

The Vancouver Sun

Three videotape chain stores attacked by 'wimmin's' group



4 Surrey
businesses
destroyed

Vancouver's 1980s Feminist Debates: Pornography and Censorship in the Archives

Gendered Violence: Responses and Remediation

A Guide for Postsecondary Education

**VIVO Media Arts Centre – Archive/Counter-Archive
Educational Guide**

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Recommended Study Levels Undergraduate Students, Graduate Students

Subject Areas Film Studies; Media Studies; Women and Film; Sexuality Studies;
Gender Studies; Queer Studies; Porn Studies

Themes Censorship; Contemporary Art; Queer Theory; Archives; Porn;
Lesbianism; Sexuality; Activism

About the Guide

This educational guide activates **one of three archival collections held at VIVO Media Arts Centre's** Crista Dahl Media Library that focus on the subject of **gendered violence** as it was discussed, debated, and exhibited in and around Vancouver in the 1980s. Although united by a common theme, these collections span a variety of topics: feminist porn wars and resistance to censorship, activist video responses to the Pinochet dictatorship, and the 1989 In Visible Colours film and media festival which aimed to foreground discussions of settler colonialism, decolonization, Indigeneity, and solidarity.

Taken together, these three collections generate intersectional and multigenerational dialogue about gendered violence; as such, the films and videos in this archive are modes of creative resistance against several forms of subordination and oppression. In partnership with VIVO, the **Archive/Counter-Archive** project has developed three separate educational guides that engage with each collection as part of its *Gendered Violence: Responses and Remediation* Case Study. **These guides are available digitally and for free at counterarchive.ca**

This specific guide centres on **the feminist debates regarding issues of pornography and censorship that took place in Vancouver in the 1980s**. Indeed,

in the 1980s, many Vancouver feminists opposed to porn drew on the language of gender violence to make their case, arguing that all sexually explicit images of women were harmful. Working against this position and the creep of censorship into smaller moving image formats in the province, queer and feminist artists defended sexual expression and created alternative visual languages for sex.

In particular, this guide expands on the 2022 mail-art project developed by Vancouver-based artists Hazel Meyer and Cait McKinney in collaboration with VIVO and Archive/Counter-Archive entitled ***The images, such as they are, do have an effect on us.***

The guide features images and videos documenting Meyer and McKinney's mail art project, an essay by Ana Valine on the feminist debates regarding sexual representation and censorship in the 1980s, and contextualizing images and videos. The curated material is listed in the suggested order of viewing and a list of discussion questions is included to encourage conversation. We recommend previewing the works before you screen them for your students and reading the contextualizing information provided in this guide. Please note that some videos contain graphic imagery.

About VIVO Media Arts Centre and the Crista Dahl Media Library & Archive

VIVO Media Arts Centre is located on the unceded territory of the xwməθkwəyəm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish) and səílłwətał (Tsleil-Waututh) First Nations. Incorporated as Satellite Video Exchange Society, VIVO is a steward of critical history and an agent for emergent experimental media arts practices. Our programs foster formal and critical approaches to media arts and reflect the diversity of contemporary technologies and communities that coalesce around new forms of knowledge and creativity.

The Crista Dahl Media Library & Archive (CDMLA) at VIVO stewards a significant repository of videotapes by artists and independent producers. Spanning over 50 years of production, its nearly 8000 media works reflect the complexity of video art history. This guide draws on two collections from the CDMLA: The Women in Focus Society and Sara Diamond fonds.

Women In Focus (WIF) (1974-1992) originated as a project of the University of British Columbia's Women's Office Collective. WIF became the first Vancouver-based, feminist media centre and visual art exhibition space exclusively for the use of women artists. Its fonds includes WIF media productions, its global distribution collection, and related administrative files.

The Sara Diamond fonds contains the bulk of the Coalition for the Right to View (CRTV) fonds. Diamond was the main CRTV spokesperson, curated conferences and exhibitions about sexuality and representation, and wrote extensively about censorship and media.

More at: archive.vivomediaarts.com

About Archive/Counter-Archive

Archive/Counter-Archive (A/CA): Activating Canada's Moving Image Heritage is a seven-year research creation project led by Janine Marchessault and funded by a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council Partnership Grant. Comprising four universities, numerous community partners, memory institutions, and policy advocates, the project is dedicated to activating and remediating audiovisual heritage created by Indigenous Peoples (First Nations, Métis, Inuit), Black communities and People of Colour, women, LGBT2Q+ and immigrant communities, and to fostering a community and network dedicated to creating best practices and cultural policies. As part of the project, Archive/Counter-Archive has produced a number of open-access educational guides which are available for free on its website: counterarchive.ca



About the Artists: Hazel Meyer & Cait McKinney

Hazel Meyer and Cait McKinney's collaborations explore their shared attachments to queer histories through research, writing, and archival interventions. Their work has been presented by No More Potlucks (CA), Little Joe: Queers and Cinema Magazine (UK), PHILE (DE), INCITE Journal of Experimental Media (US), Eastern Edge (CA), EMILIA-AMALIA (CA), and Deep Down Body Thirst, curated by the collective Radclyffe Hall for the Glasgow International, SCT (2018). Their film *Slumberparty*, 2018 has been screened at various festivals including London International Film Festival (2018), Artists' Moving Image Festival, Tramway & LUX Scotland, SCT (2019) and the Porn Film Festival Berlin, DE (2019.) They are currently working on *They, Olympia*, a video about the 1990 Vancouver Gay Games.

For more, visit: caitmckinney.com and hazelmeyer.com



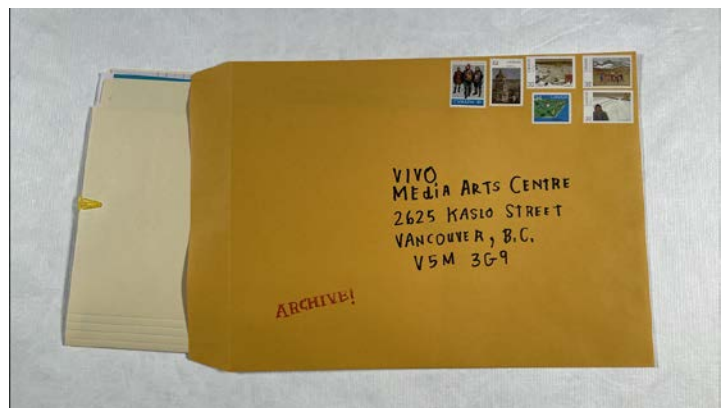
About *The images, such as they are*, do have an effect on us: Meyer & McKinney Artists' Statement

Stories about iconic "fights" amongst late 20th century western feminists are so powerful, they take on lives of their own, obscuring the complexities of how groups interpret and work through problems together. As recent feminist historiography has shown, these polarizing stories reflect affective investments in what feminism was in the past, delimiting how it can act on the present, and offering limited frames for feminist media history (Ahmed 2017; Freeman 2010; Samer 2022). This project argues that creative archival encounters can recover richer, more contradictory and knotty media histories that nuance our understandings of cultural feminism, and film and video history. We focus on the feminist porn/censorship debates of the 1980s in one understudied locale: Vancouver, British Columbia.

The images, such as they are, do have an effect on us (2022), is a mail art project that enlivened records related to porn, feminism, and censorship in Vancouver in the 1980s. Many Vancouver feminists opposed to porn argued that all sexually explicit images of women were inherently exploitative and harmful. One Vancouver group, the "Wimmin's Fire Brigade," went as far as fire-bombing a chain of three porn video stores on one night in 1982. Working against this position and the creep of a provincial film censorship board into smaller moving

image formats, local queer and feminist artists argued for the development of alternative visual languages for depicting sex.

Playing with questions of polarization and memory, we created and mailed out two dossiers based on archival research at VIVO Media Arts Centre: one represents the working files of an anti-porn feminist; the other of an artist/organizer involved in anti-censorship work. Some of the records contained in these dossiers are real, others are imagined based on scraps, remnants, and gossip. Overall, the project makes two contributions: 1) it expands our ongoing exploration of how speculative queer and feminist archival methods can be used to develop more complex histories of sexuality and media (Flavelle 2021); 2) it contributes to feminist film and video histories of Vancouver's unique cultural and regulatory contexts.



Access and download both dossiers in PDF format here



<http://archive.vivomediaarts.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Porn-Folder-Photographs.pdf>



<http://archive.vivomediaarts.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Censorship-Folder-Photographs.pdf>

Curated Films and Videos for Classroom Viewing

In addition to the two PDF dossiers from *The images, such as they are, do have an effect on us*, four videos were curated for classroom viewing .

Total run time: 46 minutes

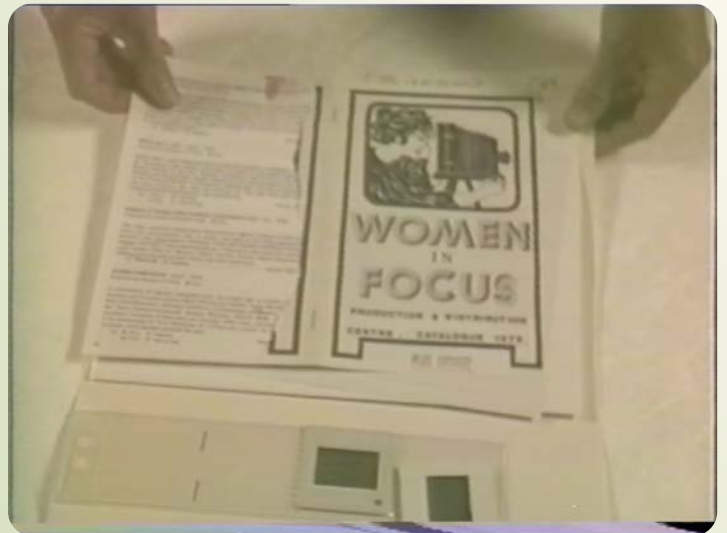
The films and videos are available to stream via the Canadian streaming and distribution platform [VUCAVU](#) or by contacting [VIVO Media Arts Centre](#)

“PORN” dossier video (digital version + VHS)

Digital video length: 1.39 minutes

VHS video length: 2.21 minutes

Description: Video documentation of *The images, such as they are, do have an effect on us* envelopes and folders being opened and artist's hand examining contents.

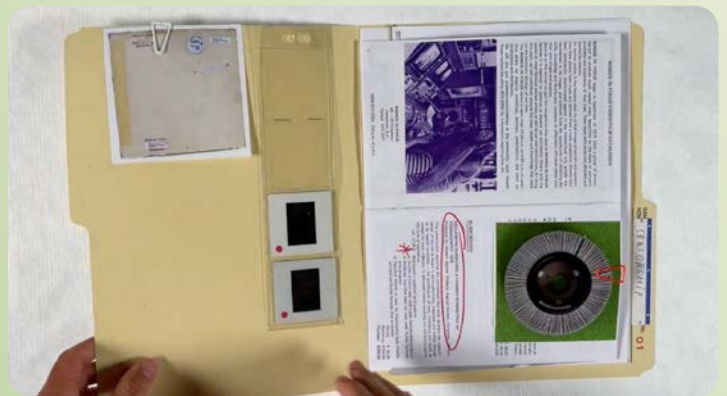


“CENSORSHIP” dossier video (digital version + VHS)

Digital video length: 2.02 minutes

VHS video length: 2.26 minutes

Description: Video documentation of *The images, such as they are, do have an effect on us* envelopes and folders being opened and artist's hand examining contents.



***A Respectable Lie* (Wendy Falconer and Penny Thompson, 1980).
Produced by Women in Focus Society.**

Length: 31 minutes

Description: Women discuss the ubiquity of pornography and the effect it has on women's self-identification process.

Content warning: Graphic nudity



**Excerpt from *Gene Errington*
(Gene Errington, 1975). Produced by
Women in Focus Society.**

Section on pornography: 39:50 – 50:50

Length: 11 minutes

Description: An excerpt from a lecture by Gene Errington, then Ombudswoman for the Vancouver Status of Women and a member of the Human Rights Commission on misogyny, violence against women, pornography, and sexual harassment in the workplace. The excerpt focuses on pornography, culture, and the struggle for gender equality.

Note: While we suggest watching the excerpt about pornography in particular, educators can choose to screen the entire video in class.



Curatorial Essay: *Community, Censorship, and Feminism in 1980s Vancouver* by Ana Valine

In the 1980s, Vancouver was a hotbed of debate over pornography and censorship which resulted in fierce splits among feminist organizers in the city throughout the decade. As such, Vancouver became “an outpost of the larger feminist sex wars” (Guerrero 2023, n.p.). As early as 1975, Vancouver feminist activist Gene Errington warned that the rising division of opinion on pornography was “our latest battleground,” as feminists found themselves “in opposition to each other” (39:45).

Some opposed pornography across the board, while others opposed the censorship of sexual expression; both positions held at their centre the visual representations of women in the media and their effects. Each side organized conferences and screenings, wrote position papers, protested, and kept making their work through it all.

The “anti-porn” position was embraced by feminists who opposed the ubiquity of pornography in Canadian society. White, heterosexual pornography seemed to be everywhere: on magazine racks, porn movie houses, record covers, and music: “Pornography has become an integral part of our lives and most of us haven’t even realized it” (Falconer 2:14). To anti-porn activists, “all sexually explicit media was harmful and a form of gendered violence” (Guerrero 2023, n.p.). As such, pornography was offensive, violent, and damaging to women, and, consequently, most material of a sexual nature had to be banned. *A Respectable Lie* (1980) and *Gene Errington* (1975), which were made by the Women in Focus Society (WIF), a feminist media collective that was staunchly anti-pornography and against most forms of sexual representation until the mid-1980s, reflect this stance. In 1982, members of the guerrilla group the Squamish Five calling themselves the “Wimmin’s Fire Brigade” went as far as firebombing multiple porn shops in the city.

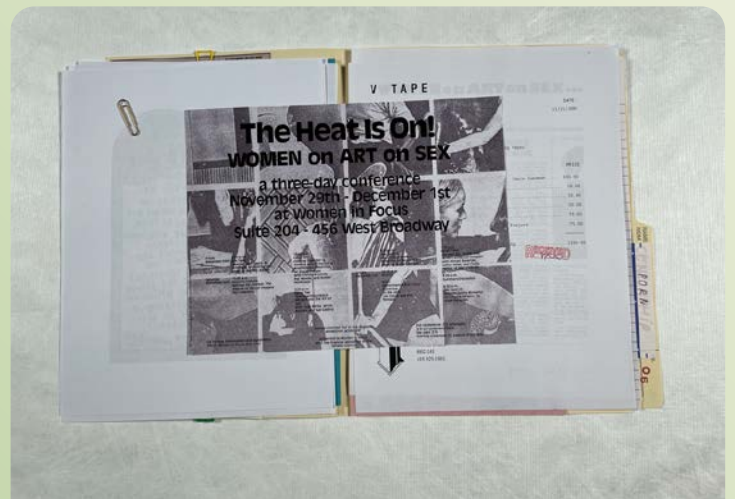


On the other hand, the anti-censorship position argued that “women were subordinated in many categories of representation, from pornography to commercial advertisements for cleaning supplies” (Sirove 2014, 146). What was needed, then, were alternate methods of artistic sexual expression that represented a feminist perspective. Among those who advocated against censorship were artists and media workers whose explorations of the question of identity in video production were prolific in Vancouver in the 1980s and 1990s and who were directly affected by the censorship of sexual representations.

Although these two sides were opposed in theory, in a relatively small city such as Vancouver, it is important to note that the camps were also porous and dynamic, connected to each other through various affiliations and concerns such as labour, Indigenous rights, migration, and anti-racism. These feminist debates were further complicated by Vancouver’s political context, where censorship laws affected virtually everyone, even those who profited from pornography and the exploitation of sex.

Karen Knights (VIVO Archivist) was an anti-censorship activist during this period. She explains: “In 1985, in the wake of funding cuts to publishers of political criticism and social history, the Socreds [the Social Credit Party, a populist, right-wing political party that dominated B.C. government for 34 years] established The Periodical Review Board, described as a ‘self-regulating’ industry body upholding ‘community standards’, a term adopted nation-wide to justify restrictions on imagery and publications about sexuality” (Knights 2020). The following year, the BC government introduced video classification and censorship legislation, “Bill 30” or the new B.C Motion Picture Act (MPA), which stated that all video works required prior screening and classification. These new laws thus impacted independent media producers by imposing fees on them for classification and restricting the imagery they could show. At the federal level, the Canadian government was amending its Criminal Code to define obscenity, and publications

were being seized at the border by Canada Customs due to their perceived violation of “community standards.” As Knights (2020) further states, these new anti-pornography legislations “[made] virtually all producers and distributors of sexual imagery vulnerable.” The most egregious use of such legislation was against queer and feminist materials. In many instances, the laws prevented non-heteronormative audiences from accessing films and videos that represented their perspectives. Indeed, while straight, white women were working toward “equal and fair representation” in sexual imagery, people of colour and queer people were trying to define and express their desires, all while working within, and in defiance of, local laws—and often in tension with the straight feminist morality.



The passage of these laws led to widespread resistance. In the winter of 1985, a group of Vancouver feminist artists and cultural workers organized *The Heat Is On: Women On Art On Sex Conference*, which brought together a national group of feminist, anti-censorship advocates that “looked to expand and consolidate into an organization that would reach beyond the art community and that could propose a credible alternative program to the slash and burn strategy of state censorship” (Knights 2020). This

was followed by several other activist and artistic events that gathered momentum and members.

In 1986, the *Coalition for the Right To View*—a coalition initiated by Vancouver's arts community and that included media workers, educators, librarians, trade unions, and LGBTQ2+ organizations and businesses, among others—was formed with a mandate to “oppose the suppression of images” at the provincial and federal level. The organization’s statement of purpose read:

“The aim of the coalition is to combat government censorship including but not limited to:

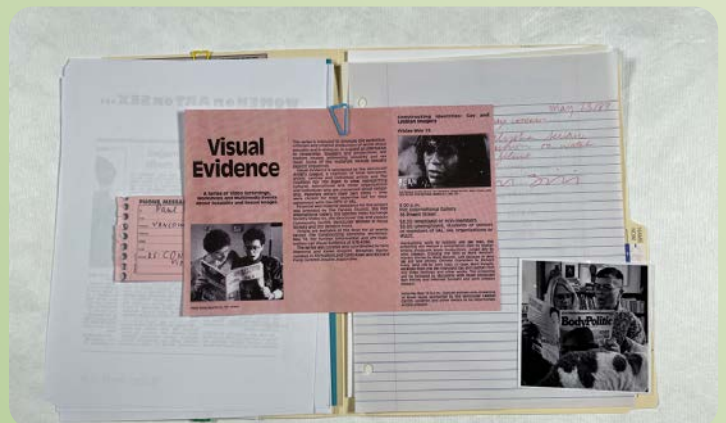
1. Proposed videotape legislation [classification and censorship]
2. Censorship by the Periodical Review Board
3. Censorship and banning of work and image by Canada Customs
4. Anti-obscenity section of the Criminal Code of Canada”

Concerned that the “government would choose to ban, rather than educate,” the group proposed that instead of censorship, education and resources were needed to support gender equality and the protection of victims of violence and sexual abuse. They also advocated for “the development of sexual images which [would]...be an alternative to existing porn and advertising images” (Knights 2020).

In 1987, *Visual Evidence*, an exhibition and workshop series about sexual representation, was organized by the Vancouver Artists’ League and the CRTV as a direct challenge to the B.C. Motion Pictures Act. In what they considered to be “an act of civil disobedience,” *Visual Evidence* screened explicit videos that had not been submitted to the Film Classification Office and there were no age restrictions on attendees. As Karen Knights recalls:

“One of the most rewarding results of *Visual Evidence* was the forging of an alliance between the arts community and those in sex education and treatment of victims of sexual abuse and violence - people who traditionally took a pro-censorship position. Many participants commented that they found John Goss’ *Wild Life* [a video confiscated and deemed by Canadian border officials to be “child pornography” because it showed two 16-year-old Latinos kissing] communicated more about youth sexuality and the dangers of legislation than any lecture on the subject” (Knights 2020).

Canadian video artist John Greyson, in partnership with Blush Productions (a woman-run pornography production house), held an accessible workshop on and screening of gay and lesbian porn which contained information crucial to the sexual health and well-being of community members. Other community activations included a public forum on Pornography, Hate Literature, and Censorship at Simon Fraser University, and *Art and the Canadian Context* at The Western Front - which organized a screening of *See Evil* by feminist video artist Lisa Steele, a video about the battle between Ontario’s arts community and the censor board, as the province of Ontario was dealing with their own censorship challenges.





This is but a brief introduction to the context in which feminists existed, thought of, and made art about issues of pornography, censorship, community, and identity in Vancouver. This history is heavily documented in VIVO's archives—although this is a history which is as rich as it is fragmented. As Emily Guerrero (2023) writes of archives: “A paradox of the archive, especially felt by those who have sorted and discarded files, is that there is never ‘one’ ‘true’ story—and as often as not, there is a chasm right where you are looking for these histories. And, the scraps and gossip found within them are so often precious fragments, requiring and deserving of care to knit back together” (n.p.).

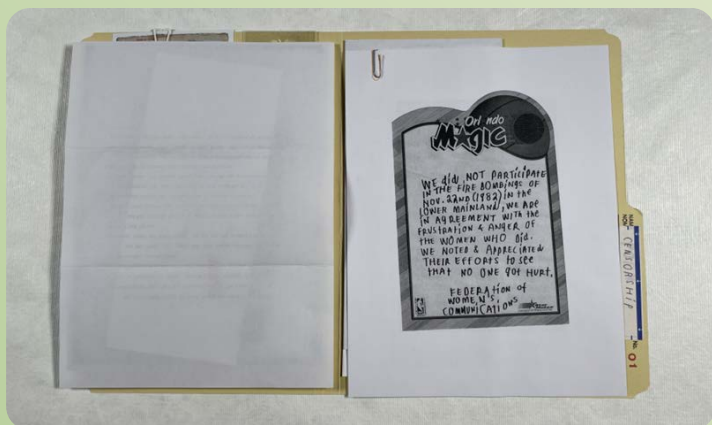
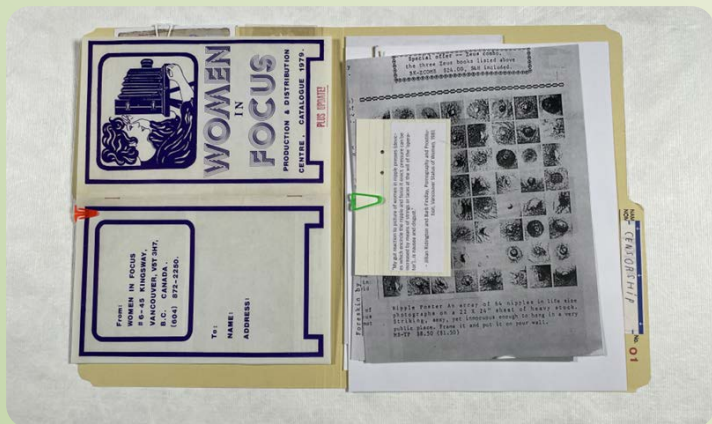
The two dossiers created by Hazel Meyer and Cait McKinney draw on this complex history and its complicated archives. “Porn” and “Censorship” represent the position of each camp in relation to sexual expression and pornography, “using the archives at VIVO as a site of activation” (Guerrero 2023). The title itself, *The images, such as they are, do have an effect on us* comes from writer Himani Bannerji’s address at The Heat is On! Conference held in Vancouver in 1985.

Hazel Meyer (2022) describes *The images, such as they are, do have an effect on us*, as an “[e]dition of 100, distributed via Canada Post, 9.5 x 12”, paper, copies, photos, clips, staples, envelopes, postage.” The dossiers were mailed in separate envelopes to select persons. The invitation came with a content warning: “The mailings include archival records related to porn, kink, and gender violence and you are agreeing to receive this material in the mail.”

Recipients got either a “Porn” folder or a “Censorship” folder in the mail. The project, therefore, was based on the physicality of the archival files. As McKinney and Meyer note in their artist statement: This “mail art project... enlivened records related to porn, feminism, and censorship” (McKinney and Meyer). In her article “Gossipy Scraps, Gossip(ing) Archives” (2023), Emily Guerrero describes the dossiers in detail:

“Bearing stamps from the ‘80s, but recently postmarked and featuring a red stamp declaring ‘Archive!’, the envelope spilled out a thick file folder labelled Censorship. Its initial title, Porn, peeked out underneath the label, covered but not erased. The file, full of clippings, photos, and notes, was a temporary portal from my messy kitchen to ‘80s feminist Vancouver, created and sent to me via archival crate digging, a bit of time travel, and a hefty dose of gossip” (n.p).

Not only do the artists mobilize archival ephemera, which, as scholar and curator Genevieve Flavelle (2021) notes, has “arisen as a key source for challenging and expanding the definition of an archive” (44), but Meyer and McKinney also introduce fictional archival elements to their project. “Some of the records are real, others we imagined based on scraps, remnants, and gossip,” reads the curatorial statement. These speculative records fill in the blanks and embellish the actual archival documents included in the two dossiers in order to play “with questions of polarization and memory” (McKinney and Meyer 2024).



The artists additionally created two video walk-throughs of the physical dossiers: one shot with a smartphone; the other with camcorder originating from the time the original documents were produced. Both recordings were, however, made in 2022. There are ‘tells’ within each file that point to contemporary touches, such as a Google map with 1982 firebombing locations highlighted. As such, Meyer and McKinney’s art project draws attention to the archives’ physical and temporal state and works to both displace and replace the archives in time.

Guerrero (2023) deems Meyers and McKinney’s project essential for thinking about our present and future:

“Paging through both folders from The images, such as they are, do have an effect on us, the differing tactics unspooling in front of me showed two deeply diverging conceptualizations of control and violence. This schism runs straight through to today—the political deal that anti-porn feminists Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin made when they pushed to get anti-obscenity laws enacted in Canada is the earlier version of current TERF/“gender-critical” feminists’ alliance with right-wing attacks on the bodily autonomy of trans people. Meanwhile, the fight against censorship led by queers and sex workers has continued as the terrain of struggle has moved from physical media to the internet” (n.p.).

Placed within the context of contemporary issues, these archives are indeed important reminders that conversations around censorship, feminism, and equality are still alive and needed.

Discussion Questions

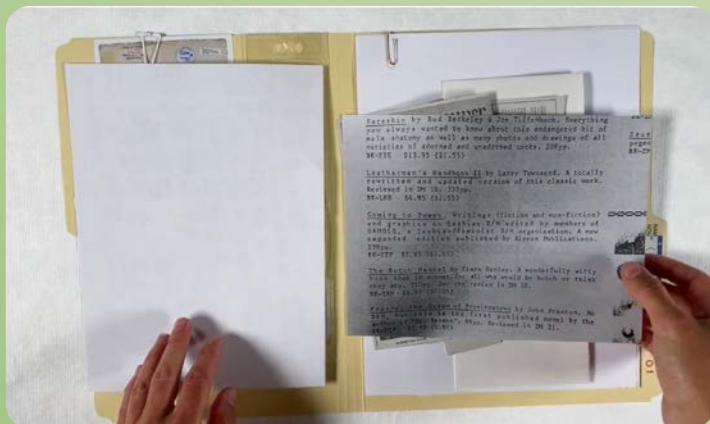
1. Take a close look at both dossiers from *The images, such as they are, do have an effect on us* (the PDFS + the videos)

- What does each dossier contain? Identify and describe the kinds of documents included in the dossier.
- Were you surprised by the content of each dossier? Why or why not?
- Can you identify which documents are fictional and which ones are "authentic" archives? Why would the artists create these fictional pages? What do they add to the stories laid out in the dossiers?

2. Think about the format of the project.

- In what ways did McKinney and Meyer embed the physical/material and temporal aspects of archives into their project?
- What is gained or what is lost when archives are digitized?

3. In the 1980 video *A Respectable Lie*, what is the intention of the repeated use of pornographic images? Are the filmmakers successful in their goal? Why or why not?



4. Focus on the video *Gene Errington* (1975) produced and distributed by Women in Focus.

- In *Gene Errington*, can you identify some of the concerns that women and feminist had regarding women's portrayal in the media?
- Have these concerns been addressed since 1975? Have representations of women in the media changed? In what ways?



5. According to the artist coalitions formed in Vancouver (and elsewhere) in the 1980s, what is at stake in censorship?

- Why do you think Vancouver feminists and artists embraced collective, coalitional approaches to address the issues of access to and the making of sexual images?
- In what ways are feminists and LGBTQ2+ people divided and/or censored today?
- What can we learn from these histories today? How can they serve as examples to fight issues of censorship in our contemporary moment?

Additional Archival Materials and Collections

We encourage educators and students to peruse the following collections which have been digitized by VIVO Media Arts Centre:

Coalition for the Right to View, Sara Diamond Fonds, VIVO Media Arts Centre Archive

archive.vivomediaarts.com/sara-diamond-crtv/

The Heat Is On! Women on Art and Sex, Sara Diamond Fonds, VIVO Media Arts Centre Archive

archive.vivomediaarts.com/the-heat-is-on/

Visual Evidence, Sara Diamond Fonds, SVES Fonds, VIVO Media Arts Centre Archive

archive.vivomediaarts.com/crtv-visual-evidence/

References and Further Reading

Ahmed, Sara. 2017. *Living a Feminist Life*. Duke University Press.

Flavelle, Genevieve. 2021. "Erotic Fever in The ArQuives: Imagining a Queer Porn Paradise in Cait McKinney and Hazel Meyer's Exhibition Tape Condition: degraded." *Journal of Feminist Scholarship* 19(Fall): 42-65. digitalcommons.uri.edu/jfs/vol19/iss19/4/

Freeman, Elizabeth. 2010. *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*. Duke University Press.

Guerrero, Emily. 2023. "Gossipy Scraps, Gossip(ing) Archives." *C Magazine*. 24 Apr. <https://cmagazine.com/articles/gossipy-scraps-gossiping-archives>

Knights, Karen. 2020. *Not Confused: Feminists, Queers, Artists and Educators Against Censorship 1982-1992*. Presentation for Griffin Arts Project Event.

Additional viewing material

Wheeler, Anne, *Better Than Chocolate*. 1999 Feature Film Produced by Sharon McGowan.

Synopsis: The famed censorship battle between Little Sister's Book and Art Emporium and Canada Customs finds itself in the background of this romantic comedy shot in Vancouver.

McKinney, Cait and Hazel Meyer. 2024. Curatorial Statement for Archive/Counter-Archive Educational Guide *The images, such as they are, do have an effect on us*.

Meyer, Hazel. *The images, such as they are, do have an effect on us*. 2022. Hazel Meyer website. <https://hazelmeyer.com/The-Images-such-as-they-are-do-have-an-effect-on-us-2022>

Samer, Jed. 2022. *Lesbian Potentiality and Feminist Media in the 1970s*. Duke University Press.

Sirove, Taryn. 2019. *Ruling Out Art: Media Art Meets Law in Ontario's Censor Wars*. University of British Columbia Press. Read the introduction for free here: www.ubcpres.ca/asset/27882/1/9780774837101-Excerpt.pdf

Guide Credits

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Contributors

Chloë Brushwood Rose is a Professor of Education at York University in Toronto. Her research explores the intersection of media, art, and pedagogy.

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Karen Knights is Archive Manager and Special Projects Lead at the VIVO Media Arts Centre's *Crista Dahl Media Library & Archive* (CDMLA) where she activates the collections through community partnerships, archivist internships, digitization projects, and curated exhibition series. Karen is the co-lead for VIVO and Archive/Counter-Archive's case study - *Gendered Violence: Responses and Remediations*.

Susan Lord is Professor of Film and Media and Director of the Vulnerable Media Lab at Queen's University. Susan is co-investigator and university lead of VIVO and Archive/Counter-Archive's case study - *Gendered Violence: Responses and Remediations*.

Ana Valine is a Vancouver based writer, director, and artist whose films have screened and won awards internationally. Ana has recently completed an MFA degree with a focus on film, is currently in the research phase of her ocean film work funded by Canada Council for the Arts, and is writing a pilot and her third feature screenplay with the support of Telefilm. She is working towards a PhD in film studies at Queen's University.