

CINE-GT.3401: The Culture of Archives, Museums, and Libraries

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Observational Study

### Observational Study: Leslie-Lohman Museum and Lesbian Herstory Archives

In 1969, Charles Leslie and Fritz Lohman held their first exhibition of gay artists in their Soho loft.<sup>1</sup> Throughout the 1970s, Leslie and Lohman continued to hold similar exhibitions and initiated the development of an LGBTQIA art collection, and during the AIDS crisis of the 1980s, their exhibitions and collections became critical to the community. They established the Leslie-Lohman Gay Art Foundation in 1987, and the museum was finally accredited in 2016.

Uptown, in 1975, the Lesbian Herstory Archives opened in the pantry of Joan Nestle and Deborah Edel's Upper West Side apartment after a year of action-oriented planning.<sup>2</sup> The Archives began as an idea in 1973, when Edel, Nestle, Julia Stanley, Sahli Cavallo, and Pamela Oline developed the idea of creating a grassroots lesbian archives, by lesbians and for lesbians. The collections continued to grow through community outreach and organizing, and via a fundraising drive in 1985, volunteers raised enough money to purchase a Park Slope brownstone for the collection. The building was purchased in 1991, opened in 1993, and remains in the location to this day.

<sup>1</sup> "About." *Leslie-Lohman Museum*. Accessed 22 February, 2019. <https://www.leslielohman.org/about/>

<sup>2</sup> "A Brief History." *Lesbian Herstory Archives*. Accessed 22 February, 2019. <http://www.lesbianherstoryarchives.org/history.html>

I visited the Leslie-Lohman Museum on a Saturday afternoon, and was caught by surprise when I realized they were hosting an opening for the exhibition *MALE GAZE: Life, Legend, Legacy*. The exhibition is a celebration of 50 years of Leslie-Lohman, and is made up of works from the Leslie-Lohman collection (which is currently over 30,000 objects). The works are hung salon-style throughout one of the museum's two gallery spaces, in an effort to re-create the experience of the original Leslie-Lohman loft exhibitions. Because of this unexpected event, I was unable to get a sense of a "typical" day at Leslie-Lohman Museum, but I was able to observe something of a time capsule in the way that guests of the opening interacted with the art and each other.

Upon entering the Leslie-Lohman Museum, visitors land at a desk where they are able to pay what they wish related to a \$10 suggested admission, and there two galleries – one to the north, one to the south – with separate exhibitions. *MALE GAZE* was in the south gallery, where the opening was in full swing. The demographic was about half people over the age of 50, half younger. Of the visitors appearing to be older than 50, roughly 90% appeared to be white men, and the younger visitors were a diverse crowd in terms of gender and race. In terms of socioeconomic status, visitors seemed to be a privileged group. Visitors mingled amongst each other, frequently walked as couples, and conversed amongst each other as much as they considered the art works. While many openings are more about the social event than viewing the art works, I found that visitors spent significant time (approximately 10-20 seconds) looking at the works and discussing them. Without a cell phone policy made visible, many people took individual and group selfies in front of works. Fewer had conversations in front of works without looking at them at all.

In the north gallery, a continuing exhibition only held a refreshments table and visitors gazing at their phones. The exhibition in place was *BRAVE, BEAUTIFUL OUTLAWS: The Photographs of Donna Gottschalk*. This exhibition focused on the photography of Donna Gottschalk, a lesbian photographer who documented the radical lesbian feminists who came out of the Gay Liberation movement. If the opening of that evening had been for the Gottschalk show, I imagine that the visitor demographic would have been quite different.

Present at the Gottschalk show was zines and ephemera on loan from the Lesbian Herstory Archives, which gave me a preview for my next institutional visit. I visited the Lesbian Herstory Archives at their Park Slope location on a Wednesday evening, which was one of the few times I could visit as a walk-in patron. The Lesbian Herstory Archives is entirely volunteer-run, and as such, hours are sporadic and brief. In February 2019, the Archives are open to the public nine days, and each of those days, it's open between two-and-a-half and six hours.

The front doors remained locked as any Park Slope private brownstone would, and visitors ring a buzzer to be let in by the supervising librarian. I was greeted warmly and asked if I had visited previously. I was informed where the collections were, as well as the kitchenette if I wanted to make myself coffee or tea. There was one other woman in the archive when I arrived, and over the course of the hour I was present, five other women came in to browse or do pre-planned research. All of us were white, and appeared to be between 25-40 years old.

The ground floor of the archives is a reference library, with sections including Poetry, Film, Herstory, Fiction/Bio/Autobiography, Sexuality, Young Adult, and Children's Literature. This section also included a donated library from the Daughters of Bilitis, the first radical lesbian activist group that was founded in the 1950s and folded in the mid-nineties. Upstairs, the archives expanded into special collections, including the tee-shirt archive, and many different

zine archives. These archives are all foldered or boxed in non-archival materials, and are available for anyone to browse through as they wish. Although this is somewhat alarming on a material level, it is inspiring on a cultural level: the Lesbian Herstory Archives is a space founded on trust within a marginalized, minority community. Though this doesn't bode well for the longevity of the materials, it does speak to the heart of the organization and its sustainability therein.

I asked about an audiovisual collection, and the librarian showed me to the basement. The audiovisual collection appeared to largely consist of spoken word audiocassettes that have been cataloged and are available in a finding aid made by students from Pratt Institute.<sup>3</sup> Boxes of VHS tapes, however, are stored haphazardly and unordered in close proximity to the building's boiler room. Many of the tapes I found were commercial titles, but plenty more appeared to be event documentation and other forms of home movies. While the Archives are a tenacious organization doing what they can with their volunteer resources, I hope they are able to organize a collection assessment of audiovisual materials before the tapes are lost to material decay.

<sup>3</sup> "Herstories: Audio/Visual Collections." *Lesbian Herstory Archives*. Accessed 22 February, 2019. <http://herstories.prattinfoschool.nyc/omeka/>