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**GRAPHIC ACTIVISM:
LESBIAN ARCHIVAL LIBRARY DISPLAY**

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GRAPHIC ACTIVISM: LESBIAN ARCHIVAL LIBRARY DISPLAY

Introduction

The cover of the 1977 issue of *Sinister Wisdom*, a *Lesbian Literary and Art Journal*, frames a two-toned photographic-negative print of two nude women in an embrace: one woman reclining, held in the arms of her lover (Desmoines and Nicholson 1977). The lover cradles the reclined figure, one arm clutching around her neck to meet her lips, the other arm, an arrow between her lover's open thighs with the entirety of her hand, disappearing into the darkness of the horizontal negative exposure; wisps of layered cropped hair dance at the lightest sections of the image, exclaiming a paucity of stillness (Corrine 1977). As described during the panel to celebrate the exhibition of this and other lesbian graphic art, *Graphic Activism* exhibition curator, Flavia Rando introduced the Tee Corrine print is a "part of a series of prints on women with physical difficulties, making love" (CLAGS 2016).

As a timestamp throughout lesbian culture, this iconic Tee Corrine print and its 1977 *Sinister Wisdom* debut as cover image represented a quest for visibility. This same issue featured an article by legendary poet, Adrienne Rich, titled, "It is the lesbian in us..." which speaks to today's presumption by young scholars of a cohesive lesbian and lesbian-feminist past. "The word "lesbian" must be affirmed because to discard it is to collaborate with silence and lying about our very existence, the closet-game, the creation of the *unspeakable*" (Rich 1977). Both Corrine's photographic print, highlighting differently abled bodies, and Rich's essay on language, speak to a current divisiveness in the queer community, where politics of gender-identities or any claim to the term "lesbian" has as a whole silenced young and older people who claim lesbian and woman-centered identities.

This current state of temporal lesbian collective identity is the culture for which the *Graphic Activism* exhibition hit the walls of the City University of New York in NYC in the 2016 summer and fall semesters. Tee Corrine's image on the 1977 *Sinister Wisdom* cover was juxtaposed with forty-six additional images of lesbian graphics from the '70s to today. The framed posters were curated inside display cases that lined the passageway of the university center main lobby, and extended to the first floor of the library. This chapter describes the process for mounting such an exhibition. It aims to serve a dual role of acting as a hands-on case study for librarians wishing to hold an archival exhibit in their library.

Part 1: The Graduate Center Library

Location, Location, Location

Diagonally facing the Empire State Building, the Mina Rees Library at the Graduate Center is one of thirty-one libraries spanning across the City University of New York. The campus which supplies doctoral and masters degrees to under five thousand students, has its library space on the first floor of the single-building campus, nestled on the northeast corner of Fifth Avenue and Thirty-fourth Street in Manhattan, one avenue east of Herald Square where the Macy's emblem boasts, "The Largest Macy's in the World." With floor to ceiling windows, the library's first floor is arranged as a walk-through leading to the concourse level and second floor, allowing for only a few rows of computer desk kiosks, but with plenty of walking space complete with a window-sized, multi-colored, steel sculpture, and a large oval reference desk, housing student workers, security, reserve books, and equipment for loan behind locked cases.

Display cases line the walls like vertical glass tiles leading toward the original architecture of the original B. Altman the historic elevator. In years' past, the university's Department of Buildings had authority to place items inside of the display cases, as they would every case throughout the building. Library control and oversight meant strategic planning was required on behalf of librarians to maintain a high standard of visual allure. With the employment of the new Chief Librarian, Polly Thistlethwaite, a former public services librarian in this same library, and caretaker at the Lesbian Herstory Archives in the 90s (a lifetime ago), themed displays responded to intersections of programming at the Graduate Center

with faculty and student interests in mind. With a small print collection of only a single floor of books, and an archive of solely institutional materials, a small number of special collections were available to manufacture alluring displays.

Displays as Outreach

Lesbian graphic art works was not the first idea for an exhibition inside library display cases. It is likely that the idea would not have taken hold without the primer of two distinct displays, each with a political herstory, and female activism (which one could define as harboring lesbian connotation) as its core context.

Creation of the library blog using the intra-campus wordpress platform, CUNY Academic Commons, allowed for a publicly accessible website which included an event calendar, detailed posts on library happenings, and a mailing list. In the span of two years, the blog became the centerpiece of library activity. An adjunct librarian position was created as Digital Outreach and Reference librarian. With the new position, all social media was connected to library administered Facebook and Twitter accounts. A new audience from within and outside of the campus emerged. An outward facing library was now at the helm of outreach service. An outward facing blog also mirrored the outward-facing display cases with a new goal for pointing back to the function and goals of library service. With much deliberation put toward objects that could stand in as visual representation of library materials, prospective display materials were pulled from special collections and intra-campus collaborative relationships.

Library Displays from Collaborative Relationships

In Summer 2012, the Activist Women's Voices special collection was displayed in the library cases. Material was gathered from the ephemera donated to the library by the Center for the Study of Women and Society at the Graduate Center. The project was committed to documenting the voices of unheralded activist women in community-based organizations in New York City. It was a manageable size of thirty-six activists and their corresponding organizations, many of whom were still alive, including the GC's very own Chief librarian. The display featured clippings, images, and writings from activists and organizations, including the Lesbian Herstory Archives. Displayed women were honored to be exhibited, and students whose focus was women's studies found the display useful to their research. The library blog highlighted the display, memorializing the collection.

Following the AWW exhibition, in 2013, two student fellows approached the library to use the display cases for an exhibition of their own – one that also acknowledged activism and women in the academy and the community. They proposed use of a current professor's research project: The Madeline Gittell Archive. This project highlighted the life of a CUNY scholar and community activist, deeply committed to racial, gender and educational justice. Gittell's archival material was processed with the direction of acclaimed university Professor Michelle Fine. A formal request was made to the Chief librarian followed by an outline of additional components of the exhibition, including a blog post written as an authored article, use of library materials, and as a departure from the AWW exhibition, an event to highlight the exhibition's materials and project. The display included archival books stacked for a three-dimensional effect, photographs, hand-written letters, and original newspaper clippings highlighting the NYC landscape on "public education in New York City, with an emphasis on Ocean Hill Brownsville during the black resistance movements of the 1960s" (Liebert 2013). The final event was *An Evening in Honor* of the exhibition and included a tour of the display cases through the GC library, followed by a Welcome from the university President and off-site reception.

These two outward facing displays since 2012 paved the way for a 2016 unveiling of a lesbian graphic activist exhibition. Without these two very outward facing events, it is likely that the lesbian graphic activism exhibition would have seemed ill-fitted to the GC library. In each iteration of the library displays, interestingly focused on gender, highlighting women's activism, a new addition to expand the exhibits occurred. During Summer 2016 *Graphic Activism* was mounted in both the library display cases as well as display cases in the main university lobby. For the first time in the library's history, a joint exhibition with the building's larger display windows curated the entire first floor of the Graduate Center. An additional new element to the Graphic Activism exhibit was its pre-existing nature; none of its collection was pulled from library collections.

A Pre-Existing Collection

One challenge that librarians commonly face with visual displays is the curation of material. Where within the larger library collection will the exhibition's material be pulled? How will the exhibit effect circulation and use? For the Gittell exhibition, for example, select books were pulled from the collection which required an edit to individual item records in the Aleph catalog. A change in circulation procedures

had to be implemented for when books were sought for check-out. In addition, reference staff had to receive training on a protocol for retrieving items when requested, which included retrieving keys from open display cases (a procedure that was not accessible to circulation staff, who were often student workers). Decisions for whether displayed books should remain in circulation for the duration of the display had to include input from the Head of Circulation, as well as from the Associate Librarian for Public Services and Scholarly Communication. This single example was largely trial by error and made the case for not including circulating materials into the next exhibition. An exhibit that relied solely on outside materials was favorable.

Part 2: *Graphic Activism*: Lesbian Art Displayed from the Lesbian Herstory Archives

Points of Connection

As a pre-existing exhibit, the *Graphic Activism* exhibition was solely comprised of material that did not belong to the library collection. Instead, material was from an outside institution – a non-profit, community-based, and volunteer-run archive: The Lesbian Herstory Archives. As the largest and oldest archive of lesbian materials in the world, located in the same city as the Graduate Center, LHA was an easy target. Yet, the serendipity of the collaborative relationship stemmed from beyond an easily replicable formula. Archival lesbian artwork on the walls of the Graduate Center was made possible because of pre-existing relationships from multiple angles.

1. The Graduate Center's Department of Buildings lead engineer was also a member of the Robert Blackburn Printmaking workshop which sponsored the pre-existing *Graphic Activism* exhibition.
2. The Head of Reference at the Graduate Center is a volunteer coordinator of the Lesbian Herstory Archives and also has six framed stills of her hand-made zines dedicated to Black lesbian herstory and queer of color housing in NYC as part of the exhibition.
3. One of the curators of the *Graphic Activism* exhibition, Flavia Rando, also led a "Seminar in the City" with CLAGS: The Center for LGBTQ studies, a center that co-sponsored the event. Flavia is also a long-standing CUNY professor.
4. The Chief Librarian is a previous caretaker and volunteer with the LHA.

The connecting points listed above does not represent an exhaustive list. Instead it aims to outline the relationship between the library, university center, and the archival organization as a long-standing and pre-existing one. As a result, the outside archival organization trusted the institution to take good care of the archival materials. The material arrived as a collection of framed original artifacts from the gallery where the collection was previously hung. Framing service was donated by the gallerists of the Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts Robert Blackburn Printmaking Workshop, the sponsoring gallery whose labor hung the pieces alongside the university's Department of Buildings staff person. Hardware and labor from outside of the library allowed for flexibility in the display's presentation, long-term length of display time (two semesters), and librarian labor. Placement of framed images was determined by the exhibition curators. Instead of doing the work of printing display headers or hanging frames, the librarian's sole responsibility was to interact with the pre-existing curators, the gallery that managed the exhibition, and the Department of Buildings who had oversight for the mounting of large objects.

Scheduled during regular library hours, the prompt two-day hanging did pose only a few minor issues for library operation. One being the need to measure distance between frames for each case. Accounting for three different frame sizes, and two distinct display case widths meant the measurements could be conducted only after frame placement was decided. The workflow entailed first, the arrival of the frames from the gallery. Second, the gallery interns had to unpack, and then delicately position all frames onto a viewable wall, upright from the floor, inside the university main lobby to be surveyed by the curators. Third, the curators determined the placement of the images in two venues, inside and outside of the library. Lastly, the frames were measured into their individual cases and mounted.

Time was split into the arduous task of deciding the placement of frames. The LHA curators were very intentional about the many considerations and risks associated with the placement of one image beside another. Appropriateness of images to go into the library compared to those for the main university lobby had everything to do with the striking image quality, the size, and the lesbian-specific content of the image. Should a line-drawing of a vagina be placed beside a photographic depiction of a snarling lesbian holding a gun? And should any vaginas be placed inside of the library? It became clear that the curation of hanging the material meant two separate shows were being exhibited. One for a library audience, scholars in mid-thought, about to tackle and articulate a research question, and one for a general public

of staff, faculty, students, and visitors in a bustling main Graduate School lobby of midtown New York City. It was determined that large-scale frames with extremely solicitous content, such as the “Lesbians who Kill” poster, or a print of two nude women in a sexual embrace, should go into the university’s main lobby. Posters focused on the representation of archival collections, such as the Black lesbian zines, or those with smaller images, requiring a closer, more intimate look by the viewer, would display in the library.

Groupings of materials by theme or format or time period was key. In the main passageway, music festival posters were grouped to sit alongside AIDS activism images, while conceptual images, such as “The Future is Female” – an unsourced phrase hovering around a glove cupped by two hands, opened the exhibition and began the long-walkway of lesbian themes. When it came to placement of images inside of the library, the eleven zine prints by two Black lesbian zine authors were grouped together, each author having her own display case, piling five frames side-by-side with six. The third and fourth display cases were chosen as four large stills, two in each, of colorful comic art, especially created for the exhibition, that narrated a journey of a young person entering the Lesbian Herstory Archives, and calling it home.

A Culminating Event

To commemorate the *Graphic Activism* exhibition, alongside the curators, the library co-sponsored with an on-campus center, CLAGS: The Center for LGBTQ studies a panel event titled, “*Graphic Activism* Panel: Lesbian Posters & Zines 1970 –Today.” The event took place on a Thursday evening in October. It was intended to be an overlapping event with the New York Archivist’s Roundtable “New York Archivists Week” (NYAW) series of events. The Graduate Center has annually participated in this week-long series, which in the past equated an “Introduction to Archives” workshop and a subsequent collaborative event with a local archive such as NYPL or the New York Historical Society. Adding events to the NYAW calendar often led to a larger audience, specifically non-GC affiliates, thereby opening the doors to an audience of librarian colleagues. This year the *Graphic Activism* Panel did not make the NYAW calendar. This was seen as a true loss since the library was excited to add lesbian subjects to a field-specific week of programming. Nevertheless, the CLAGS partnership led to a sold-out event with a primarily lesbian (and not archival or librarian-specific) audience.

A Candid Conversation

As a result of the lesbian-specific audience of the panel, and its self-affirmative nature, the best way to describe the culminating event, is to switch to a first person narrative, which I believe is best suited to finalize this chapter.

The *Graphic Activism* panel included three of the five curators of the *Graphic Activism* exhibit: zinester, Elvis Wolf, art historian and founder of the *Lesbian Studies Institute* at the Lesbian Herstory Archives, Flavia Rando, and master printer, sculptor, and graphic artist, Ann Pachner. As the librarian and moderator, I steered the conversation, first outlining the multiple long-standing collaborations of the exhibition, then by supplying a brief chronological history of art programming at the Lesbian Herstory Archives.

Before the audience arrived, Elvis, Flavia, Ann and I queued the slideshow of images from the exhibition, and then with a bookcart, transported ten hand-selected framed images to decorate the room, placing the frames alongside the walls of the otherwise sterile classroom. To our good fortune, the room's original construction had blackboards on the two larger walls. The frames sat nicely upright with the base set inside the metal chalk holders, and the frame top, leaning against the cleaned black board surface. People arrived five minutes to the start. The room filled rather quickly with an intergenerational group of lesbian scholars, students, artists, and community members. There were no empty seats, and a few folks had to stand cradling the door. We asked the audience to help themselves to the library-sponsored coffee, sweet tarts, and contraband wine.

The liveliest part of the evening was the robust discussion. Each panelist was reflective of the pieces in the exhibition that spoke to them specifically. It was acknowledged that since none of the framed images held any attribution, it was up to the women in the room to take a trip to the Archive or inquire about images individually. The collection was meant to act as a representation of lesbian iconography, ideals, and activism over a period of time, not highlight individual artists. It was soon discovered that a handful of the artists happened to be in room. One audience member acknowledged that she "was probably the only one in the room who was not an academic" but wanted to state her claim on the material anyhow (CLAGS 2016). Others conferred that they too did not identify as academics, and still found impact from the work.

A final take-away from the event was the intergenerational nature of the group discussion. One older woman asked how we could use materials such as art and archives to educate youth in schools, where a younger woman who self-identified as a millennial asked, instead, what one was to do with archival images in today's world besides putting them on t-shirts or sharing them via social media. To find the answers, the panelists reverted the conversation to the lesbian theorists of the 1970s imploring the audience to find the answers within themselves. If using the lesbian activist images as a guide, then the lessons would be to find community in lesbian identity, and from that place, create content, and with the development of community in mind, in as many physical spaces as possible, without time as a barrier, never forget to put that content up for display.

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