. 5: Polly Thistlethwaite during her interview in the basement of the archives. Megan Rossman, 2017.

Because the archives is so packed with materials, filming in every room was a tall order. In most rooms, conducting interviews involved moving many boxes and rearranging materials. I used a lighting kit to illuminate my subjects and to highlight different parts of the background. For most interviews, I used three lights: a soft-box to light the subject, a hair light, and a background light. I also used ambient light in the room, when possible, to add warmth and dimensionality to the background. In some shots, I worked to capture the depth of the room. In others, I chose a flatter background. Because I interviewed over a dozen women, I wanted to ensure that the look and feel of each shot varied. Unlike the framing in *The Homosexuals*, I wanted my subjects to be easily identifiable and to portray them as strong, happy and successful.
Production occurred in two phases. The first phase focused on events at or near the group’s space in Brooklyn, such as readings by Naomi Replansky, a 99-year-old poet, and her partner, Eva Kollisch, pride marches, and organizational meetings. When the archives is open, there is always a coordinator present to assist researchers. I followed coordinators Deborah Edel, Maxine Wolfe and Colette Montoya-Sloan during staffing days to capture impromptu tours and intern mentoring.

Co-founder Deborah Edel is the backbone of the film. At 73, she is a breast cancer survivor and has been present for every major event in the archives’ history. The other co-founder, Joan Nestle, stopped her physical involvement with the archives in the early 2000s, when she moved to Australia to be near her partner after losing her rent-controlled apartment on New York’s Upper West Side.

The second phase of production took place in Australia. Before Phase 2 began, I edited a rough cut of the film to ensure I had a clear vision of the scenes and questions I needed to ask Joan Nestle. I coordinated my travel to be there at the same time that Deborah Edel and her partner were visiting. Structuring production around Deborah’s visit allowed me to capture a dual interview with Joan and Deborah (e.g. see fig. 6).

I filmed all scenes with a Canon C-100 and recorded audio with a combination of lavalier and shotgun microphones. To avoid being intrusive, I often used a wireless lavalier system. In those cases, I found that the archivettes would sometimes forget that they were wearing a microphone. When working with a sound recordist, we used a Sound Devices 302 Field Mixer. I also used a light kit, both in lighting interviews, as mentioned above, and in staged scenes where coordinators review materials.
Both phases of production involved sit-down interviews with the women who have been most influential in the history of the organization, like Joan and Deborah, and the younger generation who will soon be in charge of keeping the archive running.

During the interview process, it became clear that each archivette had her own memory of the events that took place. It was up to me to assemble the collective memory, and although I strove for accuracy, I recognize that looking for a complete truth is misguided. “We do better to define documentary not as an essence of truth but as a set of strategies designed to choose from among a horizon of relative and contingent truths” (Williams 316).

While the younger generation’s voices and vision are valuable, the most important part of this project for me has been capturing the founding generation’s stories before they are no longer here to tell them. The women who began the archives are now in their 70s and 80s, facing their final period of involvement. One subject I interviewed later had a stroke, and she has struggled to regain her memory. I’m very grateful to have preserved a record of her memories before this
event occurred. If nothing else, this film serves as an archive itself, of the women who built the Lesbian Herstory Archives, what it stands for and what it has accomplished.

There were times during the production of this project that I worked alone. There were also times where I hired a sound recordist or production assistant to support me in the field. This was especially critical during major events, such as the pride march, where sound levels were difficult to control and equipment had to be carried long distances. After being awarded a grant from the Princess Grace Foundation, I hired a photographer to capture behind-the-scenes photographs to be used in promotional materials. As the film moved into post-production, I brought in additional support, working with a transcriber, composer, sound designer and mixer, colorist, animator and web and graphic designer.

Everyone who worked on this film identifies as female and almost everyone identifies on the LGBTQIA+ spectrum. As a lesbian myself, I wanted to employ other queer women because I knew that they would understand the subject and treat it with care, and that as women we are largely underemployed in our industry. A study from the Celluloid Ceiling, which has tracked women’s employment on top grossing films for the last 20 years, found that in 2017 “only 1% of films employed 10 or more women [in roles of director, writer, producer, executive producer, editor, or cinematographer]. In contrast, 70% of films employed 10 or more men” (Lauzen 1). The making of The Archivettes employed at least a dozen women. Individual roles also show a sharp contrast. “Women comprised 3% of composers working on the top 250 grossing films of 2017” (Lauzen 3). I don’t expect my film to be a top grossing one, but I want to do everything in my power to amplify female voices. Hiring an all-female staff, including for roles such as com-
poser and colorist, sends the same message of female empowerment and visibility that permeates the film (e.g. see fig. 7).

There were changes to the film along the way, but the piece closely matches my original vision. This was my first feature film, and with a tight timeline, I knew from the beginning that I needed to have a strong workflow to manage footage as I shot it.

Upon completion of each shoot, I pulled selects and transcribed interviews. When I sat down to edit the rough cut, I had a clear sense of all the material I had shot, which made for an efficient editing process. The film went through significant structural changes during post-production, and many scenes were left on the cutting-room floor.

As I got further along, more archival footage was discovered by the coordinators themselves. I spent time digitizing Hi-8 and VHS tapes and incorporating the strongest footage into the film (e.g. see fig. 8). I worked with the Volunteer Lawyers for the Arts to discuss the strength
of a fair use argument for some items where I could not identify all the characters or the copy-
right holders.

Making this film has affected my life in many ways. I learned a tremendous amount
about lesbian and gay history. I began to think about my own and my partner’s archive and lega-
cy. I gained an extended family and role models in the coordinators of the archive. Above all, I
realized that when I combine my love for filmmaking with my passion for a topic that I care
deeply about, I do my best work.

AUDIENCE AND EXHIBITION

Although The Archivettes is of particular interest to the LGBTQ community, I sought to
make a film that will also appeal to a general audience. My hope is that viewers can enjoy and
understand the piece without any knowledge of the LGBTQ community or gay rights movement.

There will be three phases of distribution. The first phase is to screen at film festivals.

Love Letter Rescue Squad, the short film I made about co-founder Deborah Edel, premiered at
the American Pavilion at the Cannes Film Festival in May 2017 and is still on the festival circuit (e.g. see fig. 9). My ambition for *The Archivettes* is to follow a similar trajectory.

I will submit to Sundance, Tribeca and Hot Docs. I will also target prominent LGBTQ film festivals, such as Frameline and OutFest. After the initial premier, I will submit the film to regional LGBTQ festivals. I plan to attend as many screenings as possible, and to bring Deborah Edel and other archivettes to participate in panel discussions. Before the film’s release on the festival circuit, I will build a strong press kit. I’m working with a graphic and web designer to create posters, buttons and a website for the film. I will leverage my connections in the media world to get the film featured in publications such as *The Advocate*, *Autostraddle* and *Out*.

The second phase will be to work with a distributor to release the film on demand and via DVD. I want *The Archivettes* to be accessible, and releasing it on Netflix or Kanopy would give the project greater reach. I have worked with Peccadillo Pictures to release *Love Letter Rescue Squad* in the United Kingdom, and I expect my experience with that project to guide my decisions for the feature film. *The Archivettes* was chosen to participate in DOC NYC’s work in

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Fig. 9: Megan Rossman and Deborah Edel during a Q&A for *Love Letter Rescue Squad*, Amirah Parker, 2017.
progress program in the fall of 2017. When I pitched the film, I met with many distributors and have some initial contacts I can return to once the film is completed. I’ve also reached out to educationally-focused distributors, such as UC Berkeley and Women Make Movies.

The final phase of distribution focuses on education and community engagement. Thanks to press coverage for *Love Letter Rescue Squad* in *The Advocate* and *Rebellious Magazine for Women* that mentioned that I was working on *The Archivettes*, I have already received requests from LGBTQ student groups to screen the film on their campuses. I also built connections with professors and PhD students who came to the archives to conduct research while I was filming. Many of these women pledged that they would like to buy the film for their school’s library upon its release and screen it on campus. I plan to take the film to colleges across the country, and I would like to screen at community centers, libraries and high schools. *Love Letter Rescue Squad* screened at a women’s history month event at the Philadelphia Free Library, and I will leverage the calendar to find similar opportunities for *The Archivettes*.

![Lesbian Herstory Archives co-founders Deborah Edel and Joan Nestle in the 1970’s.](image)

Fig. 10: Lesbian Herstory Archives co-founders Deborah Edel and Joan Nestle in the 1970’s.

Unknown.
From the beginning of the project, I have worked to ensure that all material is legally included. Some materials, including figure 10, have an unknown copyright holder (e.g. see fig. 10). After a consultation with the Volunteer Lawyers for the Arts, I am confident that these images are currently in the public domain. The attorney I worked with also agreed that there is a fair use case to be made for these materials.

With an original soundtrack, licensing agreements in place for the archival photographs and footage, and signed personal release forms for the archivettes in hand, my film is ready for further exhibition immediately after the thesis show.
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**Filmography**


*Word is Out.* Directed by Peter Adair, Rob Epstein, Veronica Selver, Lucy Massie Phenix and Andrew Brown, UCLA Film & Television Archive, 1977.

*Stonewall Uprising.* Directed by Kate Davis and David Heilbroner, First Run Features, 1984.

*She's Beautiful When She's Angry.* Directed by Mary Dore, Netflix, 2014.


