

(paper presented with images at the College Art Association Conference, 2010)

My presentation is about working as an artist in an archive, an activity that - somewhat to my surprise - is intricately entangled with issues of queer desire.

A love-letter on a red napkin; a pair of sequin gloves; an unpublished sci-fi novel; a photograph of Dining Hall #3 in Topaz, Utah: these are just a few of the objects that first lured me to the GLBT Historical Society archives in San Francisco. It's been an easy seduction because I am a sucker for mystery and have always found the visual evidence of a person's life uniquely compelling.

It seems I am not alone. *LINEAGE: Matchmaking in the Archive* is the name of a project I have developed as the Historical Society's first artist-in-residence. One by one I match the archives of the dead to living individuals, who I ask to invent a response. The resulting encounter resembles a blind date: I think about chemistry, about demographics and mutual interests, about what might emerge from the vault. No one is matched to someone they knew and the collections I select have not yet been in the public eye. Mostly, I use intuition to match creative individuals with an archive that might turn them on. The intense dyadic relationships forming in this process are becoming a kind of lineage, one that resides outside bloodlines and marriage contracts and often outside of identity boundaries.

As matchmaker, I find that browsing the shelved collections is somewhat like cruising, threaded with the thrill of chance encounters, the lure of fantasy, the possibility of probing deeper. To open a box, pry apart its folders, touch personal artifacts, scrutinize photos and diary entries is unsettling in its voyeurism. An awareness of death imbues each object with uncanny allure; what is absent urges further inquiry. Desire is my retrieval mechanism, or maybe it's the fuel. How to select, dive in, open myself to what is inside, let myself be taken in. There is a distinct feeling of overstepping a boundary. In the words of one participant: **"My experience was unsettling. I felt as if I had stepped into a stranger's house and gone through their drawers."** The gaps in the story fuel the imagination as one steps into and out of the box, a person's life, this archival surrogate.

For this panel I've been asked to present a paper. As a visual artist, this conference format presents a dilemma. I work with an eclectic amalgam of objects, text, images, space, time and people. I play different roles: maker, organizer, historian, detective, curator – and now this new one: matchmaker. How to flatten this out, condense, push these forms into an annotated text that is written, read, maybe published. It is not unlike the way an archive distills a person's life into folders, files, boxes, shelves – a tangible biography. A paper is an index to an entire experience of thought, movement, the weaving of ideas through time, a unique narrative. And so each person's archive suggests a unique narrative, one that is gathered and told and interpreted. Conference presentations give body to ideas, and – similarly – the work of *Lineage* participants, the relationship between the archived person and the living person, gives that archive a body. Each box is filled with the possibility of touch, smell, sight, sounds: the metaphorical taste of one person's life.

The first work to emerge from the *Lineage* process became an exhibition at the Historical Society that just closed in November. I designed the installation to suggest an exposed archive and included the work of the first 11 participants. Let me guide you through parts of this mirror archive.

The work was structured on and around steel archive shelving. Archive boxes, both functional and fabricated, served as containers and display units for objects from collections already matched as well as those waiting in the wings. A line of text quoting participants about their relationship to their match, snaked around the gallery walls. And for each matched pair I created a portrait in which the living and the dead occupy the frame at the same time. Each photo shoot lasted 2 hours or more; my living models frequently spoke to their projected matches, as well as with me and whoever else was in the room. Laughter, discomfort, conversation and technical distractions all mingled with a bit of the uncanny and felt like a form of community.

I matched **Luciano Chessa**, an experimental composer from Italy, with a box labeled "The Papers and Artifacts of Lawrence DeCaesar a.k.a. Larry Langtry (1931-1996)." Larry was a flamboyant self-taught musician who made his living playing piano bars. Larry's box was filled with an odd assortment of astrological charts, handwritten playlists, old photographs, sequin gloves, newspaper clippings, pieces of folded paper

with important dates (such as Mario Lanza died 1959), and an ordained-by-mail membership card issued from *Church of the God Within, Inc.* After finding a prayer card printed with *Prayer of an Aspiring Musician*, Luciano rushed home to compose an aria with the same title to be sung by male soprano Don Tatro. In Luciano's words: "All of a sudden, I was rapturously moved by a few clumsy, copyrighted devotional verses. Why? Larry was hardly an amateur. Was this a lesson in humility?"

Luciano interrupted his first archive visit when he discovered that Larry had performed at the *Bucket of Blood* Saloon in Virginia City, Nevada. In tears, he told me that not only had he, Luciano, visited *Bucket of Blood*, but that this same bar had been inspiration for an earlier composition *Quadri da una città fantasma*. Luciano wondered, "Was this simply a coincidence? Was it astrologically predetermined?" I thought, "Damn I'm a good matchmaker!"

Tina Takemoto, artist, writer and professor, was matched with Jiro Onuma who immigrated from Japan to California in 1923 at age 19, only to be carted off to a Japanese Internment camp in 1944. For Tina's piece "Gay Bachelor's Japanese American Internment Survival Kit" she taught herself the craft skills used in the camps and made objects from materials that might have been accessible: a tarpaper wallet and cigarette holder, carved bird cufflinks and tie clip, a muscle man hanafuda card set, and a homemade "progressive exerciser" device with chart to record progress. In Tina's words: "I grew up hearing family stories about internment camps, but no one ever mentioned the gay and lesbian experience of imprisonment. I tried to imagine how Jiro survived the isolation, boredom, humiliation and heteronormativity as a dandyish gay bachelor obsessed with erotic male physical culture magazines. When I found out Onuma enrolled in Earle Liederman's 12-week correspondence Physical Culture School program, I wondered 'Was he receiving letters from Liederman as a way to keep his queer imaginary alive?'"

With **Gabriella Ripley-Phipps**, recent art graduate and waitress, I tried something new. There was no archive collection for Sally Binford who, in the words of her friend Susie Bright "was an astonishing person, an anthropologist, anti-war activist, founding feminist and early sex radical." I had already come to the conclusion that women, trans

and people of color take up far too little shelf space. So I put Gabriella in touch with Susie and others. She spoke with Sally's granddaughter, attended her former poker party, and gathered photographs and documents to fill an archive box. The piece she created, "Archival Dinner Party," was a performance event in which 12 guests interpreted the anonymous archive objects each had donated. All in their early 20's, they discussed how archives function and how their own archive might look someday.

Gabriella writes: "Sally did not want to linger into debility and dependency so she quit while she was ahead and killed herself and her poodle Jake at age 69. I don't feel close to Sally. I only see the sides of her that were bright and brilliant, but without understanding her darkness, I cannot know her. I think I would have liked her, maybe even had a crush on her. But she would have been intimidating as all hell."

I matched **Lauren Crux**, a writer, performer, photographer and therapist, to a flamboyant political songwriter and cabaret performer named Janny MacHarg, known as "The Tallulah Bankhead of San Francisco." Lauren created "Dinosaurs and Haircuts", a live performance and artist book about a blind date, old lesbians, intimations of mortality, and what we leave behind. Janny and her long time African American lover Evie Turner were kicked out of the Communist Party for being lesbians. At her memorial in 2003, a member of the Communist Party attended and issued a formal apology.

Lauren writes: "Think about being on a blind date: the awkwardness, the hopefulness, the disappointments, the not-knowing. I kept wanting to bail on the whole thing. But then something shifted, and I came to appreciate and deeply care for Janny. At first I related to her as my butch buddy – until Ida Red told me she was femme, and described her favorite red leather jacket. When I heard her song tapes, I fell in love. She had a deep bawdy humor and I wanted to know her....I have been creating a friendship with a dead person. I notice the shift to present tense. I find myself writing Janny will like this story....I wanted her approval. Now I have to remind myself I never actually MET her."

Spending time with the archive of someone who has died is an intense and intimate process. There is an ineffable sadness in looking through the materials that is directly autobiographical. Someone else's artifacts makes us think of our own, and we weave a narrative to cement the link. Adrianna Cavarero, Italian philosopher and feminist scholar, writes about our complex desire for narrative in Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood. She states "*Between identity and narration....there is a tenacious relation of desire*" There is an eroticism in touching the artifacts of a life, of entering a narrative that feels secretive. Would this person have been comfortable with my take on their life? Or would they be insulted or offended? Am I prying too much?

In an earlier project called *Quasi Lapis*, I experienced something similar while meandering through graveyards with my camera. Lingered longest over one particular stone engraved with the names of two women, I experienced a constant feeling of being watched. In the microfiche files of a local library, I discovered they were sisters and my disappointment was palpable. Damn! Here I had been feeling self-conscious about outing two dearly departed souls, and they were only sisters. Because in my solitary and speculative wanderings, I was looking for romance. Not for myself, exactly, but some hint of it for the single women about whose lives these stones were so silent. Some romantic reference point from the past, some hint of how I might have wished to have been buried, had I been formerly dead.

The project led to digitally fictionalizing epitaphs, overlaying my own desires on the scanty evidence each stone provided. Lingered at the gravestone of Miss Olive Hills, for example, buried alone at the north end of the Hancock cemetery in New Hampshire, I imagined that really she should have been interred right next to Miss Miriam Woods at the south end. Two terribly upright slate tablets jutting at slightly different angles, but in an unmistakable intimacy above their invisible bodily remains.

I am interested in blurring the boundary between oneself and a life that has passed. What does that relationship look like? What fuels it? It seems that giving participants one archive to focus on, one person, has a unique kind of power. Is it our most accessible way into history? Not through grand narratives, or even through the identity politics of oppression, but through a simple one-to-one connection that we partially "read" and partially invent?

Discovering the Helen Harder collection in the archives ignited my own sexual fantasies as much as any 21st century figure might do. There she was in her WWII airforce jacket, her parachute hanging jauntily from around her waist. Damn, she was handsome. Not usually turned on by a woman in uniform, I found that this one – safely ensconced in the past – reached out flirtatiously from the black and white snapshot.

Maybe that's why I matched Helen with a gay man, filmmaker **Bill Domonkos**. In another coincidence that bolstered my confidence as matchmaker, Bill told me his favorite film - *Wings* - is about a Russian World War II woman pilot. Both women became single mothers, and both had a difficult time adjusting to life after the war. Bill created *The Poppy*, a short experimental film inspired by the bleak poetry Helen Harder wrote. Using a combination of manipulated archive film footage, digital animation and special effects, his film evokes an inner landscape of poetic juxtapositions, exploring themes of identity, isolation, longing and alienation. He says: "As someone attracted to the darker side of human nature, I was captivated by Helen's personal, uncompromised poetic voice."

As the *Lineage* project unfolds, new people are coming to me with a desire to be matched. The process is bringing unexpected questions to my attention. I wonder "What does it mean in the era of gay marriage, of being this close to attaining a significant marker of normalcy, assimilation and respect, to enter into a relationship with a dead person? Why are people eager to do so? As matchmaker, I already have become aware of my own historical promiscuity...but how does that work in these one-to-one relationships with the other side? Is the timing an accident? Do we still need a non-normative and de-stabilized approach to the erotic? Something outside our "normal" queer life and loves?

In my role as matchmaker, there is plenty to get off on. In the age old tradition of middle aged women who engage in this service, and as a lesbian in my promiscuous late middle age, I help launch relationships and then get to see and hear every detail of

how they evolve. It is a kind of archive mid-wifery, a highly voyeuristic, undoubtedly manipulative and totally magical experience.

It is also my camera that records the chemistry of connection. In these portrait sessions, the personality of each dyadic relationship comes out of the closet, exposed to my camera and ears. Some are shy, slow to warm up. A living person self consciously speaks to their ephemeral match through nervous laughter. Others attempt an embrace, even a kiss - speaking intimately or perhaps teasing. After my session with Luciano, he wrote: "Larry was not my type, yet I was historically intrigued. The only moment in the process in which something took place at a physical level was during the photo session. This is when I actually had to deal with the fact that Larry indeed had a body. As subjects, he and I had to measure our respective size and height to calibrate various poses, to make sure I was not covering his face or he mine – just as with any dual portrait session. Before I knew it, I was flirting with Larry's projection. For some poses Larry was my age and we made a nice couple. In others Larry was an older gentleman with southern sideburns and we played out a daddy aesthetic with me as the younger lover."

It was in the photo sessions that I was reminded of 19th century séances, of Spirit photographs graced with an apparitional presence. In her book Ghosts of Futures Past, Molly McGarry asks "How can the dead speak through the living as something other than the haunting, seething presence of absence?" In writing about the relationship of writers like Radclyffe Hall and Walt Whitman to Spiritualism, she states "...these subjects made sense of their own queer time through spiritual theories of embodiment that offered forms of meaning secular science refused...Temporality functions here as the difference most difficult to bridge, the ultimate otherness." McGarry uses the figure of the ghost as a way to understand the apparitional social status of marginalized subjects; indeed the ghost is a powerful way of understanding both memory and identity. Through the lens of queer theory, history is seen as a kind of haunting that comes back and informs the present. Participant Maya Manvi writes: It's as if Dodi's artifacts, in all their ambiguity, crawled their way up into my corpus callosum and carved the tissue and gray matter, making a home for themselves."

Troy Boyd, a publisher administrator who recently lost his job, was matched with AIDS activist George Choy, who died of AIDS in the early 90's. Troy says: "My letter is a thank-you to George; a reflection on life as a gay African American male in admiration of how George stepped out of the shadows and pushed for change. I found George's Act Up promotion poster bold and extremely sexy." In "My Letter to George" Troy writes: "It is difficult writing this letter to you; how do you admit that you are attracted to someone who died over ten years ago? But there it is, I was immediately drawn to your physical beauty. Is this sick or is it flattering? I say it is what it is."

There are now 15 new participants waiting for the next chapter in this project. Some are already matched; for others I need to return to my old cruising ground, the aisles where I locate just the right collection. People die. New collections arrive at the GLBT Historical Society, new kids on the block, waiting for their official spot on the shelf.

As an artist, *Lineage* has expanded the possibilities for my art practice. I am collaborating with a non-profit organization that initially was very cautious about having an "artist-in-residence." (I had to reassure them I did not expect to set up camp or receive a salary.) As a kind of ambassador from the arts, this project has expanded their understanding of what art can be and do. Each event linked to *Lineage* has brought new crowds of people to the Historical Society. While no one is yet rushing to make a major donation (I've raised my own funding), my hope is to attract an endowment for an ongoing Artist-in-Residence program.

LINEAGE: Matchmaking in the Archive provides one model for how to bring archives, our history, off the archive shelf into creative visibility. In this process, desire crosses time, crosses into and out from the archive, lurks in liminal spaces between life and death, between beginnings and endings. Personal archives arouse all kinds of prurient curiosities, inappropriate speculations and impossible longings - perfect provocation for art that inscribes LGBT history in new ways.