

THE COMMON GUILD

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Photo by Ruth Clark

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COMMENTARIES

Sharon Hayes

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'In My Little Corner of the World, Anyone Would Love You'

Dear reader

Whilst there is nothing particularly lesbian or feminist about open letters, the form has been useful for a movement grown as much through epistolary exchanges as more traditional kinds of protest. Love letters, agony aunt columns, personals and notes from the editor to the reader as well as from the reader to the readership give account to lesbian feminist organising in the 1970s. Whether addressed to one or multiple recipients, they are a strategy that utilises an authorial tone of address in order to make a statement, voice a demand, illicit a feeling. Showing private and public forms of readership to be intimately bound to one another, they bind both to the realm of political action. Though the radical dimensions of public sex are hotly contested within lesbian feminism, public disclosure of the kind intimately tied to gossip, or to what happens *behind closed doors*, is central to our history. Open letters helped to build networks around previously unspoken desires at a time when coming out constituted both public act and personal-political awakening.

Despite the very specific temporal and spatial, which is to say ephemeral, characteristics of lesbian feminist print cultures, history making has always been central to the movement. Materials associated with the struggle are sometimes found in large institutional collections but more likely are encountered in less formalised centres such as the Feminist Library in London, the Lesbian Archive held at the Glasgow Women's Library or in the Lesbian Herstory Archive that occupies the domestic setting of a New York brownstone. Each has its foundations in the earliest years of lesbian feminist organising; their collections represent the politically vital desire to create a public record of lesbian life. These spaces were never only about the past. Whilst working with these records I break to have coffee with one of the dykes who founded the library. Or I am invited into the home of a good friend to flick through copies

of the erotica magazine that her partner once edited with others. As print ephemera was instrumental in the early formation of lesbian feminist networks, so accessing it sparks new connections into existence.

Sharon Hayes's installation *In My Little Corner of the World, Anyone Would Love You* (2016) invokes similar exchanges, as open letters from lesbian feminist activism of the 1970s are revisited in anticipation of future audiences. Various individuals are shown reading aloud to camera within one shared domestic space, although each occupies a delineated area such as a room, a desk, a chair. I write 'to camera' but in many ways this feels more akin to eavesdropping than it does feel like being subject of address. These private acts of reading echo through a gallery that occupies three floors of a grand town house. The place of the home, of the art institution and the location of political action represent a series of imperfect parallels that will never fully correspond. Likewise, each reader is a cypher for the absent author of a text and the audience stand in for a readership that can no longer be known, if indeed it ever could. History is a fantasy that only ever takes place on the terms of the present. What is it we seek from an exchange to which a reply will never come? Open letters might make demands but they do not always require a response. They leave their mark in the world, but barely. Often unaccompanied by surname or return address, their own precarious form of authorship seems to acknowledge the patterns of exclusion that continue to permeate accounts of lesbian life.

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