

In Visible Archives: Queer and Feminist Visual Culture in the 1980s

By Margaret Galvan. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2023. 317 pp.

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When I read about archives, I've found that I tend to gravitate toward works by authors outside the profession, largely because I'm interested in how researchers use archival materials and how they view archives and their experiences there. Doing the day-to-day work of archives can cause archivists to lose sight of why we collect and preserve the materials that we do. By examining the imaginative ways our users use and analyze our collections, we can gain a better understanding of how to organize, describe, and promote our collections for broader use and discovery, as well as reassess precisely what we save in the first place.

Margaret Galvan's new book is a fabulous example of a researcher engaging with the archives in a meaningful way, one that encourages an ongoing conversation between users and archivists, particularly in the context of queer and feminist visual primary sources. *In Visible Archives: Queer and Feminist Visual Culture in the 1980s* documents the women and communities who created groundbreaking visual work that has been obscured over time. Through careful research, Galvan has reconstructed their stories through archival materials, resurrecting their work and making them visible once again. However, as Galvan notes, "visibility is tenuous and not guaranteed. These women exist in visible archives, both present and precarious. The paradox of this book's title reflects the hard-won and narrowly kept conditions of visibility for diverse sexual identities" (pp. 1–2).

Galvan's audience comprises primarily those interested in the history of queer and feminist visual culture, especially as it pertains to the 1980s feminist sex wars, but anyone with a passing interest in archives, not just archival professionals, will also glean much to contemplate. Unlike some authors who tend not to focus on the archivists who do the work of collecting and preserving historical materials, Galvan clearly understands this work and elicits a conversation with the archival profession. Each chapter includes a section entitled "Archives and Afterlives" that examines the impact of the visual materials after their inclusion in an archives and how that inclusion reverberates as the materials remain in conversation with other visual materials and the culture at large. The archives become a point of tension where the materials are saved, but at the same time might become less visible (until possibly digitized for online access) despite their preservation. This is a good reminder to archivists that just because we've saved materials doesn't mean that people know where to find them. We must continually advocate for our collections and promote their ongoing use. Otherwise, they might remain "submerged deep in the archives" (p. 65).

Galvan's unpretentious book is extremely accessible and largely free of academic jargon, along with being well organized and structured in a clear and comprehensive way that is easy for readers to follow. At no point did I feel lost or overwhelmed but instead understood clearly where Galvan was leading readers and why. The introduction lays out Galvan's goal: "I am reactivating these artists' work for what they might tell us about collective activism in their time but also for how making visible this visual activism might inspire and shape future artwork" (p. 13). Galvan, an assistant professor of visual rhetoric at the University of Florida's Department of English, uses a lens of close reading between image and text, which is informed by her training in comics studies. While not all the artists she studies are comic strip artists, Galvan posits that each of the women she includes used "the power of sequence, which is seen as one of the bedrock traits of comics" (p. 7), and that the artists belong in dialogue with each other. She contends, "All these artists embraced how sequence allowed them to create relationships between images and individuals and show how they were on the same page, whether literally, metaphorically, or both" (p. 8). Using different mediums, these women were able to document their communities and advocate for change at the same time.

One of the primary themes of *In Visible Archives* is the intersection between archives and the art produced by Galvan's subjects. She notes, "This book spans a historical moment during which documenting, preserving, and eventually archiving diverse voices was a part of the cultural consciousness and inflected the art that these women produced" (p. 15). Not only that, but Galvan argues "how archivists have welcomed these women's artwork into collections has been vital in shaping their legacy" (p. 12). The art and the archives are intertwined and inform each other, their histories becoming inseparable. This makes it appropriate and highly relevant for them to be studied together. Galvan states, "We read, in the spirit of Ann Laura Stoler,¹ along the archival grain to suss out the frameworks behind how these comics were collected in archives and how that has affected how they're positioned on the margins or not at all in histories of feminism and comics" (p. 71).

In Visible Archives contains five chapters, each focusing on a different artist or set of artists. The most famous artist included is Alison Bechdel (of the Bechdel-Wallace test fame²). The others are lesser-known artists that Galvan hopes to spotlight and raise their profiles. One need not have any background in queer or feminist history (or comics, for that matter) to enjoy or comprehend the materials she discusses. Galvan has skillfully provided all the necessary biographical and historical context needed to appreciate these women and their work.

The first chapter focuses on Hannah Alderfer, Beth Jaker, and Marybeth Nelson, who created collages, including a program for a sexuality conference held at Barnard College in 1982 that was censored and not released until months after the fact. Galvan's tracking of the history of the program in the archives unfolded as an enjoyable and enlightening journey. At one point, she uses a blank page from

the program as an illustration to demonstrate the censorship that took place (p. 32). This is a highly unusual element to include to be sure, but the nonvisual made the point much more potent than perhaps a passing comment in the main text would have done. Absences can speak just as loud as words. This chapter is followed by one on underground feminist comics created by Lee Marrs and Roberta Gregory. Galvan discusses how these types of underground comics collections are shaped by collectors' biases and how biases can be replicated due to the ways archives collect and describe the materials, especially when materials are scattered across numerous collections and repositories rather than being centralized. In chapter 3, Galvan explores Alison Bechdel's early days as a newspaper cartoonist, examining her art found within queer grassroots archives and collections on sexuality and women's history. By centering Bechdel's work in these spaces rather than in general comics collections, Galvan demonstrates how vitally these queer networks influenced Bechdel's work.

Chapter 4 examines the work of Gloria E. Anzaldúa, an artist turned teacher who used her artwork to challenge white feminism. Her artworks were used in class notes and public presentations, largely taking the form of transparencies, which are a disposable, ephemeral medium, easy to wipe away if you're not careful. Thanks to an exhibit of her transparencies at the University of Texas at Austin in 2015, Anzaldúa's drawings have reached wider recognition. The last chapter focuses on the work of photographer Nan Goldin, specifically her work around the queer community during the HIV/AIDS crisis. Goldin makes use of her photographs in different ways over time, as her connection to them changes and their meaning evolves. Goldin's reevaluation of her own work is similar to how archival materials are reinterpreted over time through different lenses.

As archivists, one of our main objectives is to prioritize original order and value the provenance of our materials. In doing so, however, we sometimes (more often than we'd probably like to admit) marginalize or sideline underrepresented voices in our collections. I believe digitizing such materials can alleviate some of these obstacles to discovery, as we can bring together materials from multiple collections into a single digital collection. Galvan recognizes this as well, writing, "The rise of digitization has begun to transform access as more and more feminist as well as gay and lesbian activist sources have been put online in proprietary, open-access, and grassroots spaces" (p. 226). Even so, digitization is just the first step. Galvan acknowledges the need for further contextualization of digitized material, as well as for the promotion of these resources, since they are not always easy to find if you don't know where to search for them.

Artists as archivists documenting their world is a theme that runs deep through *In Visible Archives*, particularly in the chapter on Bechdel. Galvan argues, "Bechdel sees herself as an archivist chronicling her generation through the details of lesbians' daily lives. . . . [However,] archives are not simply an aesthetics of Bechdel's work:

she engages existing archives and, like many lesbian feminists before her, actively creates her own archives” (pp. 118–19). This is an interesting and intriguing argument to make. Our donors often act as grassroots archivists as they build collections that one day end up in our institutions, passionately documenting our world in all its messy wonder. Bechdel and the other women’s artistic impulses are very much in the same vein as our own archival duties, and I appreciate the comparison. Galvan writes, “Reading across archives and embracing queer comics archives allows Bechdel and other LGBTQ individuals to ‘see [them]selves as part of a coherent history’ and community” (p. 122). Further evidence of this ethos can be found in how Bechdel used her own personal family archives in her graphic novel, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* (2006), which incorporates re-creations of letters from her parents and her own diary entries into the narrative of the work.

One of the clarifying moments I took away from Goldin’s chapter is that even the most mundane materials can provide unique insights. Galvan describes routine correspondence wherein members of the public inquire after a catalog for Goldin’s 1989 exhibit *Witnesses: Against Our Vanish*. The extent of the correspondence is noteworthy as it touches upon the fact that Goldin’s exhibit had a much wider audience than one might expect as some people likely only engaged with the exhibit via its catalog. The fact that Galvan used routine correspondence that not all archivists would have retained to make this point is eye-opening and a reminder that historical significance is often in the eye of the beholder. As archivists, we need to cultivate an imagination about the possibilities all our materials present, not just those that clearly have some sort of evidential or inherent value. As much as we’d like to think we know what will be important in the future, we don’t. Approaching our work with humility is vital and necessary.

One of the things I appreciated most about Galvan’s book is that archivists are not invisible in the process of building and sustaining archives. Galvan clearly recognizes that real people make concrete decisions about archives and that archives aren’t mystical spaces that happen by accident—that we aren’t sites of “archival mystique,” so to speak. Galvan states, “After all, what I’ve encountered in the archives is there because of communities of individuals who valued, saved, and deposited it and the archivists who welcomed, cataloged, and made it accessible” (p. 227). She painstakingly integrates the archival history of the objects she studies into their overarching and enduring impact. For instance, Galvan notes, “Where archives once served as the source material for . . . Alderfer, Jaker, and Nelson[’s collage work], they now serve as its primary residence” (p. 62). This new location status affects the ways in which these works continue to be viewed. Divorcing archival materials from the context in which they now reside diminishes them in ways that lessen their impact. By taking into account their creation, distribution, and eventual collection and preservation within archives, we gain a more holistic view of their value and contribution to society.

The ongoing need for better understanding and representation of LGBTQ+ communities is just as important today as it was in the 1980s when these women were working and advocating through their artwork for a more inclusive society. Recent attempts at book banning and laws directed at educators teaching not only LGBTQ+ materials but also materials concerning BIPOC communities³ makes it clear that we still have a long way to go in making sure everyone has a place at the proverbial table. Galvan's excavation of a small corner of this universe is a welcome addition to this crucial work.

Galvan has written a galvanizing book that I think all archivists would benefit from reading. Not only is the subject matter important, but it is also well written and fun to read. Thanks to archives, both grassroots and more established, materials that may have been regarded as disposable when they first circulated are now being preserved and can enter a wider conversation on queer, feminist, and comics history. Archivists are part of this ongoing dialogue, and Galvan has jumpstarted our participation with *In Visible Archives*.

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NOTES

¹ Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009). While about a completely different topic, Stoler's work on colonial archives is another fine example of a historian piecing together a broader narrative that encompasses the archives as part of the story and not just viewing the archives as a repository from which to cherry-pick information.

² See Megan Garber, "Call It the 'Bechdel-Wallace Test,'" *The Atlantic*, August 25, 2015, https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2015/08/call-it-the-bechdel-wallace-test/402259/?utm_source=copy-link&utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=share, captured at <https://perma.cc/Y6QK-L9DX>. This test measures gender equality in movies and TV shows. To pass the test, the work must have at least two women in it who talk to one other about something other than a man. Despite setting the bar so low for gender representation, many films and shows don't even pass this bare minimum.

³ See "American Library Association Releases Preliminary Data on 2023 Book Challenges," press release, American Library Association, September 19, 2023, <https://www.ala.org/news/press-releases/2023/09/american-library-association-releases-preliminary-data-2023-book-challenges>, captured at <https://perma.cc/UB9W-B2PZ>; Rachel Treisman, "U.S. Book Bans Are Taking a Toll on a Beloved Tradition: Scholastic Book Fairs," NPR, October 17, 2023, <https://www.npr.org/2023/10/17/1206219484/scholastic-book-fair-diversity-book-bans>, captured at <https://perma.cc/8K3C-922D>.