

Event: Lesbian Artistic Expressions from the Wanderground Archive: Aesthetic Inspirations for Building Communities

Overview

From September through October 2024, the Fleet Library at RISD (Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, RI) hosted an exhibit of many items from the Wanderground Collection titled "Understanding and Appreciating Lesbian Lives Through Craft and Art." An event entitled Lesbian Artistic Expressions from the Wanderground Archive: Aesthetic Inspirations for Building Communities was held on October 24, 2025. The panel presentation served a dual purpose: to offer a curator's talk for the exhibit and to discuss the importance of historical materials in building connections and community among Lesbian and Queer peoples.

Summary

Angela DiVeglia, facilitator and archivist at the Fleet Library at RISD, introduced the speakers: Mev Miller, Instigator/Lesbrarian of Wanderground, Gail Cohee, retired Director of the Sarah Doyle Women's Center at Brown University and current lecturer at RISD; and Leo Lovemore, Librarian for History, Society and Culture at Brown University Library and a lecturer in the History, Philosophy and Social Sciences department at RISD.

The discussion began with a brief PowerPoint by Mev who discussed the development of Wanderground as a community-based, Lesbian-focused library-archive-museum. Mev highlighted several items in the collection as contained in the exhibit. She discussed connections to the novel by Sally Miller Gearhart, *The Wanderground: Stories of the Hill Woman* (1978) and the importance of the Women in Print movement.

In response to a question by Angela, panelists discussed some of their favorite items in the exhibit. Gail mentioned Alison Bechdel and *Dykes to Watch Out For* and Leo admitted her fondness for the various fabrics and textiles such as a Labrys quilt square and a handmade bag. Mev added some background behind the handmade bag and also discussed Hothead Paisan

and a Goddess Cookie Cutter. Angela mentioned the hand painted Poison Ivy sign used by the New England Women's Musical Retreat.

Panelists then discussed the importance of seeing and handling physical archival materials rather than just learning about them online. Leo discussed initially viewing items in places like Tumblr but felt they were devoid of context. As a historian, she cherishes the opportunity to actually experience materials and consider the stories behind them. Gail added to that reflection by recognizing the intergenerational discussions happening among the Wanderground volunteers working to organize and catalog the collections – and also remembering that many of those who created materials did so when they were young! There was also musing about the interconnections of items in various representations, such as the drawing of a ceramic piece, then seen by Lesbians around the country and across the years.

Angela then asked what recommendations the panelists would give to anyone, especially young people, about personal archiving and documentation. Mev's immediate response was "to put a date on it!" If it's something old and undated, do the research and then pencil the date on the back of the item. For letters, keep the postmarked envelope with the letter. Also, all the stories of everyday Lesbian lives do matter, not just the famous ones. Leo added the importance (as a 40-year-old) of holding one's life in perspective and drawing the through lines of various life experiences. She recommends that, for those who move around a lot, to create small boxes of folders with labels or notes to aid in future memory of why it was important to save those items. Gail talked about what she has saved and how they continue to connect her with the individuals who made them. Mev also acknowledged, that for artists such as the students at RISD, these archival resources can unexpectedly open the door to someone else's creativity.

Angela then asked the panelists to speak about Lesbian communities located more in the center of the United States, not just on the coasts (e.g., NYC or San Francisco). The panelists agreed that some really great activism, including around Lesbian issues, and community-building happened in rural areas and smaller cities around the country. All of the panelists had lived in

some of those areas. The communities in each area had different kinds of experiences and expressions and there were a variety of textures. Not everything was inspired by universities, but rather strongly centered by Lesbians active in the towns themselves. As an example, Mev described a community-based publication (The Newsletter: A Lesbian Position) that, over its ten-year span, gives a very clear picture/history of the discussions, concerns, joys, and stuff of daily life experienced in the Connecticut area in the 1980s.

Angela then wondered why these materials are essential, even for those who are not Lesbians. Responses includes: to provide myth-busting (believe me for who I say I am); to provide a broader picture of Lesbian diversities (we're not monolithic as white, feminist, or middle class, etc.); to create an understanding of how politics come out of community recognition or experience; to maintain Lesbian visibility and history; and to remember and understand, even integrate, some of the practical building blocks for creating community.

The panelists then discussed how to view local archival collections at Wanderground, Providence Public Library, the John Hay Library and Sarah Doyle Center at Brown University, Queer.Archive.Work in Providence, and Fleet Library at Rhode Island School of Design. The special collection contents of those archives were also mentioned.

Angela then opened the floor to questions from the audience. The conversation included in-depth strategies related to the importance of community-building, practicing listening, and valuing diversity. Another topic, in response to digitization and online presence, included the ways in which Wanderground catalogs its collection. It was noted that online visibility sometimes encourages an individual to visit the archive to see the physical object. A point was also made that seeing an individual object may have its own importance, but then seeing that object within a larger collection can have greater influence when seen in a fuller context. Additionally, it's important to understand historical context. Putting today's views on items from the past can potentially distort the historical importance of those items and misconstrue their meaning or importance.

Additionally, there was a conversation about what it means to be a Lesbian archive when the term Lesbian has shifted over time. Again, the point was made that understanding the historical contexts of changing language remains vitally important as well as remaining open to diversity and change. There are Lesbian communities (plural) not one, monolithic Lesbian community.

Audio Quotes From Presentation

🔊 — indicates sound clip available

🔊 The naming of Wanderground (:55)

The name Wanderground comes from a book that was written by Sally Gearhart Miller [sic], *The Wanderground: Stories of the Hill Woman*. And it was first published in 1978 by Persephone Press, one of the first Lesbian presses in the country. And that t-shirt is “Persephone Press: a Lesbian Strategy,” which we do have a copy of that t-shirt--actually, we might have two copies of that t-shirt--in our collection. *Wanderground*, I believe, is out of print now; you might be able to get it on Internet Archive, I'm not totally sure, but Wanderground embraces the creativity, power, and insight that women, especially Lesbians, can experience when we gather together in our own creative spaces with open hearts and women-focused energies, which, if you have a chance to read *The Wanderground*, is really what that particular volume is filled with, that kind of energy.



🔊 Women in Print ecosystem – Mev speaking (3:02)

Our special collection is focused on Women in Print. So when you come in, the bookshelves are actually organized by Feminist Lesbian publishers, not by author, not by topic initially. I mean, there are some topics or whatever that are represented, but we really wanted to highlight what was happening with Lesbian and Feminist publishing. So again, the Women in Print movement happened between 1970 and 2000 roughly. It was a movement of Lesbian- and Feminist- and women-owned independent presses and booksellers, periodicals and so on, and they provided a vibrant resource for Lesbians who were coming out. Those were the days when, you know, you went to the back of somebody's car and they had things in the trunk, and you kind of looked and like, “oh!”



So it was very hush-hush initially, but then eventually became more and more visible, especially with the bookstores. At the heyday, I would say, at the Women in Print movement, there were probably 150 women's Lesbian Feminist bookstores across the US and Canada, many others around the world. And there were probably 50- or 70-some odd publishers. That has diminished now in terms of Feminist bookstores, I could count on two hands how many are still left that I'm aware of. More are opening, I'm finding but the movement really kind of went--

And it started off with print. And I just want to-- I don't know if you can read this quote, I mean, if you can see the quote from there. I do want to read it. So basically, it starts off with the

printers, right? “We couldn't get them printed. We couldn't get our words printed. So we started to learn how to print ourselves.” So a lot of what was happening with Women in Print, and even with the music industry, which I'll talk about in a second, was we had to do it because nobody else was going to do it for us. So it started off with a mimeograph machine. And if you don't know what a mimeograph machine is, you'll have to look it up. In somebody's basement, some women got the idea of publishing a book of poems and drawings by women, because there wasn't anything around like it. They produced the graphics on onion skin, which stuck to the mimeograph drum, so they had to lift each sheet off by hand. And after many hours and lots of spaghetti and coffee, they managed to produce this rather thick book called *Women to Women*, stapled it together and start taking it around in shopping bags to sell it.” So that's basically-- a lot of the presses will tell you that, you know, a couple of women quit the printer that they were working for and started their own-- managed to get the machine and started their own press. And then that develops into an ecosystem. So it's not a straight line, a printer, publisher, books, like, you know. It all is kind of emerging, kind of at the same time. It was an ecosystem in which everybody was codependent. So it was the printers, the periodicals, publishers, the bookstores, writers and artisans and musicians, and I'm sure I'm forgetting somebody in that whole list of what was going on.

21:07

Angela's Favorite Item

And when I first saw it, I just loved that it was a poison ivy sign. That's really eye-catching. I love paint and lettering. But then I also loved when Mev told me that that was a sign that goes up at the New England Music Festival, because there were some people camping in the woods who didn't know what poison ivy looked like, and so you know there were signs directing around the festival, but there also was a sign directing you not to touch this particular poisonous plant.

◀ Leo drawn to the textiles & the Tarot bag (1:22)

Leo: I'm really drawn personally to some of the textiles that are in the collection. I'm a stitcher and a punch needler and kind of a textile hoarder in different ways, and so I love, sort of participating in that lineage of kind of hand-made craft and craft that's deeply text-- you know, textured really, and sort of, you know, creating ways of feeling through time and space.... So there's a lineage there that I definitely feel connected to and excited to see.

The sort of, like the labrys quilt square over there, a couple of the handmade bags. It's also just kind of the DIY aesthetic of, like, create the thing that you want to see in the world, which I love, and is kind of threaded throughout these collections. So, yeah, I'm here for the textiles and the fabrics, among other things.



Mev: I want to just respond to what Leo was saying was that one of the bags sits with a deck of tarot cards that are communally drawn by a bunch of different Lesbians, and so some of it's photographs, some of it's drawings, some of it's impressionistic stuff, but the bag...

[coughs] Excuse me....the bag was handmade by a friend of mine out of old women's clothing, and it's got this nice little vulva thing, and you can kind of stick your fingers in it. [audience laughs] Luscious.

📌 The Goddess Cookie Cutter (:56)

There is a piece in there that is a cookie cutter that I want you to be aware of, because it was actually made by a metalsmith, who was a graduate of RISD, and she did her metalsmithing while she was at RISD. And the story behind this is that I actually acquired that cookie cutter when I was working in Minneapolis, and it had a tag on it of who the artist was, and I left it on there. Even when I made cookies, I'd take the tag off, make the cookies, and then dutifully put the tag back on. It's one of the few things that I actually know who the artist is. Well, I put it away in Minnesota and packed it, moved back here, didn't make cookies for a long time. Pulled out the cookie cutter, looked at the tag, and I was like, oh my god, Thea Ernest, she's a friend of mine! I can't believe it! I actually bought something from somebody who was now-- It was like, you know, it's the same 40 dykes done with mirrors



📌 The importance of physical materials (2:48)

Angela asks question / Leo answers question

AD: Why do you think encountering and handling physical materials is important in a time when so much learning and documentation happens online?

LL: I can say a little bit about, kind of, the move from digital to the material. So I wasn't there when a lot of y'all were making the worlds and cultures that you were making, right? I was maybe not even born yet at some of those periods, but I, you know, first encountered a lot of these lineages through places like Tumblr in the early 2000s and kind of the aesthetics of the movement, right, were, like, front and center. So memes, quotes, you know, kind of excerpts from zines and things in this very digital moment that was pretty devoid of a lot of the context that I think is really important to this world... And so, I mean, it really wasn't until I started moving into this library world where I'm having the chance to be kind of hands on with this material, and having this kind of romantic connection with the stuff, right. Like, this has been held by people, this has been passed around, this lived in a certain place in a certain time, and it's kind of a miracle that we still have access to it right now. I love thinking about, kind of, affect and emotion and objects and archives and so, you know, coming into contact with things like t-shirts-- I mean, that's such a different example of, you know-- I didn't, you know-- you can't tactilely engage with that kind of thing online, and so just a deep appreciation and respect for the stuff, for the hands that have touched it, for the hands that made it, because so much of the stuff was also, you know, produced through really obviously, hands-on kinds of production, sharing skills, do-it-yourself. So that all can come through and kind of be communicated through communing with an object, which you know is great in a special collections reading room, but when you can also do it at a place like Wanderground, where, you know, there's a different vibe to the space. Like, you can meet and



encounter an object and almost enter this world, you know, in a, in a very, I don't know, specific way. There's something that, like, can't be reproduced through that. So as I work with students and researchers, like, kind of bringing in the materiality of this stuff, it just never gets old. And there's the aesthetic part of it. There's the, you know, lineage and genealogy of this stuff. There's also the people who take care of it and steward it, which is part of the, you know, amazing kind of intergenerational connections that can happen around these objects.

Lesbian lives matter (Mev)

so that's, that's one thing I would say. But also I would say, and this is what I say about Wanderground in general: our lives are important. They matter. We matter. What we've done, what we're doing. You don't have to be a famous Judy Garland or a famous Alix Dobkin or a famous Georgia O'Keeffe or whoever your role model is. You are you and you are important and you matter. So don't think it's worth it to throw it in the dumpster, because there are things that future people can learn from our everyday Lesbian lives, and that's how I look at it. Everything in there is not necessarily from a spectacular person, but it's a Lesbian who lived a real life and had real trauma and real drama and real joys and real pain and real happiness and real work and real everything, and it's important, so don't undersell yourself.

Lesbian Community & Culture

AD: Can you all talk a little bit about Lesbian community, culture, and history outside of coastal cities?

GC: Yeah, I mean, I spent my youngest Lesbian years in Lexington, Kentucky, which was really kind of fabulous because there were, there was such a good history of leftist organizing and really important civil rights folks. So it has a really good radical history that people on the coasts don't know anything about. And so being a Lesbian feminist in that place at that time just felt like part of the lineage of other kinds of radical work.

So the community was-- one of the things I appreciated about the community at that point was that I was at the University there, but the community was really not all the university. There was people in the community who had different kinds of jobs, as well as college students. There was so much political activism at that point, with, starting, like with crisis centers and around women's health, what were called women's shelters at that point, and Lesbians, of course, were central to so much of this stuff. So it was, you know, I've been so surprised over the years, I've talked to Mev about this sometimes, that somebody, somebody, will have an obit in the New York Times, and it's like, "so and so, one of the leaders of the feminist movement." I was like, I don't know who that was. But how self-important cities feel to the people in cities, but how much really the hard work goes on... And I really-- what people who do organizing in small towns or rural areas, they're really doing organizing. And that's, you know, it's brave work to do it in those places. So, I'm really... One of my good friends said she was so grateful she didn't end up in New York, but she ended up in Lexington instead, because we could just do so more [indistinct].

Lesbian Position (1:55 – Mev)

Being in a coastal town in New Haven is a little different than New York and Boston and San Francisco, I might say, but it's definitely a tension between town and gown on some level. But one of the most magical things that I have, still from New Haven is, a bunch of us--I didn't start it—but some lesbians started a publication called *The Newsletter: A Lesbian Position*, and they were very clear that was “A”, not “*The Lesbian Position*.” But it came out monthly, started in early the 1980s, came out every month. I have every issue from whenever it started until it ended in 1993. So about 10 years' worth of this publication and letters. It was self-created in that, you know, we didn't-- toward the end, they kind of started taking things out of other more publications. But initially it was letters to the editor. We all wrote articles on various things. The therapists were advertising, the dykes who were cutting hair, you know, the car mechanics. I mean, you can really feel what the community was like, in terms-- with all its bumps and bruises and warts and everything else, in terms of what we were angry about, who was fighting, what we were mad at, you know I mean, but what we were very happy about, and things that we did. So I just, I just find that reading it from cover to cover now, 40 years later, is really instructive in terms of what it meant for me coming out or being involved as an activist Lesbian in the community then, and what was the turmoil *then* of what we were really talking about as we were building our politics and our emotions and our sense of identity and who we are. You know, because the butch/femmes were mad at the S&Ms who were mad at the feminists who were mad at the... you know. So it just kind of went on like that.

1:22:16 – Lesbian communities

sometimes we say “the Lesbian community” as if there's only one, but there isn't. I always use, I always try to use the word “communities” because there's the bar dykes. Their experience is different than the softball dykes'. Their experience is really different than those artistic dykes, which is really different than the musician dykes, which is really different than the sound engineers, which is really different from the carpenters, which is really different from the farmers. Okay, all of those are “Lesbians” in their way, and they may or may not have any commonalities, because then there's also the poor dykes, there's the disabled dykes, there's the fat dykes, there's the highly religious dykes and the woo woo dykes, you know? So it's-- you have to understand, it's, it's... “Lesbian” is very broad. It's not a monolithic thing. And I think that's the thing that, in the end, we're not a monolith, just like anybody else.

Related Items in Wanderground Collection

- Event Flyer
- Photos of display at RISD
- PPT Slide Show (in pdf format)

- *The Wanderground: Stories of the Hill Woman* (Persephone Press, 1978)
- Wanderground Bookshelves – Women in Print movement
- Dykes to Watch Out For (Books, t-shirt, cards)
- Poison Ivy Sign from NEWMR
- Go Fish Nail Clipper
- Hothead Paisan items
- Labrys Quilt Potholder
- Goddess Cookie Cutter
- Vulva Bag
- T-shirt – Dykes Out of Control – Shut Down Lexington
- The Newsletter: A Lesbian Position

Details

- Panel Discussion: Angela DiVeglia, Gail Cohee, Mev Miller, and Leo Lovemore panelists for Lesbian Artistic Expressions from the Wanderground Archive: Aesthetic Inspirations for Building Communities
- Topic(s): development of Wanderground, description of Wanderground's collections, Women in Print movement, favorite items in the collection, physical vs. digital experiences, archiving how-to, Lesbian communities, community-building, local archives in RI, historical contexts.
- Date & How Recorded: October 24, 2024 via Digital Recorder
- Panel Facilitated by: Angela DiVeglia
- Transcript Updated (corrected) from otter.ai by: Juli Anna Herndon
- Summary Prepared by: Mev Miller / Proofread by Martha Young