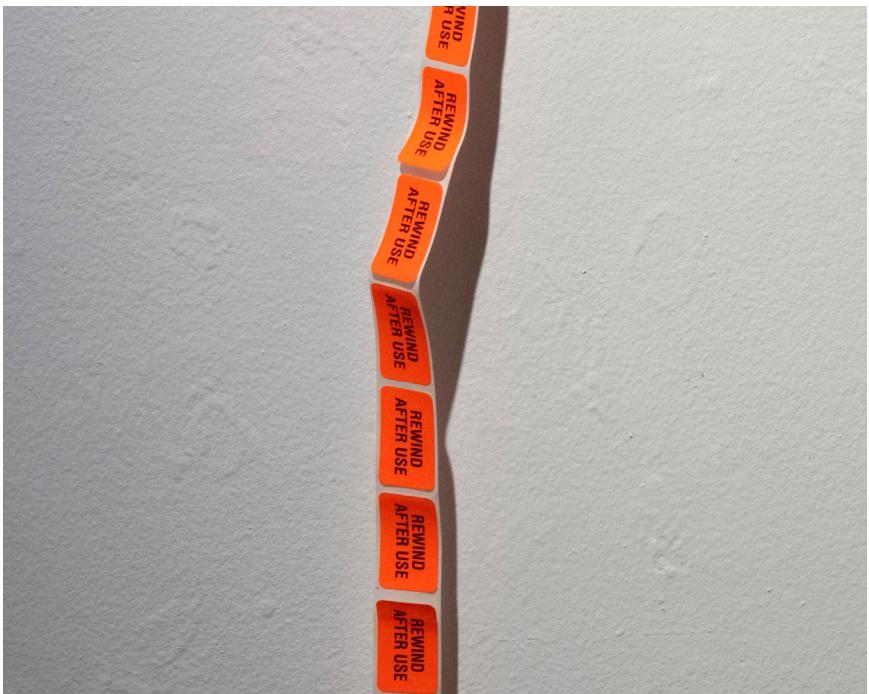


*Good Humor*



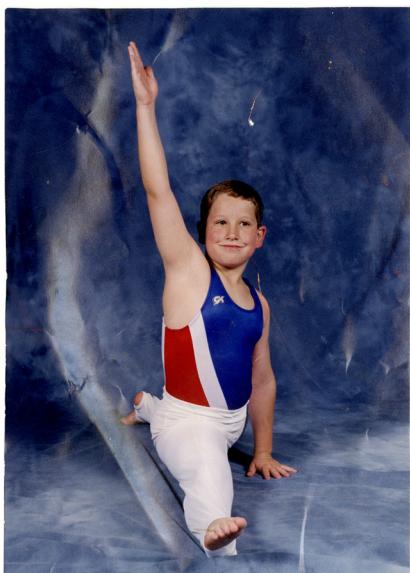
*Doran Walot*

Thesis Committee:

Ron Jude (chair)

Anya Kivarkis

Sylvan Lionni



"If you're missing me I want you to know I'm not missing you. Gone is gone. I never miss anything or anyone because it all becomes a lovely memory. I guard my memories and love them, but I don't get in them and lie down. You can even make stories from yours, but remember, they don't come back. Just think how awful it would be if they did."

- Louise Fitzhugh, *Harriet the Spy*









I shared a bedroom with my brother Seth<sup>1</sup>, five years and two months my senior, for the first thirteen years of my life. Like lots of younger siblings, it's impossible to discern what percentage of my taste is actually my brother's; certainly, Seth seemed to believe that the primary directive of older siblinghood was cultural stewardship. When we lived together, this took predictable forms-- trips to thrift stores to fill our room with esoterica, charming ushers at the arthouse cinema into granting us free admission, a cache of VHS recordings of first-run episodes of *The Simpsons*, multiple shared, secret video store rental accounts.

After Seth moved out, this culture remained our tether; in the time since Seth died, it has become increasingly clear the way these cultural conversations stood in for more personal ones. Seth and I were both drawn to photography as a creative practice. Upon clearing Seth's possessions, my parents left in my charge what remained of Seth's photographic practice in his apartment-- external hard drives, negatives, some cameras with semi-occupied media cards. Alongside the digital records of our correspondences, this shoebox of raw material became an albatross around my neck-- how to best honor Seth's intentions while making his creative practice accessible?

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1       Seth was born with Treacher-Collins Syndrome, a craniofacial genetic mutation: a recessed chin, eyes set deep enough back for gravity to constantly force eye juice to pool beneath his lower lids on his misshapen cheekbones, barely-there ears. Some further, necessary physical augmentations: a tracheotomy tube around his neck was corked by a cheap plastic cap he had to take off when he went to bed was tied around his neck with a white shoelace-like binding that would get changed irregularly, typically when it was also time to replace one of the batteries in his beige headband-style hearing aid, which he also had to remember to take off before falling asleep. On nights when I fell asleep after Seth, if he forgot to remove his hearing aid, I could hear faint feedback, like an amplifier reacting to a dropped microphone.

In the five years since Seth died, I've had this nagging urge (and some external family pressure) to structure the mass of images and correspondences left in my possession. Each time I attempted to approach this collection, I quickly found myself caught in the metanarrative of the situation- how do I honor a perspective that is not my own in a way that isn't merely "getting in my memories and laying down"? Seth was the most important guide in my cultural development and on paper, the death of my gay disabled brother is the saddest thing that's ever happened to me, but Seth was also a reasonably manipulative alcoholic who forced me into the role of mediator between himself and my frustrated parents during the last decade of his life. During our studio visit my first year, Stanley Wolukau-Wanambwa told me that "there is no story that doesn't exploit." Even still, how do I shape Seth's legacy truthfully but tenderly? Can it be done in a way that doesn't crush my parents or burnish my own ego, without turning my practice into an unpaid internship at the Seth Walot Memorial Archives?



The hearing aid fucks everything up, there aren't many styles you can bisect like that

Yeah word

I guess that's an argument for having the surgery but I'd rather just wear a hat

The argument for having the surgery is that you may not be able to replace your aid again and also, like, sound quality, but I'm not gonna argue w you about it

Yeah I just don't want to see a doctor, but I'll have insurance in January

Plus I definitely don't want to go under the knife even if it's outpatient

Hospitals are awfully depressing places

That's def true. But I honestly think a few days of suffering would increase your quality of life drastically so it's a sacrifice you may want to consider

Yeah maybe I'll look into the non bone anchored ones

If I qualify for the outpatient under the skin ones I'd probably do it

It'd be like getting a tattoo or piercing

But I have infinite distrust of medical professionals

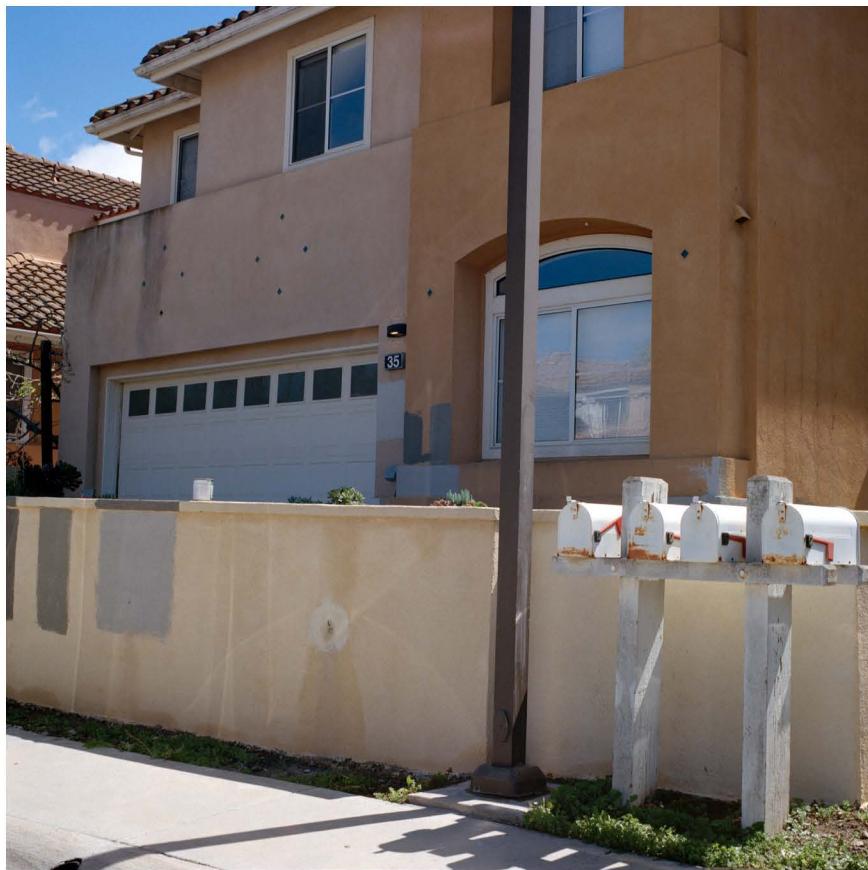


In the context of my thesis work, this meta-text became more important than the source material. Upon finally confronting, for example, the external hard drive of Seth's files, it became increasingly clear that what had been preserved were outtakes and alternatives. In life, Seth had preserved his own archive- Flickr pages, websites, and social media of image selections and edits. Reckoning with a cache of b-sides meant confronting the ways in which Seth had become a fixed, idealized presence after death (a tragic figure, a magical other, a personal shaper of taste, a content producer, an archive) and also recognizing the ways in which the undertaking of preserving Seth's things had been self-serving in the first place, an attempt to reckon with the "closure" of a kind of archive of influence.

Confronting the loss of access to a specific type of personal experience has been the general operating procedure of my thesis work. This metaphor extends beyond Seth to include the bygone space of the video rental store and also relates to the ongoing photographic body of work (images of the subdevelopment in which my brother and I were raised) represented here-- a neighborhood in a constant state of expansion and reconstruction, replacing, optimizing, or rendering inaccessible spaces that were locations of personal adolescent significance.

**HAPPY BIRTHDAY**

**HOPE IT SHREDS**



My initial interest in photography was rooted in something I would more accurately describe as an anthropological interest in the photograph as a physical item, rather than the necessity to take photos myself. I think Hito Steyerl makes cogent arguments for the image as a “thing” rendered unfixed from physical, material form by the rise of the digital screen’s inarguable rise as the predominant viewing method for art images. Nonetheless, whether out of pure nostalgic attachment to material objects, technophobia, or something deeper I’m hoping to explicate here, I can’t shake my attachment to the photograph as a material form.

This is all pretense for discussing the importance of the physical archive of images: first, to think about ways that archives, which I am loosely defining here as a collection of images (whether personal, historical, institutional, or imagined), often in conjunction with text-based ephemera, have been deployed in institutional space to highlight specific underrepresented narratives. Next, I'll touch on the photobook as a "closed" or "controlled" archival strategy for recontextualizing and physicalizing images and, very briefly, the potential for the image in physical reality as an "object"; that is: material contexts for images beyond the page or screen. Finally, I will situate concrete castings within the larger context of my thesis work.

Attempts to creatively deploy the archive to legitimize and typify populations typically undocumented or severely under-documented in institutional space is definitely not unprecedented. The Fae Richards Photo Archive, a fictionalized image archive created by the filmmaker Cheryl Dunye in collaboration with the artist Zoe Leonard as textural detail for Dunye's pioneering 1996 independent queer romantic comedy *The Watermelon Woman*, is one such example. The film, and Leonard and Dunye's archive as an extension, presaged a number of nuanced debates about the contemporary state of identity, including questions about queer erasure.





In a 2013 interview with Dunye entitled *Imaginary Archives*, Julia Bryan-Wilson argues, "As there are many kinds of queer histories, so too are there many types of queer archives: banal ones, tender ones, bureaucratic ones. But perhaps the queerest things about archives are their silences - their telling blanks and perversely willful holes."

The photobook as a material form can be used to structure and activate an archive, or at the very least, recall the form of the archive for conceptual ends.

Mapping structuralist concepts onto queer male visual culture, Hal Fischer's 1977 *Gay Semiotics: A Photographic Study of Visual Coding Among Homosexual Men* approaches a specific subculture through the removed lens of ethnographic study. In the words of Julia Bryan-Wilson, the book "pars[es] a signification system that arose out of a nonverbal, erotic exchange, [while] deconstructing gay male self-fashioning and photographing 'archetypes.'" The form of the images themselves recall catalog advertisements; Fischer has indicated that choice was intentional- "using the size of the text against the image so to read it from a distance would seem like an advertisement and then when you got closer you might think, What's he talking about?, but then I would disarm that by using humor.”"

This recollection of twin lingual forms native to power structures, advertising and anthropology, simultaneously validates these archetypes and highlights their artificiality. Publishing this collection of images lent formal credence and a broader audience to an underground visual language that had previously only been disseminated through word of mouth and assumption. Mapping deadpan or overtly humorous language onto highly personal and occasionally painful subject matter is normalizing, a "lexicon of attraction" as Fischer calls it, but still retains the authorial voice of otherness, treating its subject matter with an alien remove.



This approach, treating a personal or constructed archive as an anthropological or institutional one, can also be seen in Bill Owens' 1973 photobook *Suburbia*. *Suburbia* is a portrait of three communities in which the explicit resistance to interpreting or contextualizing the words of the residents strands them in a kind of purgatory. The subjects reveal their motivations, hopes, and frustrations but do all with the same lack of affect, leaving the viewer without a clear read on whether their adherence to the suburban ideal is fulfilling or crushing. This ambiguous space between humor and melancholy is the tonal north star of my own work- a simultaneous validation of aspiration with an awareness of the empty constructedness that undergirds the myth of the American Dream.

Larry Sultan and Mike Mandel demonstrate a strategy for utilizing “real” archival images for decontextualized means in their landmark 1977 book *Evidence*. In her essay *Two Guys from Van Nuys*, from a 2012 survey monograph of Sultan and Mandel’s collaborative works, Charlotte Cotton perhaps best encapsulates that strategy:

“Their framing of the project was, from the outset, well beyond that of simply editorially controlling the inherent meaning of the photographs. The potent visual charge of the unpublished and raw photographic material that they drew out of the archives was almost entirely contingent on their choice of the photographs and their sequencing in the book. They perceived themselves as creators of the body of work, both by their finding incredibly rare photographs with such visual charge and the resonance bound up in the sequencing and production qualities they orchestrated in their self-published book.”

This technique of utilizing a curated archive of existing images for decontextualized new narrative ends is now in many ways the lingua franca of the photobook as a form, but these decisions were still revelatory in 1977. One of the strengths of the photobook as a material form is simply our cultural deference for the book in general as an authoritative form, an arbiter of knowledge and experience.

This strategy for approaching the archive as an evolving marker of time also emerges in Nick Muellner's 2009 photobook, *The Amnesia Pavilions*. "This project interweaves images made by a 20-year-old in the last days of the Soviet Union, and by a 40-year-old in contemporary Russia. These two photographers (and these two countries) may or may not be the same. Shot primarily in and around the Siberian city of Ulan-Ude, *The Amnesia Pavilions* conflates personal and socio-political history, while refusing to separate subject from subjectivity."

Mixing images shot by the artist across these two timelines with ephemera, images culled from historical archives, and lyrical narrative passages while also leaving room for the potential for constructed narrative interventions, *The Amnesia Pavilions* represents the combination of a number of archival approaches. The book traces the artist's search for a boy, Aloysha, with whom he had a romantic connection during his original stay in Siberia that continued as a short-lived correspondence, combing through the current city, his image archive from 20 years prior, and the gaps in his own recollection to form a hunt for the literal Aloysha as well as what he represents in a repressive Siberian climate and his role in the formation of Muellner's own sexual identity.

The artist intentionally mines the ambiguity of archival sources but approaches them through a lens that is more blatantly humanist than the deadpan remove of some of these other examples. *The Amnesia Pavilions* is archive-as-memoir and not as statement of anthropological fact, even as it traces the sociopolitical changes of a specific culture. The frustration of approaching an investigation through a variety of constructed lenses- personal, political, emotional, perhaps speculative- but still failing to come up with conclusive answers is palpable. Muellner blending together the tools of both representation and identification is an approach that is decidedly queer in its resourcefulness; it serves as a reminder that existing institutional tools for approaching narratives of alterity can be revealing but ultimately may lack the ability to encapsulate the fullness and specificity of the experience of “otherness.”



Some of the effectiveness of the archive as a form is its potential to exist without resolution or necessarily coherence. In her risograph-printed zine/book *Show Bible*, Martine Syms utilizes the archive's ability to present process without making a conclusive hypothesis. *Show Bible* attempts to look at televisual representation of African-American experience. The publication mixes a variety of visual forms but is primarily told through presentation of research materials rather than images. Rather than take the structure of a critical essay, Syms fluctuates between presenting comments in the marginalia of critical race and media studies texts, presenting TV scheduling grids notable for the homogeneity of its programming, pages of scripts notable for how they do (or more often don't) approach race, archival images of black families watching television, shot lists for the *Family Matters* opening credits sequence. The book's title, *Show Bible*, refers to the master document prized by television showrunners for laying out multi-season narrative arcs, maintaining tonal continuity, references for future storylines, etc.

Reading Syms' publication as a literal "show bible" frames these varied pieces of information as a complete speculative archive, potential research for some sort of specific undertaking in sitcom development. As bell hooks writes in the introduction to *Art on my Mind*, "Representation is a crucial location of struggle for any exploited and oppressed people asserting subjectivity and decolonization of the mind." *Show Bible* speaks to the ways in which underrepresented bodies find points of connection in narratives that do not directly mirror their own for lack of alternative representation, the ways in which marginalized people cling to even inaccurate or overly broad representations because sometimes it is the only chance of representation at all.

The constant hunt for reflections of their own experience in cultural forms tends to make marginalized people experts in the language and nuances of representation because of the remove at which they stand from that structure of representation. For Syms, some of that remove is characterized in the material form of the printed book- we source information not just from the content of the book but from the texture of the photocopies of crumpled pages that bleed in the margins, the underlying and direct questioning of secondhand academic knowledge, the “poor image” simulacra- the knowledge that we are looking at this information specifically filtered through one lens of experience. This unique positionality allows Syms to act as curator of information but also a curator of absence or erasure.

*Show Bible* explicates a tool available to voices outside the institution- a simultaneous critique and acknowledgment of power, a desire to belong and participate but the knowledge that you can never fully inhabit structures that reject you.

The photobook has consistently been a strategy within my artistic practice for shaping narrative as well as both reflecting and commenting upon the archive. One successful use of this strategy was my construction of the book *When I Let Myself Feel, All I Feel is Lousy*. Utilizing some of the aforementioned editing strategies, I aimed to construct a book that functioned as an archive of repulsion and discomfort, encapsulating two feelings that rarely are preserved for posterity.

Returning briefly to Mike Mandel, whose *Baseball-Photographer Trading Cards* sit comfortably within this conversation—the half-ironic, half-sincere reappropriation of everyday images and photographic contexts. Mandel found himself becoming frustrated by the growing competitiveness within photographic circles. “[In the Seventies] it seemed that the photo community was comprised of a group of dedicated artists, who. . . had been snubbed by the art world for having the audacity to negate the imperative of the unique, precious object,” Mandel wrote in 1999, “But a strange thing happened about that time: the art world discovered photography. . . Competitions for NEA grants and university jobs began to revolve around the hierarchy of art world professionals.” Mandel’s response was to undertake *The Baseball-Photographer Trading Cards*, a collection of one hundred and thirty-four informal portraits of photographers posing as baseball players, which were produced as ordinary trading cards, complete with index numbers and accompanying statistics and quotes on the reverse side. The cards were then sold in packs of ten—complete with bubble gum donated by Topps, the kingpin of baseball card manufacturing.

WHEN I LET MYSELF FEEL,  
ALL I FEEL IS LOUSY

DORAN WALOT

"I wanted to lampoon the newfound celebrity-hood of photo personalities in the art marketplace," Mandel explains, also remembering that during his own baseball-card collecting childhood, "cards made the players more accessible—in fact, public property." He carried his spoof to the extreme, including such vital statistics on the backs of the cards as "Favorite Photography Paper" and "Favorite Camera" and tidbits of wisdom from the photographers themselves. Mandel published 3,000 copies of each card for a total print run just over 400,000, disseminated to gallery and museum locations internationally for sale and trade.

I think in many ways this project dovetails nicely with Hito Steyerl's recollection of David Bowie and commodity fetishism. The trading cards positioned an emerging circle of artists utilizing a medium only newly given access to institutional spaces as heroic icons, albeit approachable ones. This is a photo record as a mythology builder, one that with the distance of time we can recognize as successful merely by the familiarity of a majority of the names and faces represented in Mandel's project within art contexts. However, the type of mythology that Mandel is choosing to build is important in its material associations. Baseball cards are the provenance of boyhood, not the art market. Again, we come to a crossroads where representation is simultaneously granted and punctured. These photographers become icons but icons for whom and to what end?

I remain interested in this conversation between a youthful desire to feel represented and a rejection of larger systems of power. I have an understanding that despite the otherness with which I identify, rooted in gay identity and an alienating religious educational upbringing and body dysmorphia, I harbor an extreme amount of visible privilege as a white cis male. It's important that my work acknowledges that privilege and the specifics of my positionality.

Attachment to, and interest in, "outmoded" forms of cultural production can be derided as nostalgia or foot-dragging; yes, analog forms of image production, duplication, and distribution are relatively costly, temperamental, decreasingly accessible, and rapidly deteriorating. The context of the digital image only serves to expand the capacity for new interactions with the materiality of the image- a new prism through which to filter the archive, certainly a more comprehensive way to construct an archive as a pure reference tool, but not a replacement for the physical archive in its totality. I think there will always be value in the tactile image. There are narratives that remain to be allowed to take up space, literal space- seeing some hyper-specific piece of your quotidian existence reaffirmed and projected back at you, within the terms of the institutional structure through which we have been taught to understand power, especially when that representation is literal and not just flattened archetypes approximating you presented as appeasement, is vital in an era when identity is openly litigated as a tool for subjugation.



Situating the cast object in contemporary artistic contexts can be neatly summarized in two words: Rachel Whiteread. Recognition of this influence was not unwelcome but was admittedly unconscious, though reading a variety of critical interpretations of Whiteread's body of work provided a great foundation for probing my impulse to cast "Squeeze & Shake" VHS sleeves.

"Such is the nature of the history to which she is drawn in the objects she chooses: possession and use have overlaid the commodity with a patina of human traces, which in turn are left on Whiteread's cast. Or perhaps, rather than thinking of this as a patina laid down, we might think of it more in terms of that which use has worn away, which is what the inversion of casting can make present again, rendering the concave convex, bringing back into existence that which wear, damage, time have taken away. [...] Things that should be hollow (stair well, house) are rendered solid. Things that should contain (bath) are themselves contained. Casting inverts the logic of these objects, while recording the history of personal psychic investments in them. [...] The persistence of the aura, of the trace of a human presence, invests these objects with a psychic weight of loss and memorialization, and part of what they memorialize or gesture towards is a possibility of real presence, of human relations that are not mediated by the values of exchange, and therefore of domination."

Unlike Johanna Malt's interpretation of Whiteread's castings, I'm hoping that my concrete VHS sleeves maintain visual cues that point directly towards conversations about exchange value and commodity. The video store was a capitalist enterprise, not a benevolent one- shelves were stocked by demand and some surely quantifiable reasons for choosing titles: a mix between regional tastes, recency bias, deals struck with mainstream film distributors, or the aim to cast a wide (or wide enough) net over film history. Nonetheless, now (and probably always), "human traces" are inextricable from references to commodity or systems of power- corporations, depending on perspective, are either essentially people ("corporate personhood") or, at least, composed of groupings of people.

This is another nexus of discussion in my work- recognizing that systems of power are constructed and rarely fixed but also acknowledging the ways in which one can subvert or appropriate the tools of power for personal edification, acting as "a border that is not a border, but the site of an impossible possible relation between the symbolic and the real." Malt's Lacanian analysis of Whiteread's castings interprets the works in the realm of the psychoanalytic but resists interpreting the works phenomenologically. In *Orientations: Toward a Queer Phenomenology*, Sara Ahmed intends to "offer an approach to how bodies take shape through tending toward objects that are reachable, which are available within the bodily horizon. Such an approach is informed by [her] engagement with phenomenology, though it is not properly phenomenological; one suspects that a queer phenomenology might enjoy this failure to be proper." That is to say, I believe phenomenological interactions with art are tangled with the psychoanalytic.





Ahmed's queer phenomenology indeed operates both within and outside of traditional modes of interpretation; one can argue that a "queer psychoanalytics" can similarly be mapped and subverted.

Another such work invoking this conversation in my thesis is *Good Humor*. A novelty freezer seems plucked from an under-stocked bodega in winter and placed in the gallery: one Popsicle remains in stock, cradled in a gridded basket. An elaborate armature designed to keep one small, sugary treat in edible cryo-stasis, lest someone has an off-season craving. A low sound reverberates from the aging freezer, this coffin of Good Humor--peaceful and effortful.

This tension between sculptural or narrative reduction and specific reference to lived experience has been ongoing in my practice and I believe it to be a fertile ground for directing interpretation of the work itself. The concept for the piece originated with a personal anecdote, one that permanently skews interpretation. The work of Felix Gonzales-Torres often operates at this juncture between hyper-specific personal recollection and invocation of a more accessible metaphor: a billboard shows a rumpled, empty bed that appears to be recently occupied. Displayed in a context designed for commerce, interpretations vary depending on information known about the artist's life- an unoccupied bed speaks broadly to intimacy and absence, but insight that the image is made by a queer artist who lost their partner to AIDS foregrounds both empathy for a specific lived experience as well as politically-driven readings. Nonetheless, free from text or definitive means of interpretation, these billboards become spaces for contemplation where a variety of potentially even conflicting interpretations can simultaneously coexist.

My attraction to the inherent queerness of the archive stems from that unfixity. Mediated by a number of prisms- what was culled, from what available pool of resources, by whom, at what time, by what methods, on whose dime, for what audience, and so on, ad eternum- the archive is never *not* an interpretation in some definable way: new tunnels to familiar caves.

Physical photographs, castings that render negative space tangible, drawn recreations of text message exchanges- these are all methods of reconstruction at the crossroads of the “symbolic” and the “real”- artifacts that reference specific pasts but cannot be fully extricated from the systems and bodies that selected, interpreted, and maintained them. The introduction of a deadpan visual language recalls the perceived authority of the act of archival selection while simultaneously puncturing the source of said power: a nexus of conflicting interpretations and strategies that references memory while hopefully sidestepping some of the preciousness that nostalgia entails.



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