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# The Archive



# OMNISCIENT: Queer Documentation in an Image Culture

Text by Avram Finkelstein

Here, in the formative decades of the twenty-first century, a generation of theory over signification has assumed new shadings, lit, as it is, by the camera phone screen. In this LCD future perfect, teasing newer understandings of identity from the torrent of avatars and digitally filtered selfies we are force-fed by pocket computers is somewhat futile. In an "image culture" boosted by digital accelerants, many of our suppositions about representation are vestigial.

And so, the earliest predicament of the twenty-first century is not simply America's having joined the international march of proto-fascism, but the "image dilemma" that made it possible. Celebrities

like Trump have turned up in politics for decades, and were packaged like soft drinks long before that, but we've never had performance art pass as policy before Twitter. With our toes dangling over the black hole of information technologies, we watch the documentary veracity of the photograph consumed in its eddy. The JPEGs that swirl below us appear decentralized, but they are delivered by systems that are owned and wholly integrated. Likewise, social media has revealed its potential for misrepresenting persons, places, and intentionality. So how do we discern what is actual? If we can't believe our eyes in a culture fueled on images, what on earth are images *for*? Within a rapidly intensifying digital image commons how do we *perform*





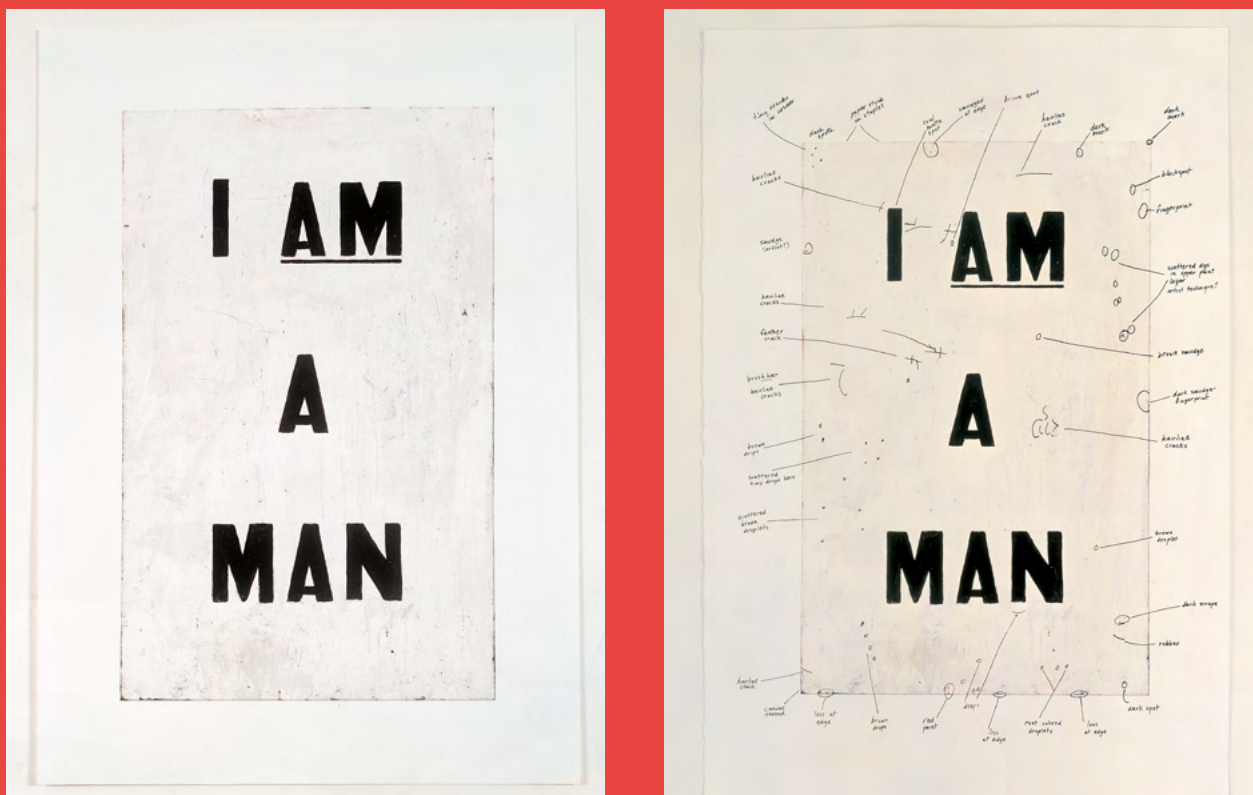


Fig. 2



Fig. 3

Fig. 2: Glenn Ligon, *Condition Report*, 2000. Iris print and iris print with serigraph, 2 parts, 32 x 22 3/4 in. (81.3 x 57.8 cm) each, 34 1/4 x 25 in. (87 x 63.5 cm). Framed. © Glenn Ligon. Courtesy the artist, Hauser & Wirth, New York, Regen Projects, Los Angeles, Thomas Dane Gallery, London, and Chantal Crousel, Paris.

participation when we can't possibly know what we're participating in?

And if the image commons itself is in a twist about all this, doesn't that leave queer publics with an image dilemma all our own? After all, to be queer is to be summed up in a glance and to face assumptions based on how we present. So what can queerness possibly *look* like, on a landscape of Möbius non-orientability? Moreover, what is identity, now that personhood has been proven the abstraction we theorized it to be? And as we struggle for traction in the contested space of the queer archive, how do we document queer cultural practice going forward, when image obsolescence occurs in a machine-learned zeptosecond?

One could argue for calm, that our "image culture" is still young, having only solidified during the television age. But that was actually seventy years ago. One might also say that queer people have no particular entitlement here, since we did not *invent* our image culture. Placing Alan Turing's contribution to theoretical computer science to the side for the moment, we have always been all over it and on the vanguard, from Vaslav Nijinsky to Bill T. Jones, from Jean Cocteau to Cheryl Dunye, from John Cage to Justin Vivian Bond, from Michel Foucault

to José Esteban Muñoz, from Rudi Gernreich to Alexander McQueen, and let's not forget the tribal elder of image documentation, Andy Warhol. Queers helped construct our image commons, from culture and academia to activism and art. We may not rule the world, but when it comes to the images used to portray it, we have certainly shaped it from the periphery.

*OMNISCIENT: Queer Documentation in an Image Culture* explores the re-situation of representation and identity with a wave of a détournement faery wand. This survey hones in on scenarios only visible from the social margins, such as Russell Perkins's audio-tapes of the clamor of casino one-armed bandits, which he transposed into a chorale for acoustic voices. To complete his critique of the tensions between the digital and the human in late-stage capitalism, and the risks working-class Americans take to survive it, he overprinted the layered score on the copyrighted pink newsprint of the *Financial Times*.

Further meditations on economic survival come from José Rafael Perozo, who began painting on Bolívars, Venezuela's currency, when the economy crashed (it was good paper, and otherwise useless); from Fred Wilson, who constructs a giant Golem

out of money; Esvin Alarcón Lam, who replicates a historic monument out of clothing made in China and then gives it all away; and Anna Sew Hoy, who destroys her own sculpture with a sledge hammer. Glenn Ligon further dissects valuation, along with race and memory, in his painting based on the "I Am A Man" placards worn by Memphis sanitation strikers, and its doppelgänger, a condition report on the work by an art museum conservator.

While America's original image factory, Hollywood, was focused on filling theaters, actress Gena Rowlands was making ground-breaking choices that redefined the way women would be portrayed in film. Angela Dufresne's depiction of *The School of Gena Rowlands* is queer pedagogy itself, raging on behalf of the punk and the hidden, restoring the marginal to proper social proportion. Chitra Ganesh delectably rereads Hollywood for what it is, a manufactory of supremacies, in her silent film mash-up of colonialist anxieties, fantasias, and stereotypes of Middle Eastern, African, Asian, and South Asian relationships to mortality, mysticism, technology, and the natural world.

Aliza Shvarts proves that documentation doesn't need to be verifiable to carry the same weight as truth, unfolding banners of reprinted social

media responses to her controversial *Untitled [Senior Thesis]*, 2008, in which she repeatedly self-inseminated and ingested abortifacients. Stephen Andrews's crayon rubbings of war are strung into a cartoon about the secondary terrors of the Department of Defense's post-Vietnam experiments in "conflict management," and for Erik Hanson, cartoons are slug-fest clouds of male fetish. Catalina Schliebener takes a sidelong glance at cartoon imagery as childhood gender mythology, in pop-up collage-work based on the Christian Right's perceived lasciviousness of Disney's *Little Mermaid*, and Kang Seung Lee meticulously renders intergenerational memorialization as an empty bed, constructing a shrine to both David Wojnarowicz and Peter Hujar.

Scale is also considered in this exhibition, as the ultimate reversal of power by putting monumentalism into queer hands, through Liz Collins's sure-footed re-imagining of the 1982 cult film, *Liquid Sky*, depicting bodies as destabilized abstractions of the frailties of human desire. Roey Victoria Heifetz's graphite transgendered gigantism juxtaposes the radical legacy of nineteenth century dandyism against current trans depictions. Camilo Godoy's billboard advertisement for mixed-race polyamory is staged where it will do the most good,

Fig. 3: Russell Perkins, *Resorts World transcription for recorded voices*, Score, 2019, offset print on 45 gsm tinted newsprint, 22 3/4 x 29 1/8 in. Courtesy the artist. Photo: © Zorawar Sidhu.







Fig. 5: Catalina Schliebener, *Rorschach Test 2*, 2019, Collage on book 7 1/2 x 7 1/2 in. (18 1/2 x 18 1/2 cm). Image courtesy the artist.



Fig. 5

(Previous Page) Angela Dufresne, *The School of Gena Rowlands*, 2016, Oil on canvas, 84 x 132 in. Image courtesy the artist and Yossi Milo Gallery.



Fig. 6

in the family theme park of Times Square, and the mythic codes of Jason Villegas's logo totems document late-capitalism as a crosshatching of symbols of wealth and the universal symbols Joseph Campbell spent a lifetime studying.

It is commonly understood that the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand in 1914 started WWI and set the entire twentieth century into motion. Similarly, the century ahead is being mapped in front of our eyes, with increasing ferocity. Still, history moves slowly, like a battleship changing direction. Images, however, move at the speed of light, and on the Internet they leave an indelible vapor trail.

In 1968 Andy Warhol drolly informed us "In the future, everyone will be world-famous for fifteen minutes," an uncanny prognostication that now belongs to American folklore.<sup>1</sup> It does stand to reason that an artist who staked our image culture as turf might have made such a prediction, although only a queer artist would have said so. What he didn't imagine—or didn't tell us if he did— was that every nanosecond of it would be documented, it be more ubiquitous than print, film,

and television combined, and in addition to being the subject we would also become editor, curator, journalist, marketer, manager, litigator, archivist, technocrat, mediator, and critic. He didn't tell us that the content we generate might replace other forms of commerce, or for those fifteen minutes we might be locked in competition with seven billion other celebrities, or how integral digital relevance might become to social survival. Warhol didn't live long enough to find out how easy, or true, or terrifying his prediction would be. Or that he would inspire generations of queer artists to map our image culture with the same innately queer love/hate alienation he himself articulated.

*OMNISCIENT: Queer Documentation in an Image Culture*  
On View: May 12 – Aug 23, 2020 & June 6 – Sept 13, 2020  
Curated by Avram Finkelstein

Avram Finkelstein is a founding member of the Silence=Death and Gran Fury collectives. His work is in the collections of MoMA, The Whitney, and The New Museum. His book, *After Silence: A History of AIDS Through its Images*, is available through UC Press.

<sup>1</sup>Shapiro, Fred R., *The Yale Book of Quotations* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 797, column 2.

Fig. 6: Yevgeniy Fiks, *Andy Warhol and The Pittsburgh Labor Files*, 2011–2016, dimensions vary. Courtesy the artist.