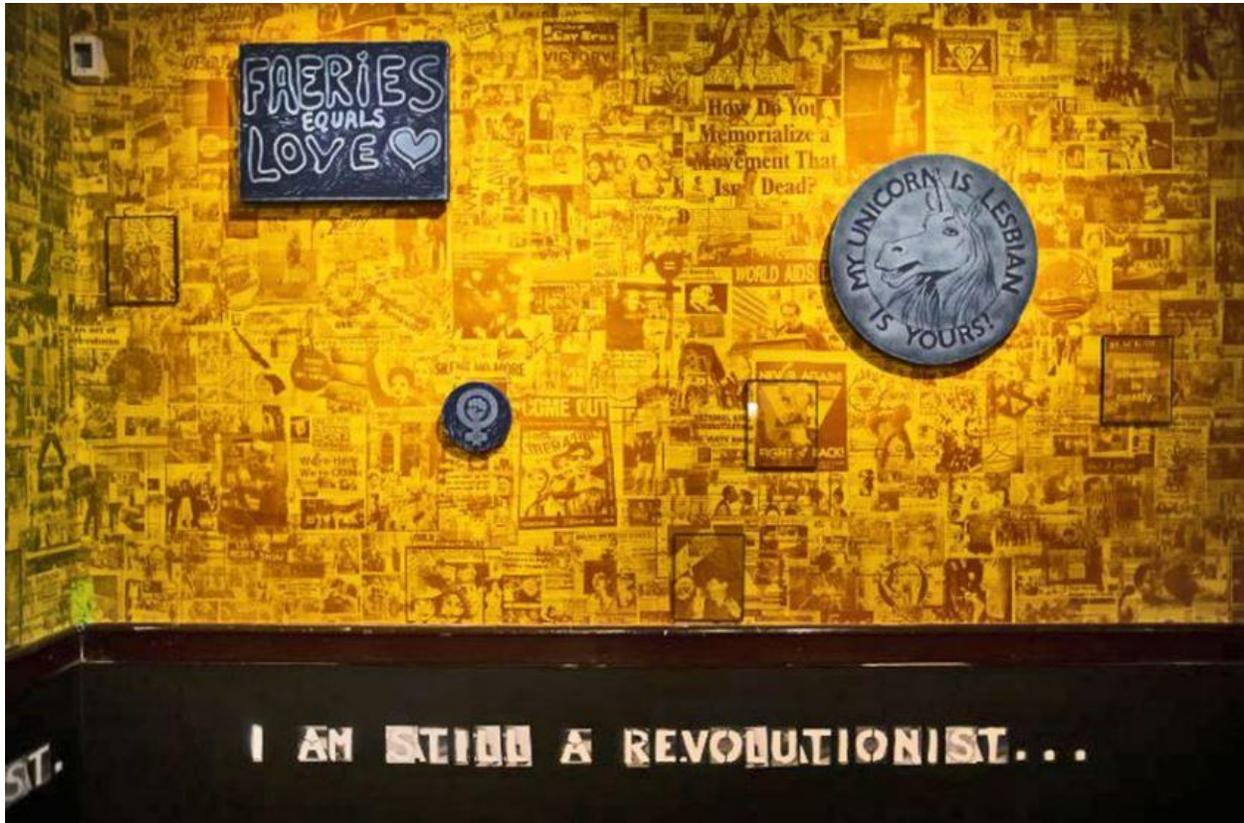


Archiving tomorrow's history

Gary L. Day July 3, 2019



The Print Center in Philadelphia held a public panel with prominent local archivists whose job is to preserve and present LGBTQ history in honor of the Stonewall uprising's 50th anniversary.

During the June 26 panel discussion, experts spoke about the process of gathering and preserving material that documents LGBTQ history and ways to present material that elucidates history and educates the public.

John Anderies, executive director of the John J. Wilcox Archives at the William Way LGBT Community Center and perhaps the most traditional archivist on the panel, explained how historical archives work, starting with what they collect: personal papers, organizational records, periodicals, art and just about anything of historical interest.

He explained that the material then goes through a process of cataloguing, indexing and, if necessary, preservation and restoration.

Anderies would know, as the Wilcox is one of the largest repositories of LGBTQ historical documents in the country. He also frequently collaborates with other archivists in devising and presenting exhibitions.

He pointed out that in this increasingly digital age, the process of digitizing archival material is essential. Not only does digitizing preserve material in case original paper artifacts are lost, damaged or destroyed, but it also facilitates external historical research, provided the archives have an effective search engine. It's also helpful when pulling together material for an exhibition.

Caitlin McCarthy, archivist for New York's LGBT Center, noted the collaboration between the archives and Google: "We've partnered with Google.org on the occasion of Stonewall 50 to make thousands of digitized photographs available from our collections."

Exhibitions were the focus of panelists Gabriel Martinez, Amy Cousins and Michael Carroll. All three recently presented exhibits that used artistic sensibilities to enhance the impact of the historical narrative — a process Carroll called "archives as art exhibitions."

Cousins, who holds a master's degree from Temple University's prestigious Tyler School of Art, said she "tried to tell stories of people who were being overlooked."

Anderies said the artistic exhibitions "transformed, but also amplified" the historical data.

The panelists agreed that the practice of archiving has to follow the changing times. With technology's impact comes a more-elusive paper record, called a "paper trail."

The work of documenting contemporary historical events like Stonewall 50 is more challenging because community members — traditionally the best sources of archival material — still tend to think of digital images as unimportant, the archivist said.

Martinez, who has two exhibitions at William Way, said digital documentation means an artist can record history without damaging any original artifacts.

Carroll, who works on digital projects in Temple's Metadata and Digitization Services Department, maintained that social media is "a treasure trove of potentially important historical documentation. People still haven't learned that digital photographs are just as important to archivists as paper photos."

Added Anderies, "We have to educate people about the archival importance of digital photos." Imagine if, at Stonewall 50, community members had been able to record the event with a smartphone, he said.

Anderies said archivists have a responsibility not only to document history, but also to record tomorrow's history.

"We need to be collecting our present."

<http://www.epgn.com/news/local/14887-archiving-tomorrow-s-history>