

Love & Resistance: Stonewall 50

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A discursive review of the “Love & Resistance: Stonewall 50,” on view from February 14 to July 14, 2019 at the New York Public Library’s Stephen A. Schwarzman Building, 476 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY.

Let me say, at the risk of seeming ridiculous, that the true revolutionary is guided by great feelings of love.¹

Two giant banners frame each side of the entrance of the New York Public Library’s Schwarzman building with large vertical text declaring, “LOVE & RESISTANCE,” and, smaller below, “STONEWALL 50.” We try to think of iconic gay moments that happened on the expansive steps leading to the entrance of the New York Public Library near Bryant Park, but can recollect only Carrie Bradshaw wearing a bird on her head, waiting for Mr. Big to arrive for their wedding in *Sex & the City: The Movie*. We feel a sense of guilt for being so disconnected to a major civic institution and for immediately processing *Love & Resistance* through a basic pop cultural lens.

Walking into the exhibition space feels like a deferral: an interstitial hallway that gives you the sense that you are constantly approaching, but never arriving at, a gallery space that will open the scale and breadth of the exhibition. A few aesthetically gay textures set the mood: seedy neon signs designate separate sections of the exhibition—In Print; Bars; Love; Resistance—and rectangles are painted on the walls in an ethereal shade of lavender to mark thematic shifts. The first half of the exhibition focuses on photographs of protest and political social texts that frame gay and trans lives within the decade leading up to the

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Stonewall riots in 1969. Protest images from the years following the riots are also featured heavily in order to map political movement from the homophile organizing of the Mattachine Society and Daughters of Billitis to the birth of the groups like the Gay Liberation Front, Radicalesbians, and Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries.² The second half of the show features portraits of varied intimacies between gays and lesbians after Stonewall³: uninhibited dance floors, protest kisses, and just-married poses.

All historical overview and representation of queer life will be fraught; archives represent and solidify the worth of people that are already seen as intelligible. “Paranoia is anticipatory,” according to Eve Sedgwick⁴, and we prepare ourselves for the exhibit to be a white-washed imagining of sexless homosexuals made palatable for an audience of New York tourists with children. Queer people often anticipate the worst when faced with our representations in order to circumvent our grief when experiencing any bad surprises. But we are more terrified of the prospect that what we fear could be true: that we are going to be disappointed by representation. The exhibition, thankfully, is not a disappointment, but the writing that follows comes from a place of both skepticism and hope.

))) David

The first thing I realize as I enter the exhibition is that the NYPL’s Stonewall narrative is being told primarily through the lens of two lesbian photojournalists, Kay Tobin Lahusen and Diana Davies. Both women were active with gay and feminist presses before and after the riots. Their photographs make up the majority of the images in the exhibition, so *Love & Resistance* functions not only as a historical overview of Stonewall, but as also a retrospective of two lesbian photographers that documented the labor and intimacies of lesbian, gay, and trans people at a time when our political intelligibility was entering mainstream U.S. civil rights discourse.

There is a grand shift in the aesthetics of protest between the homophile movement and the gay liberationists, both depicted by Lahusen and Davies. Whether this shift is largely a curatorial creation for the exhibition is debatable, but the photographs of homophile protests are largely flat in their affect, with moments of sullenness from protestors, whereas the gay liberationists are excitable and joyous. Images at the end of the “Resistance” section, like a glamorously dressed, bohemian black lesbian marcher⁵ in Albany in 1971 carrying a sign that reads, “Lesbians for Equal Employment Rights,” are in contrast to images of influential early homophiles in suits and dresses—like Barbara Gittings⁶ picketing the White House in 1965 with a placard that states, “Sexual Preference is

Irrelevant to Federal Employment.” I am immediately wary of my own impulse to digest the images through a binary of assimilation/anti-assimilation, and I want to resist privileging liberation-based identity politics over the homophile movement’s tolerance-based activism. The discursive boundaries of “homophile” and “liberationist” dissolve when I recognize that shared labor was at the center of the actions of these protests. The homophiles and the liberationists may have mediated their labor through differing tactics, but both were working to imagine freedom.

))) Isaac

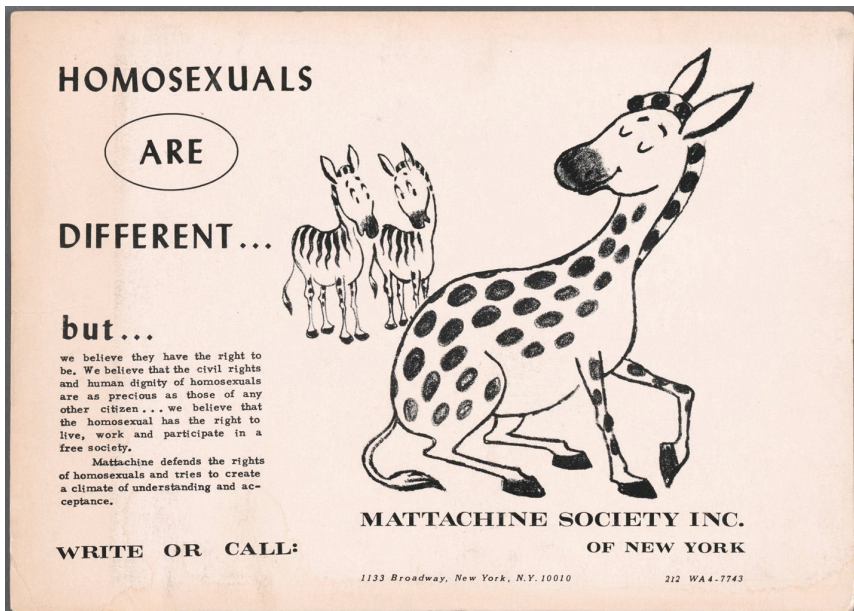
Among the portraits in the exhibit, a lone image of a squat, lumpy wedding cake stands out on an otherwise empty table.⁷ Frosting on a candy heart spells out “Gay Power to Gay Love” and a pair of brides and a pair of grooms adorn the top of the second layer of the cake. In the background, there is a man holding a newspaper spread wide in front of him that covers all but his face, which is meeting the gaze of someone off frame, to the right, as a hand with a microphone, presumably belonging to a reporter, peeks in from the left. The banal



“Barbara Gittings in picket line, reprint” *The New York Public Library Digital Collections*. 1965. Photo by Kay Tobin. <http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47e3-b65b-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>.

surroundings suggest that no wedding is taking place and that this modest drooping confection was presented as an act of protest. These fey provisional moments are what pull me into each thematic cluster in the show. Another unassuming piece of ephemera in the form of an illustrated Mattachine flyer⁸ also lingers with me. It features a limp-wristed zebra covered in spots and smiling as two striped zebras raised their eyebrows in the background. I think of zebra stripes as some of the more audacious animal prints, almost synonymous with Fran Drescher's wardrobe as Nanny Fine, but of course these zebras did not view their bodies as being coded until that spotted zebra placed their whole pattern ontology into question. Text on the flyer reads: "Homosexuals *are* different . . . but . . . we believe they have the right to be. We believe that the civil rights and human dignity of homosexuals are as precious as those of any other citizen . . . we believe that the homosexual has the right to live, work and participate in a free society."

Whereas the photographs surrounding the illustration depict members from the Mattachine Society and Daughters of Billitis dressed conservatively and picketing to achieve basic civil rights and job security, the zebra cartoon takes on a guise of faggotry with a traipsing that makes Snagglepuss look like the Hulk by



"Homosexuals are Different" *The New York Public Library Digital Collections*. 1960–1969. Created by The Mattachine Society of New York. <http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/2d0d34a0-e134-0136-e6a9-6f331fd05261>.

comparison. The ambivalence of this illustration animates its radicality through a canonically gay lexicon in which flippancy is always available as one of the many tools for agitation. The anti-assimilation discourse of the spotted zebra is on first glance in opposition to the assimilationist tactics in the homophile protest imagery. However, this binary of assimilation/anti-assimilation collapses upon realization that both images depict the varying tactics of the homophile movement.

The zebra is one of the first images that I encounter in the exhibition and for a moment I feel the joy of being pandered to, of feeling recognized or seen. As I walk through the hallways, I notice that I am sharing space with a generic mix of tourists from all over the world. The feeling of affirmation provided by the flyer swiftly passes as I see most others quickly parsing the show. I don't blame the populism of the museum space, and I don't feel that this show flattens the history of the gay liberation movement. Instead, I feel a dissonance that comes with visibility, a loss of some of the potency of the coding that makes me feel connected to a history and a style. But I am also relieved to see that the preciousness of Stonewall is slightly less spectacular. Stonewall feels mundane, and the romantic views I have of its players, textures, and attitudes have deflated in the same way that present time feels deflated and ordinary.

))) David

A number of manifestos and publications on display position gay political action as joy interpolated from anger; good feelings do not transcend the bad, instead they are both a necessity and intrinsic to the collage-like formulation of gay liberation. Perhaps the most famous manifesto in *Love & Resistance* is the Radicalesbian's "The Woman Identified Woman" (1970). The text begins with, "What is a lesbian? A lesbian is the rage of all women condensed to the point of explosion." She is furthermore, the "woman who . . . acts in accordance with her inner compulsion to be a more complete and freer human being."⁹ The desire to be free is one moment where joy demands that it be attended to. "If you're ready to tell people that you want to be free then [you're] ready to fight," states Street Transvestites For Gay Power¹⁰ in a pink leaflet titled, "GAY POWER: WHEN DO WE WANT IT? OR DO WE?"¹¹ The leaflet, on display in the exhibition, continues with the following: "We would also like to say that all we fought for at Weinstein Hall¹² was lost when we left upon request of the pigs. Chalk one up for the pigs, for they truly are carrying [their] victory flag. And realize the next demonstration is going to be harder, because they now know that we scare easily."



“Gay rights demonstration, Albany, New York, 1971 [41]” *The New York Public Library Digital Collections*. 1971. Photo by Diana Davies. <http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47e3-5758-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>.

Rage blooms from a desire for freedom that confronts and holds others accountable. The exhibition, as a whole, can be read as the representation of gay, lesbian, and trans people holding one another close by holding one another accountable for their responsibility to one another. Stonewall is a place, a history, a fantasy; a bridge, a ladder, an assemblage of feelings. People are sentimental about history and much of our collective nostalgia of the Stonewall riots means that the event itself is secondary to the way that the event makes us feel. If I am always going to be lead to the history of Stonewall by my own feelings, then I choose joy to lead me to that history.

))) Isaac

Many exhibitions that address the aesthetics tied to gay, lesbian, and trans histories are framed with an overdetermined eagerness to name what’s being presented. In their book *The Estrangement Principle*, Ariel Goldberg notes that they “have watched the unsavory trends of the art market temporarily crown ever-incomplete versions of ‘the political’ or ‘the queer’ as fashionable.”¹³ This

impulse to equate politics with queerness forecloses on all of the inconsequential actions that enable political decisions and all of the overt political assertions that drain the curiosity and reverie from life. The use of the word “queer” as an umbrella term, especially in an institutional context, capitalizes on an elusive identity position that retains much of its power through its illegibility and threatens its use value through overexposure. Goldberg continues, “I like to use the word political to describe work that isn’t ‘counter-whatever-the-culture-is’ but hides its opinions—if the art has any at all—and maneuvers to mirror the safety of the status quo.”¹⁴

David and I meet to regroup in a large open corridor that feels cavernous compared to the modest hallway-cum-galleries on either side. I am feeling a kind of ecstatic melancholia, and I am processing the mediocrity as revelation rather than as disappointment. And then I see one person staring up at the ceiling as dozens of people quickly buzz around and dart from room to room; I follow this person’s gaze to a massive mural: clusters of muscular men in various states of undress, wrestling atop mountain peaks framing each side of the ceiling. One of the men in the mural leaps dramatically into an idyllic sky crossing the peaks and an underview of his scrotum assumes the center of the heavens, peeking down at me below. It is at this moment I wonder, “Is the Library trolling



“Jim Owles at zap of New York City Clerk, 1971” *The New York Public Library Digital Collections*. 1970–1971. Photo by Richard Wandel. <http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47e3-cc20-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>. © Richard Wandel

us?” The 1911 mural, painted by James Wall Flynn, was recently renovated and reopened in 2016,¹⁵ around the time when I imagine the curatorial season for 2019 would’ve been in ideation. Is the unannounced bisection of the show—where it moves from documents and protest into intimacy—a coded curatorial wink? This encounter, whether intentionally mediated or not, is refreshing because it is not foregrounded in polemics. The mural enables a reparative engagement with the institution that we anticipated to be untrustworthy and echoes the possibilities for willful misreading—or astute decoding—that are offered in the exhibition.

))) Next

The exhibition is a space that begs us to peruse in the same way one might cruise the stacks at the New York Public Library, hoping to find glimpses into another version of the present. The accessibility of the New York Public Library depends on the broad representation of histories through a navigation of fragments (photos, manifestos, flyers) that have already received the affection of the institution. Any attempt to name what Stonewall was or is—or what gay, lesbian, and trans histories might be—is faced with the dilemma of being unable to account for the gaps caused by (un)intentional erasure and the proliferation of slant-subversive cultural products that were left opaque for the necessity of survival: the survival of both the objects and their progenitors. Because the curation is specific to primarily the work of two photographers and only a few decades of political-social ephemera, the exhibition is just one form of scaffolding for the representation of Stonewall. We are responsible for our epistemological becomings, for filling in the gaps and imagining something else, when faced with our own representations.

NOTES

1. *GLF News* No. 9; New York: Gay Liberation Front, February 10, 1970; Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library.
2. This mapping is most apparent in the chronological ordering of images in the “Protest” chapter of the exhibition’s accompanying book, *Love and Resistance: Out of the Closet into the Stonewall Era*, ed. Jason Baumann.
3. Visibly trans people were mostly absent from the second half (“Bars” and “Love”) of the exhibition.
4. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, Or, You’re So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You,” in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 130.

5. Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library, "Gay rights demonstration, Albany, New York, 1971 [41]" *The New York Public Library Digital Collections*, 1971, <http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47e3-5758-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>.
6. Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library, "Barbara Gittings in picket line, reprint" *The New York Public Library Digital Collections*, 1965, <http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47e3-b65b-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>.
7. Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library, "Jim Owles at zap of New York City Clerk, 1971," *The New York Public Library Digital Collections*, 1970–71, <http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47e3-cc20-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>.
8. Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library, "Homosexuals are Different," *The New York Public Library Digital Collections*, 1960–69, <http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/2d0d34a0-e134-0136-e6a9-6f331fd05261>.
9. Radicalesbians, "The Woman Identified Woman," in *For Lesbians Only: A Separatist Anthology*, ed. Sarah Lucia-Hoagland and Julia Penelope, 2nd ed. (London: Only Women Press, 1992), 17. Book referenced for citation only. The exhibition included an original print of the manifesto. The manifesto has not yet been digitized by the New York Public Library.
10. Also known as Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (STAR).
11. "NYU OCCUPATION: STREET TRANSVESTITES FOR GAY POWER STATEMENT," *Reina Gossett* website, February 23, 2013, transcription of leaflet, <http://www.reinagossett.com/nyu-occupation-street-transvestites-for-gay-power/>. Website referenced for citation only. The original leaflet on display in the exhibition has not yet been digitized by the New York Public Library.
12. STAR was involved in the 1970 occupation of Weinstein Hall by gay activists protesting New York University's refusal to host gay dances. An image of this protest by Diana Davies is present in the exhibition and in the corresponding book, Jason Baumann, ed., *Love and Resistance: Out of the Closet into the Stonewall Era* (New York, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2019).
13. Ariel Goldberg, "Simplicity Craving," in *The Estrangement Principle* (New York: Nightboat Books, 2016), 43.
14. Ibid.
15. Angela Montefinise, "Mural Being Given New Life at The New York Public Library's Iconic 42nd Street Building," *The New York Public Library*, March 2, 2016, www.nypl.org/press/press-release/march-2-2016/mural-being-given-new-life-new-york-public-library's-iconic-42nd.

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