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ISBN

9798190926286

Author

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Publication Date

2026-09-10

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Los Angeles

Process and Product, Ephemera and Evidence:

Queering Institutional Archival Practice and Processing the Archive of Ron Athey

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction

of the requirements for the degree

Master of Library and Information Science

by

Jordan Thomas Cain

2026

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2026

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Process and Product, Ephemera and Evidence:

Queering Institutional Archival Practice and Processing the Archive of Ron Athey

by

Jordan Thomas Cain

Master of Library and Information Science

University of California, Los Angeles, 2026

Professor Anne J. Gilliland, Chair

Queer archives, as products of queer lives, tend to resist conventional standards of archival processing and description. They are queer in content, representing the lives of people and communities who live in opposition to social standards of sexuality and gender, and queer in form, representing alternative approaches to order and structure. They often consist of materials that deviate from normative standards of documentary evidence, challenging long-standing and more mainstream conceptions of the archival record. The papers of queer performance artist Ron Athey at the Getty Research Institute exemplify this. Using archival autoethnography and drawing upon critical archival theory, this thesis documents and reflects on my work processing the Athey papers and asks if and how archivists should be engaging with relevant cultural and critical theoretical frameworks when processing and describing queer archives. I take the

position that in order to honor these materials, their creators, and communities, and properly describe them to make them accessible and discoverable to researchers, it behooves us as archivists to engage with the cultural and theoretical frameworks of the community/ies in which the archive was created. Through my work and reflections on the process, I attempt to demonstrate how this engagement helps enrich archival description and enhance discoverability by elucidating nontraditional forms of documentation, considering the potentiality and multivalence of evidence, and contextualizing materials within broader contexts of creation, community, and use.

This thesis addresses a gap relating to the consideration of archival labor and processor positionality in queer archival scholarship and extends existing conversations on how archivists can incorporate critical and community-oriented praxes into their institutional archival processes and practices. Most importantly though, this thesis documents the preservation of the work and papers of an important artist and his community, and properly situates his artist's working archive in an ongoing process of engagement, activation, and recontextualization as a collection within a prominent art special collection.

The thesis of Jordan Thomas Cain is approved.

Michelle Caswell

Thuy Vo Dang

Jennifer Doyle

Anne J. Gilliland, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2026

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GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Archival processing: (*Often used interchangeably with “cataloging” and “description”*) The process by which archivists arrange, describe, and preserve archival materials for long-term storage and access. Conventional standards and best practices include rehousing physical materials in archival enclosures, conducting preservation interventions, inventorying and describing material in a finding aid, and making the archive discoverable and accessible to researchers.

Arrangement note: A descriptive field in a finding aid used to describe how the archival collection or part of the collection is organized (e.g. original arrangement, archivist-devised arrangement, alphabetical, or chronological arrangement).

Custodial history: the history of an archive’s movement and of who possessed the physical materials of the archive. Differs from provenance insofar as custodianship can also refer to possession of materials that does not include ownership of materials (*see also Provenance*).

DACS: *Describing Archives: A Content Standard*, (DACS), the conventional American content standard for describing archives. DACS standardizes authority control and the types of required note fields in a finding aid, and establishes a hierarchical structure and whole-part relationship between archival component records.

Finding aid: a form of archival description that conveys information about the contents of an archive. Finding aids usually include some form of inventory, description of contents, and explanation of the significance and context of materials. Conventional standards require finding aids to be written in XML as Encoded Archival Description (EAD), usually with the aid of software such as ArchivesSpace and a content standard like *DACS*.

Front matter: in the context of the finding aid, the front matter colloquially refers to information about the whole collection at the highest hierarchical level of description. This usually includes a summary or abstract of the collection, a biographical or historical note about its creator(s), processing history, arrangement, provenance, extent, and administrative information. Specific requirements for the front matter are prescribed in *DACS* and other content standards.

MPLP: “More Process, Less Product,” or MPLP, is an article written by Greene and Meissner, which advocates for limited archival processing, description, and preservation in order to manage growing archival backlogs, raise productivity, and provide quicker access to archival collections for researchers. MPLP is a popular archival processing practice in many institutions, and has been the target of much ambivalence in archival studies and among professional archivists.

Original order: (*or original arrangement, original organization*) the order of archival materials established by the creator of the archive. The concept is somewhat embattled, and many

standards including *DACS* conceive original order instead as a logical ordering of like records and perceived activities.

Processing note: A descriptive field in a finding aid, usually placed at the highest level of description, explaining how an archive was processed and by whom.

Provenance: The original ownership, or a history of different ownership or custody, of an archive (*see also Custodial history*).

Scope and contents note: A descriptive field in a finding aid, used to describe archives at any and all hierarchical levels. Can be used to describe the contents of a whole archive, the contents of a part or series of the archive, or an individual container, folder, or item.

Sources consulted:

Mark Greene and Dennis Meissner. "More Product, Less Process: Revamping Traditional Archival Processing." *The American Archivist* 68, no. 2 (2005): 208–63. <https://doi.org/10.17723/aarc.68.2.c741823776k65863>.
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BIOGRAPHY

Jordan Cain is currently a Special Collections Archivist at the Getty Research Institute. His current work includes processing the archival collections of architect Frank Gehry and performance artist Ron Athey, and his archival specializations include architecture and design, modern and contemporary art, and queer archives. He has previously worked in special collections public services at the Getty Research Institute and UCLA Library Special Collections. He holds a B.A. in Political Science from the University of California, Los Angeles and his research interests include the intersections of queer and critical theory, memory, affect, and archival studies, as well as contemporary art, performance, and architecture.

Introduction

In 2006, the Getty Research Institute hosted the Southern California Consortium of Art Schools conference on the “Aesthetics of Risk.” The conference’s panel of speakers included photographer Catherine Opie, whose portraits of queer performance artist Ron Athey were featured as promotional material for the event. Athey, despite his notoriously risky work, was not invited to speak. Athey’s performances utilize extreme practices of the body such as piercing, cutting, bleeding, penetration, and sadism and masochism. They express themes such as spirituality, sexuality, disease, AIDS, death and loss, community, and care. He began performing in the early 1980s as part of the early punk and DIY scene in Southern California, and after a hiatus, started performing again in queer clubs and underground performance spaces. He was the subject of controversy in 1994, when conservative politicians directed their ire towards the National Endowment for the Arts and the contemporary and performance artists it funded. After a series of sensational stories and fabrications about a performance of Athey’s sponsored by the Walker Art Center, and a false accusation that Athey had received federal funding through the Walker and in his performance had exposed the audience to HIV-positive blood, Athey became embroiled in a national controversy.¹ Still, this controversy heavily influenced Athey’s work and practice, and still today showcases how Athey’s work, Dominic Johnson explains, “tests assumptions about the power of representation, the viability of cultural freedom in a volatile present, and the power of governments to restrict access to art.”² Considering this reputation,

¹ The audience that night was never exposed to HIV-positive blood, as the blood present was that of Athey’s co-performer, Divinity Fudge, who was HIV-negative. The \$150 in funding Athey received, the Walker explained, did not come from federal funds; See Dominic Johnson, ““Does a Bloody Towel Represent the Ideals of the American People?: Ron Athey and the Culture Wars,” in *Pleading in the Blood: The Art and Performances of Ron Athey*, ed. Dominic Johnson (Live Art Development Agency and Intellect, The University of Chicago Press, 2013).

² Dominic Johnson, ““Does a Bloody Towel Represent the Ideals of the American People?”” 93.

Jennifer Doyle contends that the Getty may have used Athey's work in their conference to synthesize an "aesthetics of risk," but "didn't want to get themselves mixed up with the baggage that comes with Athey himself."³ After all, Doyle writes, "the halls of such institutions" as the Getty "are at a real remove from the spaces in which Athey performs."⁴

Fast forward 20 years and a collection of Athey's archive now sits unprocessed in the vaults of the Getty Research Institute (GRI). When the collection was acquired by the GRI in 2018, Athey was being evicted from his long-time rent-controlled Silver Lake apartment, pushed out by new owners after the previous landlord had passed away. Although another half of the archive had already been stored at the home of Jennifer Doyle years before, art historian and friend Amelia Jones helped pack up the rest of the archive from Athey's apartment and stored it in her home until the eventual acquisition by the GRI. Jones describes the archive as "messy and confusing," "haphazardly organized," and the stuff from his apartment that was "being lived with, in, and through—but might well not have had any logical organization at all in [its] lived state."⁵ She also writes that eventually, "the Getty will rationalize the archival materials, and force them to make a kind of sense they in fact do not organically hold."⁶

Archivists are professionally bound by principles and associated best practices that value an archive's original organization and its provenance as integral to its existence, as well as its evidentiary and research value.⁷ Paying attention to these qualities helps contextualize archival material among a broad and intricate system of records and potential evidence. As an archivist at the Getty, it is my job to parse the notion of original organization in an effort to understand how

³ Jennifer Doyle, *Hold It Against Me: Difficulty and Emotion in Contemporary Art* (Duke University Press, 2013), 59.

⁴ Doyle, *Hold It Against Me*, 60.

⁵ Amelia Jones, "Introduction: Queer Communion and the Worlds of Ron Athey," in *Queer Communion: Ron Athey*, ed. Amelia Jones and Andy Campbell (Intellect, The University of Chicago Press, 2020), 14.

⁶ Jones, "Introduction: Queer Communion," 14.

⁷ See Glossary for definitions of *provenance* and *original order*.

the archival collection that I am processing was created, used, and arranged, and how those qualities in turn can aid in my processing and description of the collection. Broadly, the archival profession seeks to describe, catalog, and tidy up material for ease-of-access, increased discoverability, and academic consumption. However, queer lives, and thus queer archives, tend to resist neat organization and cataloging. Thus, when we prescribe normative conceptions of how an archive should be organized and cataloged, we may end up misrepresenting the material by overvaluing certain forms of documentation and undervaluing those that might need additional description or contextualization.

Queer archives are created by those who are members of the queer community, and like queerness, are defined by provenance and content—their creators and creations are based in identities that deviate from social standards of sexuality and gender—as well as form—they often challenge preconceived notions of normalcy, order, and structure. They can be full of messy, sometimes haphazardly organized, unconventional, highly affectual, and ephemeral materials that do not fit conventional definitions of documentary evidence. These ephemeral materials include artifacts, fliers, artworks, snapshots, posters, journals, and notes, and other materials that were not created to last. They are perceived as having less reliability than conventional forms of documentation and evidence such as legal and financial documents, and official correspondence, yet they represent real lives, events, activities, stories, and memory. In queer archives, these materials are created often out of trauma, out of a hope for the future, and out of preservation of history and community. They are often not often created, however, with archival accessioning, cataloging, and access in mind. The Ron Athey papers sit at this multi-pointed intersection of mess and trauma, ephemerality and documentation, and marginalization

and institutionalization, and thus provide an excellent case for a critical and applied discussion regarding queering archival processing.⁸

Guided by critical archival theory and a queer/ed archival methodology, this thesis uses autoethnography in the form of detailed documentation of my hands-on work processing the Athey papers to demonstrate and reflect upon how employing queer, community-centered, and critical theoretical frameworks allows for more effective contextualization of archival materials in ways that traditional archival processing might not. I also leverage these same frameworks through interdisciplinary research and literature review in an effort to extend archival theories on notions of the archival record, evidence, affect, and memory to my institutional practices.

The queer archive is a prominent object of consideration in queer and feminist studies, art history, performance studies, and critical theory. The humanities have tended to be preoccupied with *the archive* as a theoretical entity—a construction associated with power and control—and with *archives* as historical source material.⁹ Archival studies considers *archives* as a whole, but outside of community archiving, queer archives have received less attention in institutional settings. Literature in archival studies also tends to consider the creation, curation, and activation of queer archives, but considers less often the archival labor involved in processing and describing them. This thesis seeks to address these gaps.

Considering the nature of the material, the influences behind its creation, and the significance of the cultural membership of its creator, this thesis asks if and how archivists should be engaging with relevant cultural and critical theoretical frameworks when processing and describing queer archives. I argue that in order to honor these materials, their creators, and

⁸ Throughout the paper, I use the terms “papers” and “collection” to refer to the component of Athey’s archival materials that were acquired by the Getty Research Institute, while I use the term “archive” to generally refer to the whole of Athey’s records production, much of which was not acquired by the GRI.

⁹ Michelle Caswell, “‘The Archive’ Is Not an Archives: On Acknowledging the Intellectual Contributions of Archival Studies,” *Reconstruction: ARCHIVES ON FIRE: Artifacts & Works, Communities & Fields* 16.1 (2016)

communities, and properly describe them to make them accessible and discoverable to researchers, it behooves us as archivists to engage with the cultural and theoretical frameworks of the community/ies in which the archive was created.

As an archivist at the Getty, I am bound by specific and standardized institutional practices that adhere to a long lineage of traditional archival best practices. While my agency as an archivist is flexible at times, it is not systemic or structural; I cannot make sweeping changes or deviate from my institutional practices drastically. However, when faced with a unique archival collection that seemingly requires more intensive consideration, my professional judgement urges me to lean in and consider alternative approaches to processing and description.

As a gay man, I am drawn to Athey's work because of his profound statements of cultural experience and memory, and I volunteered to process his archive because of how significant his work and forms of documentation are. With that being said, an archivist does not need to identify as queer in order to effectively process and describe queer archives. I argue that proper processing and description of queer archives requires engagement with requisite cultural and critical theoretical frameworks, regardless of the archivist's positionality, in order to 1) contextualize the ways that queer archives are created, organized, and used; 2) elucidate queer archives' many forms of documentation and their evidentiary potential; and 3) seek to question conventional standards and concepts in archival processing practices. This thesis seeks to demonstrate how working with the Athey papers may suggest some of the answers, or can at least offer some insight on how we should be engaging with these concepts to properly process, describe, and preserve queer archives.

The collection reflects the career of an artist who has spent decades exploring identity, spirituality, sexuality, the body, and memory through performance, writings, and community collaboration. It also represents works of immense ephemerality, affectuality, and community-

building. Athey's papers are a disparate collection of records, yet as a whole, the collection represents much of his body of work up until the point that it was acquired by the GRI. My work processing the collection began in February 2026 and is still ongoing. This thesis captures some of the most crucial work in surveying, arranging, rehousing, and conserving the bulk of the collection. In the end, I hope this work will contribute meaningful input to discussions of the preservation of queer memory and cultural heritage, while also helping to preserve the work of a legendary artist.

Literature Review

Introduction to the Mess of Queerness

Queerness, as described by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, is "the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, or anyone's sexuality aren't made (or *can't be* made) to signify monolithically."¹⁰ David Halperin describes queerness similarly yet more formally, as "*whatever* is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. *There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers*. It is an identity without essence."¹¹ Queerness, therefore, can be understood as a constantly shifting identity at odds with standards of society, culture, and form, where the experience of being queer is to make oneself at home amidst these shifting definitions (and lack of definition). As the by-products of queer lives, queer archives can be conceived of similarly; they are born from these gaps and overlaps, from the spaces of disorganization and resistance to formal categories. Much like queer lives, queer archives stand at odds from preconceived notions of normality.

¹⁰ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (Duke University Press, 1993), 8.

¹¹ David Halperin, *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography* (Oxford University Press, 1995), 62.

Queer archives are also physically messy, they “expand the idea of archive by departing from the planned coherent borders of the ‘archival’ and deploying a sustained focus on the seemingly trashy, dirty, disgusting, and untidy disorganization of bodies, things, and emotions.”¹² This is the description given by Martin Manalansan, who explains that “mess, clutter, and muddled entanglements are the ‘stuff’ of queerness, historical memory, aberrant desires, and the archive.”¹³ Manalansan’s dive into the domesticity of a group of queer immigrants in New York City doesn’t just demonstrate this, it also seeks to challenge the perception of the archive as a static collection of items in a repository. After all, he acknowledges that “feminist scholars have suggested that the archive is a space for dwelling and a quotidian site for marginalized subjects as well as gendered and erotically charged energies, meanings, and other bodily processes.”¹⁴ This situates queer archives as systems outside of institutional bounds, and as processes that are heavily engaged with by their creators. The queer archive as a “quotidian site” proposes a consistent process of use, formation, and recontextualization that occurs iteratively and over expansive stretches of time.

Ann Cvetkovich discusses how these formations might occur and how they are influenced by the queer experience. Heavily rooted in queer and feminist theory and trauma studies, Cvetkovich argues that experiences of trauma—sexual trauma, political trauma, cultural trauma—make archiving cultural memory difficult, but nevertheless form the basis upon which so many queer archives are created. She explains that “trauma challenges common understandings of what constitutes an archive...Trauma puts pressure on conventional forms of documentation, representation, and commemoration,” and thus “demands on unusual archive,

¹² Martin F. Manalansan, “The ‘Stuff’ of Archives,” *Radical History Review* 2014, no. 120 (2014): 94, <https://doi.org/10.1215/01636545-2703742>.

¹³ Manalansan, “The ‘Stuff’ of Archives,” 94.

¹⁴ Manalansan, “The ‘Stuff’ of Archives,” 1.

whose materials, in pointing to trauma's ephemerality, are themselves frequently ephemeral."¹⁵ This is especially relevant when considering a community that has been so deeply affected by many widespread traumas, including the AIDS crisis. These traumas often act as catalysts for archival drives that produce records that represent events and activities in unconventional ways and through unconventional mediums. These archival drives are intersectional and have affected each part of the queer community differently. For example, mortality and existentiality often drives the urge to archive among gay men, transgender people, and those living with HIV and AIDS, whereas lesbian archiving deals more in relationships, sexual trauma and misogyny, and the role of caretaking during the AIDS crisis.¹⁶ Conventional forms of documentation, materials that are often seen as having more evidentiary weight such as legal documents, contracts, correspondence, and financial records, are often missing from these archives. They instead consist of highly ephemeral materials that were not made to last and were not created with the expectation that they would need to serve as documents in the same way. Ephemeral material such as this often receives less attention in archival description, and thus presents an opportunity to reapproach how archivists describe ephemeral materials especially in the context of queer archives.

The ephemeral nature of queer archives thus becomes very evident through these definitions, as well as through many theories of queer epistemology, knowledge creation, and archivization. José Esteban Muñoz notably argues that queerness has always “existed as innuendo, gossip, fleeting moments, and performances that are meant to be interacted with by those within its epistemological sphere.” This results in a queer archive that is “makeshift and

¹⁵ Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Duke University Press, 2003), 7.

¹⁶ See Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings*.

randomly organized.”¹⁷ It takes the form of “alternative forms of textuality and narrativity like memory and performance...traces, glimmers, residues, and specks of things...traces of lived experience and performances of lived experience.”¹⁸ These are very metaphysical examples, but their essence is often captured in physical materials such as “testimonies, memories, letters, and journals...material artifacts,...from photographs to objects,”¹⁹ as well as household items, dishes, heirlooms, artifacts, and objects whose potentiality holds hope for the future.²⁰ Marika Cifor describes AIDS archives, specifically the ACT UP/NY records, as containing a wide array of documentation, both formal and informal, “things like T-shirts that tell stories that don’t exist anywhere else.”²¹ These items are not commonly seen by dominant academic standards as documents, or capable of standing as reliable forms of documentary evidence, yet they convey important pieces of information about a community and a people who do not often hold the privilege to create and preserve “proper” forms of documentation.

The Privilege and Drive to Archive

Artist Catherine Lord wonders “whether the certainty that one’s work is worth archiving is a symptom of privilege—generally white, generally Western, ponderously male, tediously heterosexual.”²² She writes how painter Louise Fishman’s *Angry Paintings* series constitutes a counter-archive, a representation of the gossip of cultural memory that would not otherwise be evident to those outside the culture or outside the queer/feminist epistemological sphere.

¹⁷ José Esteban Muñoz, “Ephemera as Evidence: Introductory Notes to Queer Acts,” *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 8, no. 2 (1996): 6-7, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07407709608571228>.

¹⁸ Muñoz, “Ephemera as Evidence,” 10-11.

¹⁹ Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings*, 7.

²⁰ Manalansan, “The ‘Stuff’ of Archives,” 105.

²¹ Marika Cifor, *Viral Cultures: Activist Archiving in the Age of AIDS* (University of Minnesota Press, 2022), 90.

²² Catherine Lord, “Their Memory Is Playing Tricks on Her: Notes Toward a Calligraphy of Rage,” in *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution*, ed. Cornelia Butler (MIT Press, 2007), 442.

Fishman's paintings, which all in different ways spell out "ANGRY [NAME]" (e.g. "ANGRY HARMONY [Hammond]," "ANGRY YVONNE [Rainer]"), synthesize the anger and rage that most women artists, especially lesbian and queer women artists, felt during this era of feminist art in the 1960s and 70s. The paintings, Lord quotes art historian Gavin Butt, "make evident that which could not [be] seen, which was not clear and was not disclosable."²³ They represent memory and affect, and in this way constitute a mnemonic record in the archive of feminist and queer art. Lord prefaces her essay by explaining that neither her essay nor the exhibition for which the essay was written (nor, I would add, these works by Fishman),

"could be imagined without access to specific architectures of memory, to the repositories of artifacts and knowledge that enable and determine both recollection and oblivion—which is to say an archive. Like Pandora's Box, no archive is opened without an intention to reconfigure and reinscribe, which is to say, to propose and, in doing so, to institute a counter-archive."²⁴

She also notes, "the archive is a pledge to the future. So says Jacques Derrida. Heterosexuality is about reproduction. Same thing. History belongs to the victors," and to those who believe their histories will be reproduced.²⁵

Indeed, Derrida writes, "the archive has always been a *pledge*, and like every pledge, a token of the future,"²⁶ and that "the question of the archive is not, we repeat, a question of the past...It is a question of the future, the question of the future itself, the question of a response, of a promise and of a responsibility meant for tomorrow."²⁷ Lord recounts remembering this while watching a film screening by a "happy man, a structuralist filmmaker," (a moniker she borrows

²³ Gavin Butt, *Between You and Me: Queer Disclosures in the New York Art World, 1946-1963* (Duke University Press, 2005), 7.

²⁴ Lord, "Their Memory Is Playing Tricks on Her," 441

²⁵ Lord, "Their Memory Is Playing Tricks on Her," 442.

²⁶ Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (University of Chicago Press, 1996), 18.

²⁷ Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 36.

from artist Carolee Schneemann),²⁸ whose pairing of films from his past and present “[revisited] the moment he himself had created in full confidence that there would be a future for that self.”²⁹ The promise of the future is indeed not a promise made to all. Yet all people, all communities, generally feel the drive to preserve and to archive for the future. Derrida explains that “the archive is made possible by the death, aggression, and destruction drive,” and that the compulsion to archive is a driving force behind the creation and preservation of knowledge and memory (or *mneme*).³⁰ With this in mind, I argue that while the “happy man, the structuralist filmmaker” archives with *confidence* in the future, queer people archive with *hope* for the future. More broadly and simply, those with the privilege to archive do so with confidence that their histories will be preserved, while those without such privilege to archive do so with hope that their histories might be preserved. As Manalansan wrote, the household archive of his queer subjects “deviates from an idealized, pristine archive that systematically stores, retrieves, and communicates information about the past.”³¹ Instead, it serves as mnemonic triggers of future-memory and the potentiality of the future that make their creators stop and think, “someday.”³²

For a generation of queer people struggling through discrimination, trauma, and the HIV/AIDS pandemic, this becomes increasingly evident. As Marika Cifor writes, “archives are deeply concerned with time...how it is constituted, organized, and mediated; and what it means to exist in relation to it.”³³ AIDS complicated normative conceptions of time in archives; it created its own temporality. “AIDS sped up time,”³⁴ Cifor writes, and created an “urgency

²⁸ Performance artist Carolee Schneemann famously uses the “happy man, [the] structuralist filmmaker” as a subject in her piece *Interior Scroll* (1975). Schneemann’s papers are held at the Getty Research Institute.

²⁹ Lord, “Their Memory Is Playing Tricks on Her,” 442.

³⁰ Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 94.

³¹ Manalansan, “The ‘Stuff’ of Archives,” 103.

³² Manalansan, “The ‘Stuff’ of Archives,” 100.

³³ Cifor, *Viral Cultures*, 17.

³⁴ Cifor, *Viral Cultures*, 11.

wrought by imminent mortality.”³⁵ Ron Athey, who has been HIV-positive since the 1980s, expresses this sentiment through his performances, many of which, using the body, blood, and S&M, demonstrate experiences of loss, disease, spirituality, and legacy. Athey explains, “part of this frenzy I’m in with AIDS is, ‘Oh my god, I’m gonna die in a few years and I have to leave my mark, what’s my mark? Was I just some stupid fag who died of AIDS? ... It’s like this frenzy to make it bigger, make it more, to make it mean something.”³⁶ This frenzy to produce and to archive is the urgency that Cifor speaks of, the Freudian drive which Derrida conceptualizes as the “archiviolithic” drive or “archive fever.”³⁷

Archive fever, the rush to consign every memory, is an affliction that Cvetkovich has argued queer people indeed have, as it has been “catalyzed by the silencing, neglect, and stigmatization of queer histories.”³⁸ This drive can be exemplified in Cifor’s quoting of artist William Cullum’s poster, “LET’S KEEP A RECORD,” for Visual AIDS which urges artists and queer people to “document our work now so that when you die and your boyfriend throws it all out on the street. There will be a record.” Cifor explains, “mortality was not an if but a when.”³⁹

Archives of Feeling and Memory: The Hypomnesic Archive

This drive created a generation of queer archives, trauma archives, AIDS archives, and archives of feeling that attempted to archive every memory while also capture the affectiveness of the queer experience and of AIDS. Jennifer Doyle offers the work of artist David Wojnarowicz as an example of this, for his works “describe the life-world of a community doubly traumatized ... Works like *Untitled (Hujar Dead)* capture the emotional world of AIDS

³⁵ Cifor, *Viral Cultures*, 75.

³⁶ *Hallelujah! Ron Athey: A Story of Deliverance*, directed by Catherine Saalfeld Gund, with Ron Athey, 1998

³⁷ Derrida, *Archive Fever*.

³⁸ Ann Cvetkovich, “The Queer Art of the Counterarchive,” in *Cruising the Archive: Queer Art and Culture in Los Angeles, 1945-1980*, ed. David Evans Frantz and Mia Locks (ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives, 2011), 32.

³⁹ Cifor, *Viral Cultures*, 17

activism,” and inspired artists like Athey.⁴⁰ In a summary of a performance at Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions, Athey is quoted explaining that he wrote part of the performance the day that Wojnarowicz died:

“It was in my grief and sense of loss over his passing and over the realization that all of my role models are dead [or] dying—that many of the images in this work were born. This is not just an AIDS piece, or just a piercing demonstration, but a work about a group of people who have been branded black sheep because of the things they do with their bodies. It is my response to society’s reaction to my body modification, my sexuality, and my own Judeo-Christian guilt over my HIV-infection. And through my response I gain freedom by denying or redefining a God concept and embracing the term perverse as mine.”⁴¹

In this way, Wojnarowicz’s life and work, not to mention Athey’s inspired performance, serve as the access points which evoke the queer memory of loss, the AIDS crisis, and the emotions tied to those cultural traumas.

The preservation or consignment of memory such as this into the archive, produces what Derrida calls the *hypomnesic archive*, which, in the simplest of terms, is an archive of feelings and of memory. The hypomnesic archive is, as Derrida asserts, a “mnemotechnical supplement or representation,” that “takes place at the originary and structural breakdown of the said memory,” and represents memory as external from it.⁴² However, *hypomnesia* implies a lack or lapse in memory. Derrida therefore explains that the archive is not just about remembering, but also forgetting. It is through these lapses in memory that archival material exists as representations of memory, but not the memory itself, and can possess a wide potentiality of meaning and a varying evidentiary capability depending on who is attempting to access said memory. Derrida explains that “*there is no archive without a place of consignment, without a*

⁴⁰ Doyle, *Hold It Against Me*, 130.

⁴¹ Ron Athey papers (2018.M.5), Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles

⁴² Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 11.

technique of repetition, and without a certain exteriority. No archive without outside.”⁴³ There can be no archive without an act of archivization or *archivalization*⁴⁴—a conscious or subconscious decision, an act of preservation, or of remembering—but there can also be no archive without someone to access it. This mnemonic, and specifically hypomnesic element, insists that material carries a potentiality that is implicit in the material itself and holds memory that can shift depending on who is accessing it. However, archive fever and the Freudian death drive “destroy the hypomnesic archive,”⁴⁵ Derrida explains, for they risk the “eradication of that which could never be reduced to mneme or amnesia.”⁴⁶ The frenzy to archive those things which are not so easily recorded, the “traces, glimmers, residues, and specks of things,”⁴⁷ as Muñoz describes, the anger in Fishman’s paintings, the despair in Wojnarowicz’s *Untitled (Hujar Dead)*, the things which often comprise the queer archive, risk their own destruction.

It is in these ways that the queer archive is reconstructed and recontextualized, that it begins to resemble the kind of archive theorized by Michel Foucault, that is situated “between tradition and oblivion, [that] reveals the rules of a practice that enables statements both to survive and to undergo regular modification.”⁴⁸ I hesitate to cite Foucault, as his description of *archive* is that which is not necessarily concerned with the preservation of physical records and the institutions responsible for such practices (more on this later), but I believe the function of the queer archive as an entity constantly undergoing cycles of becoming and unbecoming is representative of Foucault’s theoretical conception of *archive* (not to mention his theories forming the bases of much contemporary queer theory). Foucault describes “the never

⁴³ Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 11.

⁴⁴ Eric Ketelaar, “Tacit Narratives: The Meanings of Archives,” *Archival Science* 1, no. 2 (2001): 133, <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02435644>.

⁴⁵ Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 12.

⁴⁶ Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 11.

⁴⁷ Muñoz, “Ephemera as Evidence,” 10.

⁴⁸ Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (Éditions Gallimard, 1969; repr., Vintage Books, 2010), 130.

completed, never wholly achieved uncovering of the archive.”⁴⁹ Muñoz explains that “we may never touch queerness, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality. We have never been queer, yet queerness exists for us as an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future.”⁵⁰ Queerness and the archive exist on the same wavelength of futurity, and they hold the same promise of a utopian potentiality.

Archives of the Body

In a similar way, Jamie A. Lee proposes a push beyond the postmodern conceptions of archives and archival labor, beyond dominant perceptions of Cartesian individualistic subjectivity, and toward “the dynamic and simultaneous processes of becoming and unbecoming that accompany changes in self-understanding, memory, and subjectivity over time.”⁵¹ This is the process of queerness, the iterative process of constructing and deconstructing identity; and of archiving, of remembering and forgetting. Lee emphasizes how this shows that “records produce and are produced by memory and collective memory, and subsequently reveal how humans know their bodily being in the world and, therefore, within the archival collections.”⁵² She also draws from Joseph Pugliese’s analysis of photographer Alan Sekula’s⁵³ concept of the “shadow archive.”⁵⁴ Pugliese explains how “our bodies are themselves inscribed by embodied shadow archives that escape intelligibility precisely because they constitute the corporeal infrastructure of our everyday thoughts and practices.”⁵⁵ In other words, our bodies are a form of living

⁴⁹ Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (Éditions Gallimard, 1969; repr., Vintage Books, 2010), 131.

⁵⁰ José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York University Press, 2009), 1.

⁵¹ Jamie A. Lee, *Producing the Archival Body*, Routledge Studies in Archives (Routledge, 2021), 41.

⁵² Lee, *Producing the Archival Body*, 118.

⁵³ Alan Sekula’s papers are held at the Getty Research Institute.

⁵⁴ Allan Sekula, “The Body and the Archive,” *October*, 3-64, Vol. 39 (1986).

⁵⁵ Joseph Pugliese, “Embodied Archives,” *Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature*, JASAL Special Issue: Archive Madness (2011): 2.

archive, everchanging, and subject to the flux of our experiences and surroundings.

Acknowledging this, Lee argues, can help us archivists better understand how

“human and nonhuman complexities and multiplicities will influence stories the archives collects; how stories are organized and structured in relation to the micro-stories as well as to the whole of the archival body of knowledges; and the representative descriptions and access points that are meaningful to diverse populations of producers and users of archival records.”⁵⁶

These representative descriptions then, I would argue, if engaged within these frameworks properly, can become another example of queer (un)becoming that demonstrates the livingness of the queer archive and the body archive.

Ron Athey’s medium of choice is the body. His performances feature the body in movement, through body modification, piercing and cutting, bleeding, S&M, bondage, real and dramatized depictions of disease, healing, spirituality, glossolalia, and more. His body is also a masterpiece of tattoo, and it carries with him histories of his art and expression, of addiction, and of HIV-positivity. Artist and friend Julie Tolentino writes that “Ron forced the hand of AIDS, addiction, self-loathing, isolation, and pain.”⁵⁷ She writes that through all of that, through his performances, and among their group of artists, performers, and friends, “our saturated bodies serve individually as perfectly-inadequate living archives worthy of a leather-daddy boot shine, a perfect reunion-by-slow-dance in a mirrored ballroom, or maybe just a messy blow job. Small momentary acts to make us perfect—never fully repeatable.”⁵⁸ These small momentary acts then comprise the living body archive, always in a state of modification and recontextualization in time and space.

⁵⁶ Lee, *Producing the Archival Body*, 117.

⁵⁷ Julie Tolentino, “The Irreplaceable Bodies: Resistance Through Ferocious Fragility,” in *Pleading in the Blood: The Art and Performances of Ron Athey*, ed. Dominic Johnson (Live Art Development Agency and Intellect, The University of Chicago Press, 2013), 116.

⁵⁸ Tolentino, “The Irreplaceable Bodies,” 117.

This living archive then, Adrian Heathfield explains, “is not simply a static repository of traces of lives, nor is it solely an institution, architecture or collection nominated as such, but rather a diffuse cultural system moving between occurrences, the corporeal, the textual and artifactual in an ongoing state of flux.”⁵⁹ Instead, this archive, Heathfield argues, is conceived as Foucault described. It is in these ways then, that the queer archive is expanded beyond the effects of archive fever, and is instead able to negotiate the terms of its own archivization through an ongoing and open discourse of archontic power. By shifting the lens through which we view queer archivization, we can begin to reframe *archive fever* as not a malady that risks the destruction of the queer archive, but rather as a facet of an iterative and “regular modification” of the archive through the body, its place in time and space, and its relationship to its productions. These productions—the performances, the work, the physical traces, the records—can then be conceived as the physical archive which performs its hypomnesic function in pointing to the theoretical queer archive of memory.

The Archive and Archives

However, it is now incredibly necessary to point out the distinction between *archives* and *the archive*. Michelle Caswell importantly differentiates *the archive* as a “hypothetical wonderland,” inspired by the theories of Foucault and Derrida, upon which humanities scholars have set their gazes of both adoration and ire; while *archives* “are collections of records, material and immaterial, analog and digital,” as well as “the institutions that steward them, the places where they are physically located, and the process that designated them ‘archival.’”⁶⁰ This

⁵⁹ Adrian Heathfield, “Illicit Transit,” in *Pleading in the Blood: The Art and Performances of Ron Athey*, ed. Dominic Johnson (Live Art Development Agency and Intellect, The University of Chicago Press, 2013), 220.

⁶⁰ Caswell, “‘The Archive’ Is Not an Archives,” 1-2.

difference is significant and profound, as Caswell argues that discussions of the archive and archives were happening “on parallel tracks in which scholars in both disciplines are largely not taking part in the same conversations, not speaking the same conceptual languages, and not benefiting from each other’s insights.”⁶¹ And at the time, “almost none of the humanistic inquiry at ‘the archival turn’ ... has acknowledged the intellectual contribution of archival studies as a field of theory and praxis in its own right.”⁶² Caswell’s prescriptions are mostly aimed at humanities scholars, but she acknowledges that “archival studies scholars have to do more to articulate the existence and value of their perspectives to humanities scholars,” and that “interdisciplinarity is a two-way street.”⁶³

Some progress has been made recently in closing this gap through a variety of recent collections of essays featuring humanities and archival studies scholars who have pushed the methodological discussion to be more conscious of the nature of archival work and its effect on how primary source materials should be approached. Aliza Luft and Jelena Subotić, for example, explain differing approaches to archival research among historians and social science scholars and recommend frameworks to help their fellow scholars better and more holistically approach archives. To address their ethical concerns of the “politics of archival research, ... the challenges of interpretation, and ... the consideration of harms and benefits” of such practices, Luft and Subotić recommend that researchers be able to:

“describe and contextualize the provenance of their archives, ... specify alternative interpretations of materials along with an explanation of the reasoning behind their

⁶¹ Caswell, “‘The Archive’ Is Not an Archives,” 2.

⁶² Caswell, “‘The Archive’ Is Not an Archives,” 2.

⁶³ Caswell, “‘The Archive’ Is Not an Archives,” 2.

chosen interpretations; and ... discuss how considerations of harms and benefits influence their research methods and writing.”⁶⁴

These recommendations help establish meaningful guidelines for ethically engaging with archives and reorient researchers to begin considering foundational concepts of archival provenance, interpretation of the record, forms of meaning and evidence, and the ethical implications of conducting such research. These are also several important qualities of queer archives, including provenance, custodial history, and community-creation; interpretation of conventional and unconventional forms of documentation; and multiplicity of meaning and evidence. Addressing these qualities and following these recommendations also means applying critical analysis in uncovering the influences of power and society on the creation, interpretation, and use of the archive.

Archival scholars Caswell, Punzalan, and Sangwand argue, “critical theory has much to offer archival studies and that, conversely, archival studies has much to offer critical theory.”⁶⁵ This exchange, which they term *Critical Archival Studies*, “could simultaneously explain and critique the core tenets of archival studies— notions of record, of provenance, of value, of representation, to name a few—that takes a long view of how potential evidence gets transmitted across space and time.”⁶⁶ I therefore concern myself with how careful consideration of these theories of record, provenance, value, representation, and evidence can be extended to archival labor (processing and description) in order to expand on how we actually engage with these theories in praxis, in addition to how we conceive of them. For example, when examined through a critical archival lens, the transmission of potential evidence becomes a large focus—how it is

⁶⁴ Aliza Luft and Jelena Subotić, “Ethics of Archives: Improving Historical Social Science Through the Consideration of Research on Violence,” *Social Science History* 49, no. 1 (2025): 229–53, <https://doi.org/10.1017/ssh.2024.42>,

⁶⁵ Michelle Caswell et al., “Critical Archival Studies: An Introduction,” *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* 1, no. 2 (2017): 3, <https://doi.org/10.24242/jclis.v1i2.50>.

⁶⁶ Caswell et al., “Critical Archival Studies,” 4.

transmitted, how it is represented, and most importantly, how we should be describing records in order to properly elucidate their evidentiary potentiality and direct researchers through intricate and complex patterns among disparate records.

In the same vain as the *archive/archives* debate, the humanities tends to view *ephemera* as something hard to grasp, something intangible, and as Muñoz describes it, “all of those things that remain after a performance, a kind of evidence of what has transpired but certainly not the thing itself,”⁶⁷ whereas archival studies scholars view *ephemera* as archival materials “created for a specific, limited purpose, and generally designed to be discarded after use,” things like fliers, advertisements, stickers, posters, tickets, receipts, and other artifacts not commonly viewed as documents like objects, clothing, snapshots, works of art, and much more.⁶⁸ This ephemeral material is much more implicit in nature, it is sometimes non-textual, and often lacks information that normative conceptions of documentation expect, such as date, creator, or audience. Thus, I argue that the archivist describing such ephemeral material should be required to engage with them within applicable theoretical frameworks in order to better understand the material and contextualize it among its multiple evidentiary potentialities.

These potentialities ultimately allow communities to “re-envision the future through archival interventions in representations of the shared past.”⁶⁹ These re-envisionings, sometimes taking the form of “archival imaginaries,” as Caswell and Anne Gilliland explain, require archivists to “envision new ways that archival description, retrieval and use can be reworked to take absences...into account,” especially “if the archival endeavor is to become relevant to

⁶⁷ Muñoz, “Ephemera as Evidence,” 10

⁶⁸ Society of American Archivists, “Ephemera,” Dictionary of Archives Terminology, <https://dictionary.archivists.org/entry/ephemera.html>.

⁶⁹ Michelle Caswell, “Inventing New Archival Imaginaries: Theoretical Foundations for Identity-Based Community Archives,” in *Identity Palimpsests: Archiving Ethnicity in the U.S. and Canada*, ed. Dominique Daniel and Amalia S. Levi (Litwin Books, 2014).

communities disenfranchised by the extant record.”⁷⁰ The archival studies field is captivated by archival absences, gaps, and silences. Ephemeral material sometimes leaves gaps such as these open, which especially for the queer archive, leaves open a range of potentialities, archival imaginaries, and multivalency of meaning and evidence.

Considering these archival imaginaries, their context, and the possibility of “imagined records” also means taking affect seriously.⁷¹ Gilliland warns that archivists are not immune, no matter how much we want to believe we can remain impartial, contained, or decontaminated from what she calls the “nasty effects and affects of the contents” of difficult and traumatic archives, and from the affective nature of memory when processing archives.⁷² She poignantly writes that “if we dismiss affect professionally or methodologically as suspect ... we fail the records, we fail those who participated in their creation, we fail those who today depend upon them, and we fail ourselves as professionals.”⁷³ Ron Athey’s work is incredibly affectual, utilizing difficult tools—blood, sex, S&M, religion—to perform themes of grief and loss, spirituality, and disease. Because of this, Doyle writes, “the genuine difficulty of Athey’s work has been amplified by the absence of a disciplinary discourse on its value,”⁷⁴ and that “the controversy that surrounds Athey’s work is engineered to keep us from thinking about and working through these aspects of its difficulty.”⁷⁵ Affect is an integral and centrally important part of the creation, organization, disposition, and eventual processing and description of the queer archive. Therefore, describing ephemera properly also requires the archivist to

⁷⁰ Anne J. Gilliland and Michelle Caswell, “Records and Their Imaginaries: Imagining the Impossible, Making Possible the Imagined,” *Archival Science* 16, no. 1 (2016): 73, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10502-015-9259-z>.

⁷¹ Gilliland and Caswell, “Records and Their Imaginaries,” 73

⁷² Anne J. Gilliland “Studying Affect and Its Relationship to the Agency of Archivists Since the Yugoslav Wars.” (2015), 29.

⁷³ Gilliland “Studying Affect and Its Relationship to Agency,” 50.

⁷⁴ Doyle, *Hold It Against Me*, 19.

⁷⁵ Doyle, *Hold It Against Me*, 20.

acknowledge affect as a significant facet in the creation and use of records. Ephemera and affect are often intrinsically tied, as ephemera serves as the mnemonic representation for a multiplicity of meanings, memory, and emotions. In this way, Muñoz's description is applicable, as even physical ephemera serves as "a kind of evidence of what has transpired but certainly not the thing itself."⁷⁶

Evidence and Ephemera, and "Ephemera as Evidence"

The ephemerality of the queer archive has proved troublesome for certain standards of the academy in regards to its evidential viability. Muñoz challenges standard requirements of evidence prescribed through a "regime of rigor," held in place by institutional ideology with which queer scholarship has attempted to align itself.⁷⁷ He explains that "evidence's limit becomes clearly visible when we attempt to describe and imagine contemporary identities that do not fit into a single preestablished archive of evidence,"⁷⁸ and when the archive of evidence surrounding contemporary identities is highly ephemeral, we must begin to expand our evidentiary capability and start thinking less about what evidence *means* and more about what it *does*. Where, of course, Muñoz is referring to the theoretical/humanistic concept of *ephemera*, we can attempt to bridge this divide by returning to debates on the archival *record*. Jonathan Furner, for example, explains that archival materials "are known as *records* in virtue of this potentiality: an artifact that may potentially serve as the source of grounds for believing that a particular event happened is a record."⁷⁹ Just as well, Eric Ketelaar describes how archives are becoming "spaces of memory-practice, where people can try to put their trauma in context by

⁷⁶ Muñoz, "Ephemera as Evidence," 10.

⁷⁷ Muñoz, "Ephemera as Evidence," 7.

⁷⁸ Muñoz, "Ephemera as Evidence," 9.

⁷⁹ Jonathan Furner, "Conceptual Analysis: A Method for Understanding Information as Evidence, and Evidence as Information," *Archival Science* 4, nos. 3–4 (2004): 259, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10502-005-2594-8>.

accessing the documents, not primarily seeking *the* truth or searching *the* history, but transforming their experiences into meaning,” thereby uncovering the multivalent potential of records to provide potential meaning.⁸⁰ In all, Lee also argues that “it is integral that archivists break apart the qualities of recordness, the distinct qualities that seemingly indicate...a record’s evidentiary value, in order to understand how people making meaning and what of this process and performance might enter into the archives.”⁸¹ Heeding these calls to redefine and attend to the record and its potentiality, of acknowledging the evidentiary potential of ephemera and nontraditional forms of documentation, will ultimately expand our conception of evidence to account for communities whose records do not fit into normative standards of recordness.

Ron Athey’s work is rarely editioned, sold, or preserved in tangible ways. This “resistance to documentation,” on Athey’s part, Dominic Johnson writes,

“was contingent on his lived experiences: from his outsider lifestyle in the early years, to a later realization that time was running out, as more pressing concerns took precedence over the urge to ensure posterity...any residual archival impulse was swept aside in the rush to produce live work, and to have it seen by audiences before time ran out.”⁸²

This is the theoretical/humanistic conception of the queer archive of ephemerality, of “queer acts, like queer performances, and various performances of queerness, [that] stand as evidence of queer lives, powers, and possibilities.”⁸³ Still, these acts leave behind physical traces, physical ephemera that challenge standards of documentary evidence, and that establish a connection to queer memory. The records left behind—fliers, photographs, videos and soundtracks, art objects, props, costumes, notes and drawings, gifts from friends—elucidate the evidence of Athey’s

⁸⁰ Eric Ketelaar, “A Living Archive, Shared by Communities of Records,” in *Community Archives: The Shaping of Memory*, ed. Jeannette Bastian and Ben Alexander (Facet Publishing, 2009), 120.

⁸¹ Lee, *Producing the Archival Body*, 67.

⁸² Dominic Johnson, “Introduction: Towards a Moral and Just Psychopathology,” in *Pleading in the Blood: The Art and Performances of Ron Athey*, ed. Dominic Johnson (Live Art Development Agency and Intellect, The University of Chicago Press, 2013). 38.

⁸³ Muñoz, “Ephemera as Evidence,” 6.

work, performances, and his practice, but they rarely consist of contracts, correspondence, financials, and other documents often perceived as possessing more documentary and evidentiary weight. It is for these reasons that these records require more attention to emphasize their significance, contextualize their relationship within the archive, and prevent them from being written off as mere “ephemera.”

Methodology

Introduction to the Athey Papers

The Ron Athey papers were acquired by the Getty Research Institute (GRI) in 2017 (officially accessioned as 2018.M.5), and consist of about 45 linear feet of paper, notes, drawings, books, photos, audiovisual materials, props, art, correspondence, and a small amount of digital materials. The collection represents nearly four decades of Athey’s life and career, and includes invaluable performance documentation and demonstrations of his deep connections with his co-performers, contemporaries, and the queer and performance art scenes in Los Angeles and around the world. Materials include published writings, clippings from articles written by Athey, and publications featuring his writing and performances, as well as unpublished writings, notes, diary entries, writings that evolved into performances, and performance outlines and scripts. There are professional photographs and portraits by photographers like Manuel Vason, Elyse Reghr, Karen Filter, and Catherine Opie, in addition to hundreds of snapshots of friends, artists, parties, gatherings, dinners, bars and clubs, exhibitions, performances, and more. The collection contains dozens of tapes and discs with recordings of performances, soundtracks, and photographs, which constitute the bulk of the formal performance documentation. Performance documentation takes many forms in Athey’s archive, including audiovisual materials; writings, notes, and outlines; photographs, both professional portraits and amateur snapshots; and a

plethora of fliers, programs, and publicity. These fliers and performance programs, although ephemeral by definition, form the foundation of documenting Athey's many performance events and iterations of performances, as well their venues, festivals, and co-performers. There are very few instances of contracts, financial documentation, legal documents, or other administrative paperwork to represent these performances and other professional activities, with the exception of Athey's teaching career. There is also little formal correspondence, but many notes and gifts from friends and other artists in the form of drawings, objects, art, and books. Jennifer Doyle describes Athey's "presence in the official archive of Los Angeles performance [as] more of a haunt than a record...as an artist whose work represents that which can't be accommodated by institutional discourse."⁸⁴ She writes that "Athey's legacy is both informal (underdocumented) and powerful (hard to overstate)."⁸⁵ Dominic Johnson similarly writes that "Athey's peripatetic relation to archiving his work posed challenges for compiling and editing *Pleading in the Blood*," the first monograph on Athey's work, "photographs were salvaged from friends' archives, rare publications, or degraded videos."⁸⁶ Athey's work and archive, in part owing to his underground beginnings and non-institutional position, must then be conceived outside of standard institutional conceptions of archival processing and description.

I therefore utilize autoethnography to narratively demonstrate and document my experiences, decision-making, and processing and description of the Ron Athey papers. In my processing, I contemplate the theory and practices emanating out of critical archival studies and Lee's queer/ed archival methodology to help uncover how queer archives deviate from normative standards of archival creation, arrangement, and description. I also utilize an

⁸⁴ Jennifer Doyle, "Ron Athey's Dissociative Sparkle," in *Cruising the Archive: Queer Art and Culture in Los Angeles, 1945-1980*, ed. David Evans Frantz and Mia Locks (ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives, 2011), 140.

⁸⁵ Doyle, "Ron Athey's Dissociative Sparkle," 140

⁸⁶ Johnson, "Introduction: Towards a Moral and Just Psychopathology," in *Pleading in the Blood*, 38

amalgamation of queer, humanistic, and critical theoretical frameworks in an effort to extend these theories to my institutional practices and archival processing standards.

Caswell, Punzalan, and Sangwand define critical archival studies as “those approaches that (1) explain what is unjust with the current state of archival research and practice, (2) posit practical goals for how such research and practice can and should change, and/or (3) provide the norms for such critique.”⁸⁷ Critical archival studies provides the foundations upon which to question the current state of archival processing standards and start working toward new, more applicable workflows and ways of thinking that better serve the archive. The authors explain that “critical theory is crucial for understanding [the political power of archives]—how it operates, through whom, and why—and for building new archival practices that liberate human potential rather than oppress it based on categories such as race, gender, class, sexuality, and ability.”⁸⁸ After all, they explain, “critical archival studies, like critical theory, is emancipatory in nature.”⁸⁹ My archival processing, therefore, seeks to engage with these principles.

Jamie A. Lee proposes a *queer/ed archival methodology* that seeks to “guide archivists through self-reflexive thought to re-imagine and critically evaluate their archival production,”⁹⁰ as well as “question and upset the normative archival structures that continue to uphold and reproduce exclusionary hegemonic power dynamics through adherence to grand metanarratives that tell one story and often from the perspectives of those with privilege.”⁹¹ Most importantly, Lee writes, within a queer/ed archival methodology, “archivists are invited to question their ongoing practices to develop alternates to practices that may no longer be relevant within their

⁸⁷ Caswell et al., “Critical Archival Studies,” 2.

⁸⁸ Caswell et al., “Critical Archival Studies,” 3.

⁸⁹ Caswell et al., “Critical Archival Studies,” 2.

⁹⁰ Jamie Ann Lee, “A Queer/ed Archival Methodology: Archival Bodies as Nomadic Subjects,” *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* 1, no. 2 (2017): 6, <https://doi.org/10.24242/jclis.v1i2.26>.

⁹¹ Lee, “A Queer/ed Archival Methodology,” 9.

own archival contexts.”⁹² The approaches I have adopted have anticipated being contrary to many traditional archival processing standards and institutional guidelines that have not been advantageous or beneficial in the processing of the Athey papers and other queer archives. At the same time, any far-reaching interventions are constrained by the institutional policies with which I have been working. Where feasible, I offer input on how I mitigate any issues between these policies and the frameworks I am employing.

Cifor conceives of archival ethnography as “a form of qualitative field research and iterative naturalistic inquiry,” which

“offers epistemological advantages by accounting for the complexities of documents and human behavior and feelings, providing thick description, offering multiple viewpoints, and facilitating inquiry into obtuse but vital areas of human experience, affect, emotion, and memory, thereby enabling inductive research.”⁹³

Robb Hernández similarly situates “archival body ethnography” as a “descriptive overview of the body of a record,” that serves to “evaluate the recordkeeping constellation in its textual, visual, and artifactual appearance.”⁹⁴ My research concerns the archival context of one specific archival body (or at least, the collection of which that has been acquired by the Getty) and my work processing it.

I therefore use *autoethnography*, which allows me to adhere to the spirit of archival ethnographic research, critical archival studies, and queer/ed archival methodology while specifically focusing on my own processing as well as my personal and institutional positionalities and reflections. My personal and institutional positionalities are both significant in my research. As a queer person and an admirer of Athey’s work, I have a personal stake in how

⁹² Lee, “A Queer/ed Archival Methodology,” 9.

⁹³ Cifor, *Viral Cultures*, 30.

⁹⁴ Robb Hernández, *Archiving an Epidemic: Art, AIDS, and the Queer Chicana Avant-Garde*. (New York University Press, 2019), 22.

his history is preserved and how the archive is processed. And as a professional archivist at a prominent art institution, my agency is in tension with systems, standards, and practices⁹⁵ that might prevent more inventive or interpretive conceptions of archival processing and description. Thuy Vo Dang suggests, “that archivists and educators enter into the work with transparency regarding their positionality and relationship to power structures that both enable and limit their engagement with the communities they serve.”⁹⁶ It is because of how I am situated in relation to my work and my research that I have chosen to employ an autoethnographical method.

In this way, my research also forms a double hermeneutic relationship with my methodology as my findings and methods begin to reflexively interact. Building upon Giddens’s definition of the double-hermeneutic as the “mutual interpretative interplay between social science and those whose activities compose its subject matter,”⁹⁷ Sue McKemmish and Anne Gilliland explain that the double hermeneutic nature of archival studies research reveals the “importance of reflexive research practice for individual researchers and research projects.”⁹⁸ My decision to use autoethnography as a method in my research arises from this desire for reflexivity. As McKemmish and Gilliland write, autoethnography “features self-reflective narratives of the experience of researcher partners and participants as a mechanism for exploring and analysing social phenomena.”⁹⁹ The result is an ongoing and iterative renegotiation, a

⁹⁵ The Getty over the years has established many systems, standards, and practices widely adopted by libraries, museums, and archives, such as the Getty Vocabularies and manuals on archival processing, digital preservation, and cultural heritage management.

⁹⁶ Thuy Vo Dang, “TEACH and CARE: How Community-Centered Archival Practice May Transform Education, Archives, and Community History,” *Journal of Contemporary Archival Studies*, 2026, 2.

⁹⁷ Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society*. (Polity Press, 1984), quoted in Sue McKemmish and Anne J. Gilliland. “Archival and Recordkeeping Research: Past, Present and Future.” *Research Methods: Information Management, Systems, and Contexts*, 2012, 80–102.

⁹⁸ McKemmish and Gilliland, “Archival and Recordkeeping Research: Past, Present and Future.”

⁹⁹ McKemmish and Gilliland, “Archival and Recordkeeping Research: Past, Present and Future.”

becoming and unbecoming, of my methodology and my research as my findings require me to alter my methods and my documentation.

What follows is a narrative (though not necessarily linear) documentation of my experience and decision-making processes while working on the early stages of processing the Athey papers, and an in-depth discussion of my personal experience, point of view, and positionality while working with this material. I also include an early processing diary in Appendix I which consists of my contemporaneous notes while surveying and arranging parts of the collection (some of which have been added into the body of this thesis).

Acquisition History

Multiple accounts, recollections, and stories of archivization, movement of materials, and imposition of systems of organization underlie the acquisition of the Athey papers by the Getty. The conception of his artist's archive as a resource that might be used by others than Athey himself stretched back nearly ten years prior to the acquisition, to when Athey moved to London and his friend Jennifer Doyle stored much of his archive in her home while he was away. In the meantime, Doyle began organizing Athey's archive so that it could be used by other friends and art historians such as Dominic Johnson and Amelia Jones.¹⁰⁰ This marks the beginning of multiple iterations of archivization whereby a large portion of the artist's archive would eventually become an archival collection held and processed for research use at the Getty. Not too long after Athey moved back to Los Angeles, owing to the precarity of the housing market, the rest of Athey's papers that were not with Doyle had to be rescued overnight. Jones tells this story about the eviction:

¹⁰⁰ Dominic Johnson is a long-time friend and co-performer of Athey's and the author of *Pleading in the Blood*, the first monograph written on Athey. Amelia Jones is the author and curator of *Queer Communion*, the exhibition and catalog on Athey shown at ICA LA.

“In 2016, [Ron] hears rumors that his Los Angeles rent-controlled apartment of 25 years, his affordable haven in an increasingly priced out city, is in danger of being sold—the owner having passed away. He begins posting alarming messages on Facebook about throwing his long-accumulated archive of props, scripts, and miscellany out on the street and torching it all ... His rage at the carelessness, even violent refusal to care, of contemporary late capitalist societies is fully justifiable and understandable, but his posts put me on alert. As a scholar of past art and performance histories, I cannot let the archive go up in a billowing plume of smoke...Along with others, ... I rush over and pick up the archive in several days’ worth of loads. We help Ron scoop items from half-organized drawers into plastic bins; we assist in carrying metal filing cabinets, paper files, and box after box of costumes and props.”¹⁰¹

Jones stored all of these in her home. At the same time, she began curating an exhibition on Athey that would eventually become *Queer Communion: Ron Athey* at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (ICA LA) using materials from her half of the archive as well as from Doyle’s half. Once the acquisition by the GRI went through, the materials selected for use in the exhibition Jones was curating (for research, for the show, and for the catalog) were held back from the initial transfer of material to the GRI and held by Jones until after the exhibition was finished. The final transfer was received by the GRI in 2022 (officially accessioned as 2018.M.5 ADD1), and processing began in 2026.

Systems of Organization and Custodial History

The materials have undergone many different iterations of arrangement, about one for each phase of the collection’s movement from one place to the next. While not necessarily uncommon for archival materials, these changes in organization reflect the archive’s movement, custodial history, and how it has been used. The first inventory at my disposal surveyed the materials that Amelia Jones was removing from Athey’s home. This survey was most likely

¹⁰¹ Jones, “Introduction: Queer Communion,” 5.

carried out by Athey and Jones, and contains important descriptions of certain materials, but it did not assign titles to boxes or containers. Because of this, I tend to omit this inventory in my consideration of the multiple discreet generations of organization. It has nevertheless been very helpful in describing and contextualizing certain materials.

The next survey was more thorough, included more granular description of the contents of each box, and assigned an alphanumeric name to each. This inventory was eventually sent to the GRI during the acquisition process and is included in the final acquisition agreement. I refer to this system as the Tain-numbers, as they were part of a spreadsheet sent to the acquiring curator John Tain during the acquisition process. It also shows a complete snapshot of the collection without the division between Doyle and Jones.

The division of the archive between Jennifer Doyle and Amelia Jones however, is the most constant and arguably significant system of organization. It represents not only the custodial history of the materials, but also the chronology of archivization; Doyle's half of the archive was the first batch of materials to be "archived," to be set aside as a specific group of materials to be researched, and Jones's half was the second batch that was more hastily archived during the eviction. This iteration of organization names all the containers with an alphabetical scheme: "Jones" or "Doyle," depending on the household in which the material was stored, followed by a letter (e.g. Jones A, Jones F, Doyle C, Doyle E). There is no complete survey of this system, however, and container numbers were only evident to me through post-its on the physical containers. While this system was being used, material was transferred to the GRI, and Jones also began curating *Queer Communion* from the archive, separating much of the materials from their original containers. All of the original locations of the separated material were carefully notated by Jones, and the pulled items were listed on an inventory sent to the GRI during the first transfer. This list proved incredibly useful in returning pulled material to their

original containers to restore them into their original order, and in serving as a small survey of the materials included in the second transfer of material.

When material arrived and was registered by the GRI's registrars, the boxes received yet another new set of arbitrary numbers, agnostic of the Jones/Doyle names, and were yet again reordered. This happened with both transfers, with boxes receiving what we call "T-numbers" or temporary box numbers (e.g. T2, T7, ADD1-T12). This was the final rearrangement before the collection's eventual permanent box numbers. During registration, materials were also transferred out of unstable boxes and filing cabinets, risking their misorganization. Some of this process can be seen in *Figures 1 and 2*.

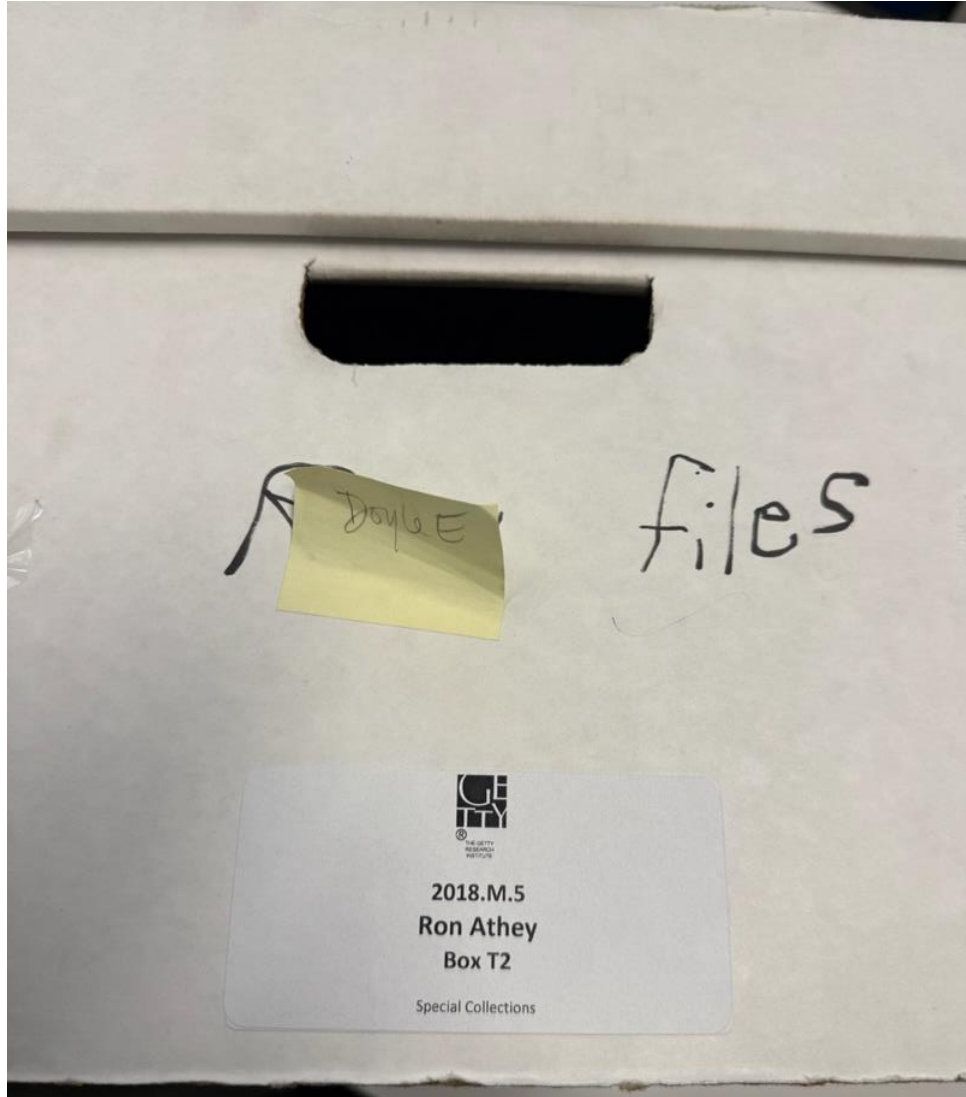


Figure 1: A Banker's box with a GRI label of "Box T2," a post-it with "Doyle E," and inscription of "Ron Files," showing at least three forms of organization labeled.

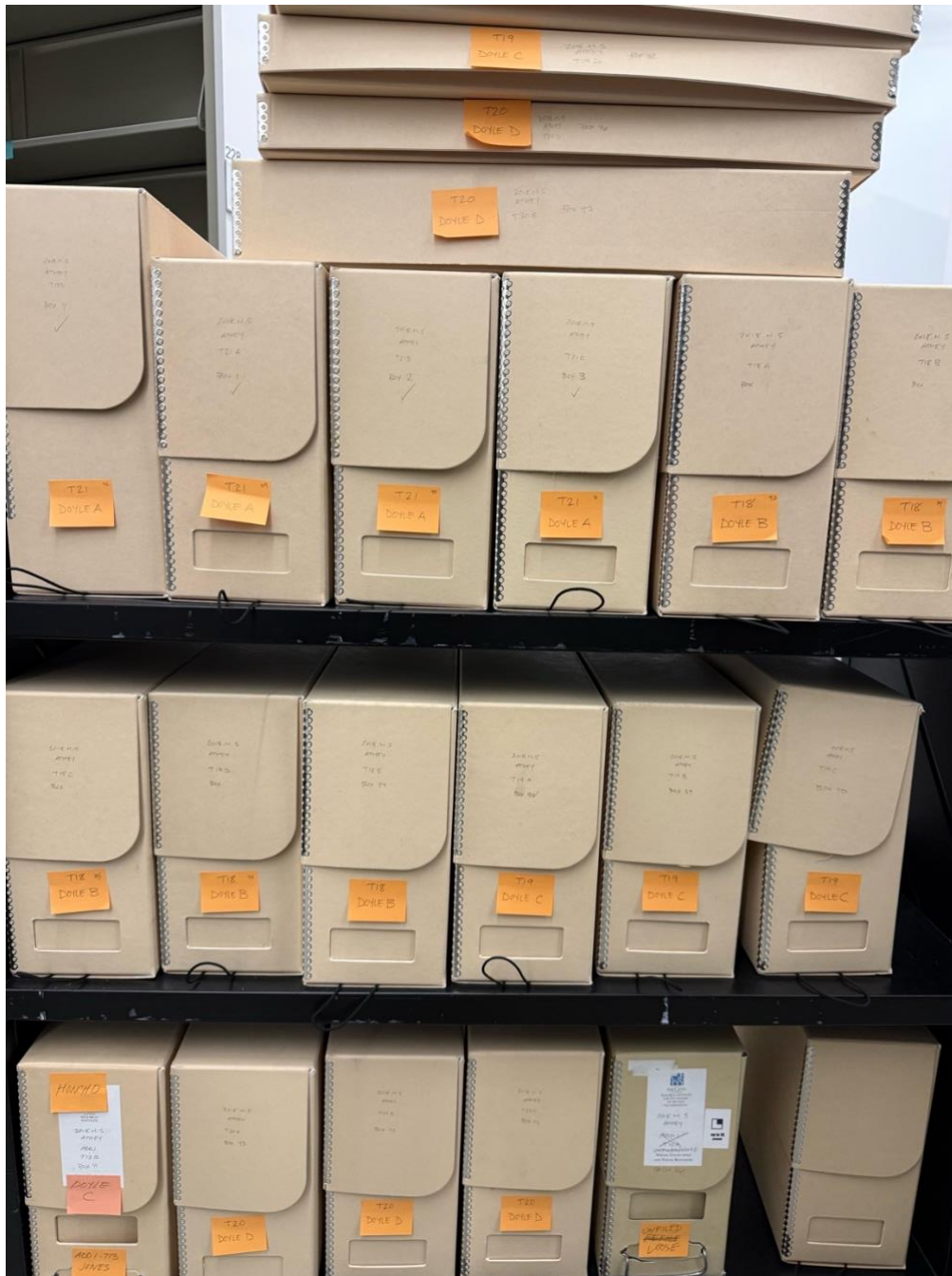


Figure 2: A full cart of in-process boxes with my post-it notes preserving “T-numbers” and “Doyle numbers” in addition to the new box numbers written on each box.

During my initial survey of the collection, the first task I assigned myself was to uncover how these boxes moved around during each organizational system. What were they called during each system, and how would this be relevant to the records’ eventual description? Which boxes

went to Doyle's versus Jones's house, and how does this demonstrate the different ways in which the materials were used? Were any boxes absorbed by others during each transition from Athey's house to Doyle/Jones to the GRI? Did the shipping of materials or our registration of the collection at the GRI (in either transfer) affect any aspect of the "original" arrangement? I decided to track these changes in a large Excel spreadsheet that I eventually migrated to an Airtable database. It allowed me to see these transitions between systems more easily, and gave me a platform to track most importantly, how each of these systems fed into the final box list for when processing is finished (a complete list of boxes, their changing names, and mostly final box numbers is included in Appendix II).

What this shows is not just how the material moved through different systems, iterations of organization, and collection management styles, but just as importantly, illustrates how archives organically move, how they are used, and the relationship between artist and art historian, material and researcher, and creators and institutions. Archival scholars have often examined this phenomenon—the forces behind creation, movement, custody, and disposition of records—as a facet of provenance. Terry Cook argues that archivists should start viewing provenance as “linked to function and activity rather than structure and place,”¹⁰² meaning that in the case of the Athey papers, the material's transition from Athey's home to those of Jones and Doyle, their subsequent research and organization of the archive, the material's use in the ICA exhibition, and the final transfer of the material to the GRI, are all highly significant activities. These activities should be recorded as part of an archive's *records history*, which Laura Millar describes as “the story of the physical management and movement of the records over time,” including “how they were created and used; who had them and when; where they were moved to

¹⁰² Terry Cook, “Archival Science and Postmodernism: New Formulations for Old Concepts,” *Archival Science* 1, no. 1 (2001): 21, <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02435636>.

and why; and whether any records were lost or destroyed, enhanced or altered, and why, up to and including the time they were transferred into archival custody.”¹⁰³ For these reasons, this history of movement and organization is being recorded in the finding aid’s front matter, as well as in applicable scope and content notes.¹⁰⁴ For example, the *Processing information* note field in the collection-level record will be worded as follows:

“The collection was processed in 2026 by Jordan Cain. Before its acquisition by the Getty Research Institute, parts of the collection were organized, described, and researched by Jennifer Doyle and Amelia Jones. Order of the boxes and of the materials has been retained from before the transfer of material to the GRI, and many original descriptions have been kept. The collection arrived in two parts: the first transfer arrived in 2018, and the second transfer, consisting of materials that were used in the exhibition *Queer Communion: Ron Athey*, curated by Jones, arrived in 2022. Both parts have since been integrated. Materials were separated by Jones for the exhibition and subsequently returned by Cain using inventories created by Jones. Materials were also separated from the unprocessed collection in 2023 for the Getty Research Institute’s exhibition *\$3 Bill: Evidence of Queer Lives in the Archives*, which have also been returned by Cain. Additional detailed processing information, inventories, and box listings are available and requestable in the repository’s research files. Contact the repository for more information.”¹⁰⁵

It is institutionally required for us to include processing history in the finding aid’s front matter, but the note typically does not delve deep into custodial history, exhibition information, and additional work in description and organization. I have decided to include this information in addition to mentioning that more detailed history is available in the collection’s research files, which are open for consultation by researchers. Considering these activities is incredibly important in understanding when, why, and how the archive came to be, and how researchers should engage with it in the future. But more so than that, recognizing the custodial history and

¹⁰³ Laura Millar, “The Death of the Fonds and the Resurrection of Provenance: Archival Context in Space and Time,” *Archivaria*, no. 53 (2002): 13.

¹⁰⁴ See Glossary

¹⁰⁵ This note follows *DACS Rule 7.1.8* on supplying Processing Information; Society of American Archivists, *Describing Archives: A Content Standard* (Society of American Archivists, 2019).

significant use of the queer archive demonstrates how community-oriented they are. It shows how Athey's community came to his aid, played a role in the preservation of his archive, shared its materials, and demonstrated how an archive like Athey's is certainly not static.

Original Order and Use as Arrangement

In the past five years alone, and as mentioned above, Athey's archive has been used in two separate exhibitions. The first was *Queer Communion: Ron Athey* at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, curated by Amelia Jones in 2021, which happened amidst the GRI's acquisition of the archive. Jones describes much of her experience curating *Queer Communion* in the catalog of the same name. While working through the archive amidst its acquisition, and after hearing that the acquisition finally went through, she writes,

"I now have two months to sift through everything and pull out all the items needed for the exhibition—otherwise, once the Getty takes things, they are forever swallowed into the cushy storage areas of one of the wealthiest museums and art history study centers in the world. I compile a checklist (frantically, with little sleep, and building anxiety), re-box the already haphazardly organized materials, and finally hand off about half of the paper archive to the Getty."¹⁰⁶

This first half of the "paper archive" handed off was the first transfer. What Jones kept would eventually become the second transfer (or what we call the "ADD" or "ADD1," short for an addition or addendum to the collection). As mentioned before, Jones flagged each location where material was removed from the collection, labelled and notated profusely, and inventoried all of the materials that were removed. This inventory helped me return materials to their original locations and served as an inventory of the ADD.

¹⁰⁶ Jones, "Introduction: Queer Communion," 6.

The second exhibition to feature Athey's archive was in-house. In 2025, the Getty Research Institute put up *\$3 Bill: Evidence of Queer Lives in the Archive*, curated by Pietro Rigolo. While *Queer Communion* was a solo show, *\$3 Bill* featured material from queer creators and their archives at the GRI and elsewhere. Material used in *\$3 Bill* from Athey's archive was not just material about or created by Athey, but featured other artists like Vaginal Davis and publications like *Poz*. Both exhibitions demonstrated an unprecedented activation of Athey's archive and were able to make visible the community behind it and showcase their contributions. At the close of both exhibitions though, material remained separated from the archive.

As mentioned, the ADD consisted solely of material that Jones had held back for exhibition in *Queer Communion*, the catalog, and all the requisite research. Some containers were intact, and no materials were removed. Other containers consisted of separated materials with post-its and notes indicating from where they were removed. Just as well, after *\$3 Bill* was deinstalled, separated materials needed to be returned to their original locations; this is GRI policy when processed collections are used in exhibitions. However, the Athey papers were unprocessed, and still in their original containers with ostensibly original arrangement. I planned to return the GRI's exhibition material to its original arrangement without question, but returning the *Queer Communion* material back to its original arrangement was not necessarily required of me; standard archival processing workflows would have me process the materials in their current state. The state of the archive at the point when it enters the archival repository is inferred as being a form of original arrangement. Therefore, the use of the archive by Jones in the exhibition is outside of the scope of my intervention as the archivist and can be seen as a form of its original arrangement. However, Jones had marked from where in the archive materials were removed, and maintained that detailed inventory of separated materials, so, overcome with the professional urge to preserve the archive's original arrangement, I ultimately made the decision to reunite the

materials with their original locations. While Jones's use of the archive is important, I believe that the pre-exhibition arrangement of the materials is the most valuable form of arrangement because it is closer to how Athey may have used his archive, as well as to the chronology of the collection's archivization. In making this decision, I also blurred the line of disposition between pre-custodial use of the archive and the repository's archival stewardship, thereby questioning the institutional standards for how we approach original arrangement.

As archivists, we are haunted by the Jenkinsonian mandate to "reflect or, where necessary, recreate, as transparently as possible, among records transferred to the control of an archives, the order and character of the records as they were with their original (and subsequent) owners."¹⁰⁷ The guideline of original order set forth by Sir Hilary Jenkinson, and the authors of the preceding "Dutch Manual,"¹⁰⁸ stemmed from the need for archivists to appear unbiased, trustworthy, and authoritative; it allows the "records to serve as trustworthy evidence of the facts," and reenforces the authority of the archive.¹⁰⁹ Over time however, members of the archival field began realizing the impossibility of the unbiased archivist, and thus the neutral archive. Terry Cook explains this shift, providing a chronology of shifts in archival theory from the premodern "custodian-archivist" safeguarding ostensibly unbiased records of evidence, the modern "historian-archivist" appraising records for the preservation of historical memory, and the postmodern "mediator-archivist" safeguarding the records of the society's identities, to the community-oriented, participatory "activist-archivist" democratizing archives at the grassroots level to expand access and archival education.¹¹⁰ Much of the archival world is still living in the modern archival world, and archival processing standards have adhered to scholarship of the late

¹⁰⁷ Cook, "Evidence, Memory, Identity, and Community," 100.

¹⁰⁸ The "Dutch Manual" colloquially refers to the *Manual for the Arrangement and Description of Archives* (1898), written in Dutch by Samuel Muller, Johan A. Feith, and Robert Fruin.

¹⁰⁹ Cook, "Evidence, Memory, Identity, and Community," 100.

¹¹⁰ Cook, "Evidence, Memory, Identity, and Community," 100.

20th century which hovers in between the historian-archivist and the mediator-archivist. As Cook notes, “these four [paradigms] accumulate across time; they do not entirely replace each other. Traces of what went before linger in successive mindsets, and sometimes form discursive tensions in our professional literature and in our practices.”¹¹¹ As such, even in today’s increasingly community-centered archival conception, most institutions still remain rooted in the modern archival conception of many decades past.

Considering this, the arbitrariness of original arrangement in queer archives and in Athey’s archive in particular is not lost on me. Even as I began some of my preliminary surveying and sorting of material, I asked myself repeatedly if I should organize certain materials or leave them alone. Would reorganizing material such as slide transparencies or snapshots negate the significance of the messy queer archive, or is that not of significance here? Ultimately, I decided to keep most things in their original state, but in some cases—slides with frame numbers, groups of publications with dates—I did choose to rearrange. The archive will never return to its original, organic, lived state after all its reorganization, activation, research, and eventual processing. And although I decided to favor some semblance of original order, my processing notes and scope and content notes,¹¹² as mentioned earlier, will reflect and explain the movement of materials by myself and others in order to properly contextualize how the archive has been used and activated over the past few years as it undergoes its processing.

Describing Archives: A Content Standard (DACS), the predominant archival processing content standard in the United States, states that “original order is best thought of as an intellectual construct that communicates important activities and relationships inhering in records through identifying key groupings that reflect the main activities and functions of the record

¹¹¹ Cook, “Evidence, Memory, Identity, and Community,” 100.

¹¹² See Glossary for definitions of *processing notes* and *scope and content notes*.

creators.”¹¹³ *DACS* cites Cook here, as well as Jennifer Meehan, and uses her research to make the disclaimer that “this kind of sense-making is only as good as the archivist’s judgment and is itself an act of research and use.”¹¹⁴ I wholeheartedly agree, however, I still believe this paradoxically results in what Cook describes as the archivist “[injecting] their own values, experiences, and education and [reflecting] those of various external pressures, into all such research and decision-making.”¹¹⁵ Rearranging archives by presumed function and activity as an assumption of original order merely presupposes that the creator was engaging with their materials based on normative organizational structures. In the case of queer archives, I don’t believe that we should be making this assumption without properly engaging in queer frameworks that allow us to understand how the archive might have been used during its creation and use. If this “sense-making” is only as good as the archivist’s judgement, and if it constitutes research and use, we should be doing the research and engaging with frameworks that make our judgement more informed.

Many archival descriptions include separate series for personal and professional materials. This is especially important when in some cases, the creator of the archive may have a professional career of very high significance and research value, but whose collection also includes a large amount of personal correspondence or other material related to their personal life that has no overwhelming relevance to their professional work. However, this is a hard distinction to make for other creators, especially artists, writers, creators whose personal lives influence their work heavily and who often have no institutional role. This is exactly the case for the Athey papers, wherein personal material such as writings, drawings, and journal entries, can

¹¹³ Society of American Archivists, *Describing Archives: A Content Standard*, xiii.

¹¹⁴ Society of American Archivists, *Describing Archives: A Content Standard*, xii; Jennifer Meehan, “Making the Leap from Parts to Whole: Evidence and Inference in Archival Arrangement and Description,” *The American Archivist* 72, no. 1 (2009): 72–90, <https://doi.org/10.17723/aarc.72.1.kj672v4907m11x66>.

¹¹⁵ Cook, “Evidence, Memory, Identity, and Community,” 102.

be directly tied to the ideas and planning of his performances. Research files, artist files, material relating to his interests, and materials collected from and about his friends and contemporaries are not just his personal papers and collections, but records that represent histories of the communities of which he has been a part. His archive has also never been held or organized through a representing gallery or studio. Therefore, I made the decision to eliminate any division between the personal and professional spheres in the archival description of Athey's papers.

Most institutions—dedicated archival repositories, special collections libraries, academic libraries, museums, non-profits—as mentioned before, are still tethered to outdated modern conceptions of archival processing policies, and are for example, firmly rooted in institutional custodianship. Changes bubble up at the edges, but for now we are in a transitive state where those of us archivists interested in the forward progress of the ever-shifting archival paradigm should seek to implement community-based practices incrementally at our own institutions, especially as these institutions continue to acquire archives for which these frameworks would be beneficial. As Cook writes,

“community-based archiving involves...a shift in core principles, from exclusive custodianship and ownership of archives to shared stewardship and collaboration; from dominant-culture language, terminology, and definitions to sensitivity to the ‘other’ and as keen an awareness of the emotional, religious, symbolic, and cultural values that records have to their communities as of their administrative and juridical significance.”¹¹⁶

Cook suggests that this is most importantly not about professional archivists coming to the rescue, but about how we as professional archivists can learn from community-based archival practices to better inform how we process and describe archives.

¹¹⁶ Cook, “Evidence, Memory, Identity, and Community,” 115.

Community, Co-creatorship, and Collaborative Works

Ron Athey's archive is not a community archive in the sense that this is understood in the professional literature; community archives are collectively created and controlled.¹¹⁷ Moreover, the definition of *community* is broad and contested. Generally, groups of people that share a socially significant commonality are considered a *community*. According to Flinn, Stevens, and Shepherd, they are "any group of people who come together and present themselves as such," and their archives are "the product of their attempts to document the history of their commonality."¹¹⁸ Thus, Marika Cifor extends that "archival communities materialize around cultural, ethnic, racial, or religious identities, gender and sexuality, socioeconomic status, geographic locations, and as AIDS shows, health status."¹¹⁹ These groupings have a habit of overlapping, their intersections forming pockets of subcommunities.

But, as mentioned before, and typical of many artists' and queer archives, Athey's collection is highly community-engaged, embedded, and referential. In addition to his own life and work, his archive reflects and documents the communities of which Athey is a part—the queer community in Los Angeles, the underground performance scene, the club scene, and more—as well as the lives and works of his friends and other artists. At different times and in different spaces, Athey has been a member of the gay community, the queer community, HIV-positive community, leather and S&M communities, performance and live art communities, and so many more at varying levels of participation, contestation, and ostracization. Many of these communities are nested inside others, and some serve as counter-cultures and underground

¹¹⁷ Flinn et al., "Whose Memories, Whose Archives?"

¹¹⁸ Andrew Flinn et al., "Whose Memories, Whose Archives? Independent Community Archives, Autonomy and the Mainstream," *Archival Science* 9, nos. 1–2 (2009): 71–86, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10502-009-9105-2>, 75.

¹¹⁹ Cifor, *Viral Cultures*, 19.

alternatives to a more dominant or mainstream community, always in a state of becoming and unbecoming, recontextualizing in relation to each other.

Many of Athey's performances are collaborative, but he didn't just perform with his company, he travelled with them, lived with them, created with them, partied with them, and more. Athey's artistic practice is heavily influenced by his community experience and participation, and his archive reflects this. It both consists of materials created by other members of his community/ies and collected by him, and exists as an archive because of the community stake in his work's documentation and archivization. Thus, it is integral to understand the cultural frameworks of the communities to which the archival creator belonged in order to better understand their archival materials and the narratives that surround them.¹²⁰ Ann Cvetkovich describes the archive of artist Barbara Hammer as containing "notes and sketches towards the finished work that are often valued in an artist's archive as documentation of the working process," but also as a "personal archive" that is "a collective and historical one—her papers offer evidence of the social networks that connect artists, filmmakers, lesbians, and queers and foster art scenes."¹²¹ As Cvetkovich demonstrates, this is a significant and intersectional quality shared by both the queer and artist's archive. Ron Athey's archive can be described similarly; it documents the work of Athey as well as the work and activities of his friends, fellow artists, and community/ies of which they have been a part.

In 2000, photographer, friend, and co-performer Catherine Opie was commissioned by the Estate Project for Artists with AIDS to do a series of massive life-sized polaroid photographs.

¹²⁰ As Ketelaar argues, "archives are not a static artifact imbued with the record creator's voice alone, but a dynamic process involving an infinite number of stakeholders over time and space. Thus, archives are never closed, but open into the future." Eric Ketelaar, "Cultivating Archives: Meanings and Identities," *Archival Science* 12, no. 1 (2012): 19–33, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10502-011-9142-5>, 19.

¹²¹ Ann Cvetkovich, "The Artist as Archivist, the Archive as Art," in *Barbara Hammer: Evidentiary Bodies*, ed. Staci Bu Shea and Carmel Curtis (Hirmer, 2018).

Among other portraits, Opie chose to stage a series of tableaux of Athey in performance. The result was about half a dozen portraits featuring Athey's *Martyrs and Saints*, *Solar Anus*, and *St. Sebastian*, as well as regal shots of Athey in a cape once owned by Leigh Bowery. Doyle recounts the story surrounding the Getty Research Institute's "Aesthetics of Risk" conference, mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, wherein Athey's role in this piece was effectively diminished. Doyle writes that the "'risk' associated with Opie's work pertains to her identification with queer subjects, as gay and lesbian artists. The risk she took in identifying herself with these sexual communities was substantial, but it was less precisely aesthetic than it was professional."¹²² On the other hand, "the 'aesthetics of risk' is clearly embodied by...Ron Athey," as the portraits represent him performing his signature acts of body modification, piercing, and penetration. Yet the piece has circulated and been exhibited as an untitled work by Opie, not, as "Opie and Athey have represented the work," a collaborative piece. Doyle thus argues that "this narrowing of the portrait's attribution simplifies the story of the relationship between the two artists: Opie was a member of Athey's company," but "ascribing authorship exclusively to Opie," Doyle contends, "allows the work to circulate within the marketplace, reinforcing her profile as a photographer while disassociating the photograph from its documentary resonances."¹²³ This case brings up a challenge for archives in general, but for queer archives and other community-created archives especially.

Archives of community challenge the notion of provenance, creatorship, and the single fonds. Athey can be seen as the sole creator and collector of the material, but to simply describe him as a collector or accumulator of material does a disservice to describing the extent of the community creation that his archive represents. After all, as Doyle notes, Opie was a member of

¹²² Doyle, "Ron Athey's Dissociative Sparkle," 140.

¹²³ Doyle, "Ron Athey's Dissociative Sparkle," 142.

Athey's performance company. She had as much a hand in their collaborative and group performances as Athey did in her portrait sessions. These life-sized portraits ultimately did not end up in the Athey papers at the GRI, however several smaller polaroid test-shots by Opie of Athey and members of the company such as Divinity Fudge (Darryl Carlton) and Pigpen (Stosh Fila), did. These materials inhabit several diverging and overlapping spaces of documentation: documentation of a performance, documentation of the portrait shoot, and documentation of their collaboration as a company and as a community. With this in mind, contextualization must situate the materials properly. I thus consider a scope and contents note such as the following:

“Photos and portraits, Portraits by Catherine Opie, The Estate Project Polaroid test-shots, [date]

Scope and Contents: Color Polaroid test shots by photographer Catherine Opie for a shoot commissioned by The Estate Project for Artists with AIDS. The shoot, a collaboration between Opie, Athey, and members of his company, documents moments of performances including *Martyrs and Saints*, *Solar Anus*, and *St. Sebastian*.”

A scope and contents note such as this describes the content of the material (the finished product will likely be even more granular considering the significance of the materials), explains the significance and the context of materials, and orients the reader to the historical background of the record and the event which it portrays.

Recontextualization of a Growing Body of Work

Ron Athey is a working artist. He is still practicing, producing, performing, and with every new addition to his body of work, his archive is recontextualized. Every new piece he produces reorients his former works in space and time as he develops and redevelops his artistic practice. This phenomenon is evident in his archive as multiple iterations of the same performance are reperformed, reworked, rewritten, and redeveloped. Some series of

performances may have five or six smaller acts, each a different take on the same genesis.

Capturing this shifting practice in the archival hierarchy of a finding aid is incredibly difficult as performances borrow from each other, blend into each other, and become each other.

For example, the work *Incorruptible Flesh* is a series with many offshoots. A strict reading of DACS's whole-part hierarchical structure would result in a record with *Incorruptible Flesh* and a child record for each different iteration or act of the series, including performances such as *Incorruptible Flesh (Perpetual Wound)*, *Incorruptible Flesh (il luminous/dissociative sparkle)*, *Incorruptible Flesh (Messianic Remains)*, and more. However, several fliers advertise multiple acts, some videos depict multiple versions, and some performances did not include Athey as a performer. These are therefore much harder to categorize under a specific work's record. Just as well, the chronology of the many acts in the series is not entirely clear to me as the archivist, and without watching each performance video (not all of which were recorded), reading every flier, and researching every event, I cannot properly note which iterations followed each other and which might include elements of another with certainty. Therefore, I made the decision to drop all records under a single *Incorruptible Flesh* parent record, and to utilize the scope notes at the parent and child levels to hopefully convey any information about the performances' context in the broader performance series. It is in these ways that the (queer) artist's body of work tends to challenge archival description's neat hierarchical categories. Still, it is our job as archivists to contextualize these records even when new work and newly discovered work constantly recontextualizes preexisting records.

This continuous recontextualization of the queer archive is demonstrative of the recontextualization, the becoming and unbecoming, of the queer identity. This is the same process of queerness, of constantly reinventing and renegotiating one's identity in consultation with new information about oneself, with different pressures and influences from society and

community. The queer identity is therefore constantly shifting and consistently inconsistent; queerness as a form without form is supposed to be unstable. Lee writes that “as archives are always themselves in states of becoming, [she has] come to understand the precariousness of settling,” because “once settled, the archives then holds the potential to enact hierarchical power differentials rather than remaining flexible.”¹²⁴ Lee relates the processes of queerness and of archiving to one another, poignantly noting that through her conception of “a posthuman archival approach,...both ‘product’ and ‘process’ are intertwined and, as an example, might fit adaptably within the Australian Records Continuum Model through which product and process are always interacting and always in states of becoming.”¹²⁵ The Australian Records Continuum Model, as explained by Frank Upward, is a multidimensional, multiaxial system founded on the principles that conceive records as having “continuing value...which stresses their uses for transactional, evidentiary, and memory purposes,” views “records as logical rather than physical entities,” and requires “emphasis on the need to integrate recordkeeping into business and societal processes and purposes.”¹²⁶ Most importantly, Upward notes that the “records continuum is continuous and is a time/space construct not a life model...No separate parts of a continuum are readily discernible, and its elements pass into each other.”¹²⁷ In this way, the process becomes an inseparable part of the record’s context, significance, and form, and intrinsically tied to its product.

Process as Product

¹²⁴ Lee, *Producing the Archival Body*, 18.

¹²⁵ Lee, *Producing the Archival Body*, 18.

¹²⁶ Frank Upward, “Structuring the Records Continuum Part One: Post-Custodial Principles and Properties,” *Archives and Manuscripts* Vol. 24, no. No. 2 (1996): 275-276

¹²⁷ Upward, “Structuring the Records Continuum,” 277.

In a similar way, I argue for the inseparability of process as archival labor and product as output. Yet standardized archival processing guidelines tend to prioritize product, not process. The seminal 2005 article, “More Product, Less Process,” which outlined a new approach to efficient archival processing known colloquially as “MPLP,” stresses the importance of making collections available to researchers faster through minimal description and selective preservation interventions.¹²⁸ MPLP has been adopted as the primary processing practice among most large archival institutions and special collections libraries. There is a time and a place for MPLP, I would argue—massive archives in the thousands and tens of thousands of linear feet, records that are otherwise already organized, and certain business and organizational records for which more intensive processing would not necessarily be beneficial are more suited for MPLP practice. However, most personal archives, community archives, artist archives, and archives from marginalized creators who have had little institutional involvement such as Athey require more intensive consideration and description.

By definition, MPLP prioritizes product over process, thereby reducing archivists to “workers on an assembly line aiming for standardization, ever-greater amounts of linear feet processed, and at increased speed.”¹²⁹ This incursion of neoliberal (and more broadly, capitalist) expectations of production upon libraries and archives ultimately reduces the agency of archivists in providing meaningful description and contextualization to some of the archives that need it most. Cifor and Lee write that “MPLP is often adopted across repositories over more critical approaches that are social justice-oriented and that recognize heterogenous collections

¹²⁸ See Glossary for more context on *MPLP*; Mark Greene and Dennis Meissner. “More Product, Less Process: Revamping Traditional Archival Processing.” *The American Archivist* 68, no. 2 (2005): 208–63. <https://doi.org/10.17723/aarc.68.2.c741823776k65863>.

¹²⁹ Marika Cifor and Jamie A. Lee, “Towards an Archival Critique: Opening Possibilities for Addressing Neoliberalism in the Archival Field,” *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* 1, no. 1 (2017): 12, <https://doi.org/10.24242/jclis.v1i1.10>.

and records creators as integral to the breadth and depth of archival collections.”¹³⁰ This results in finding aids and archival descriptions that are bare, lifeless, and severely lacking in content, context, scholarship, and consideration of the unique nature of queer archives and other community-based archives.

MPLP’s standards are purposefully agnostic, but in order to make the argument that queer archives, community-based archive, artist archives, and other applicable archives require additional consideration, I must distance my processing practice from MPLP. The Getty’s institutional practices already ride the line between MPLP and intensive processing: in physical processing, we do not remove undamaged staples, but we sleeve most photographs in Mylar; in description, we typically don’t write finding aids for collections under three linear feet, but if the material is designated as having high research value (or monetary value) it may receive up to intensive item-level description. We have created our own bespoke standard for archival processing that is designed to best serve our unique holdings. In consultation with these practices, I have also developed my own way of processing that combines my institutional knowledge, my archival education, and the scholarship with which I have engaged. What has resulted is a research-based archival processing practice that combines, in this case, critical archival studies and queer theoretical frameworks. One of the biggest changes in practice that I have enacted through this method is, as mentioned before, a special attention to ephemeral material.

Take, for example, fliers: fliers are ephemeral material meant to be thrown away after an event. Their purpose is promotional, and once they serve their purpose, they are usually useless outside of archival contexts. In this way, fliers are also mnemonic; they promote a performance,

¹³⁰ Cifor and Lee, “Towards an Archival Critique,” 12.

an event, a person, or a thing represented, while remaining distinct on their own. A strictly MPLP approach to processing large amounts fliers (especially with many duplicates, many of which might be DIY), would likely result in large chunks being described as a whole, with a description like “Assorted performance and event fliers,” hopefully with a scope and contents note with a bit more clarity. Individual performances might only be represented in the finding aid if other forms of documentation presented themselves—correspondence, contracts, notes, plans, or financials that pointed toward a specific performance as an event would be listed and described. Many of these performances and events in Athey’s archive however, do not have these forms of documentation to back them up. Therefore, I have chosen to treat fliers as documents with the same evidentiary weight as the previously mentioned formats. This way, more distinct performances might be included in the finding aid and in the overall catalog of Athey’s works.

This practice requires more time, though. But an increase in time and in more discerning archival labor is in tension with certain standards maintained by the neoliberal archival institution. Admittedly, it can be easier to process materials using MPLP or to impose new arrangements. I even found myself fighting the urge to just rearrange everything and start over, or to minimally describe things so I could move on to the next task. Preserving original arrangement, researching and contextualizing nontraditional forms of documentation, and truly working to understand how an archive works requires much effort. I argue though that this is a necessary labor, and that it would be an injustice to write this material off as merely ephemeral, or even worse as miscellaneous, especially when it contains the records of queer memory and history. Pictured below (*Figures 3-6*) are fliers and unique objects I have found in Athey’s papers, some of which I have identified and others I have not yet:



Figure 3: Folder of fliers for various performances, events and parties, including the festival “Visions of Excess,” Solar Anus, Fuck!Jesus, and the film Hallelujah! Ron Athey: A Story of Deliverance.



(Left to right)

Figure 4a: Fliers for an Athey-produced party called “Initiation,” and a Stonewall 25th anniversary party at Clit Club/NYC, among others.

Figure 4b: A flier for Athey’s birthday party featuring a one-off performance. Notably, there is no year on this flier.

Figure 4c: Fliers and programs for performances such as 4 Scenes and Solar Anus, and for a benefit for Hallelujah!

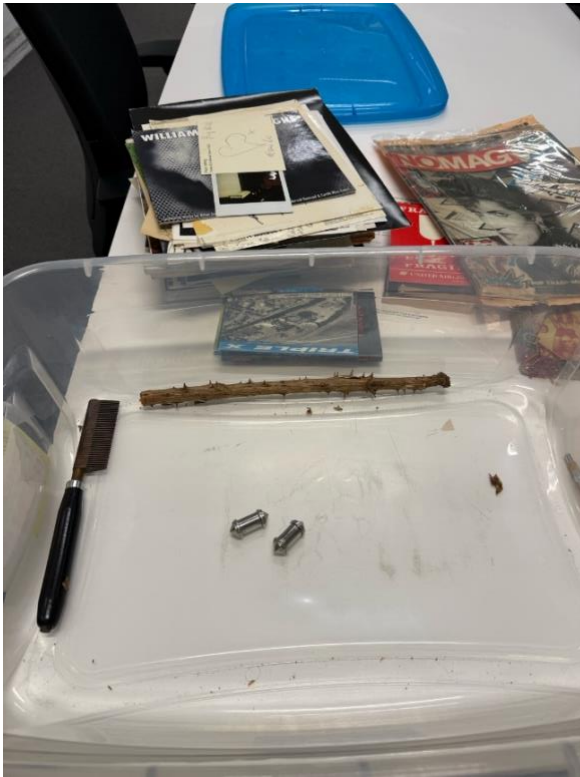


Figure 5: Plastic tub containing a rusty hot comb, a branch covered in thorns, and a large gauge set of jewelry for nipple piercings.



Figure 6: A mannequin head and attached gas mask, and two of the four total crowns of thorns made of hypodermic needles.

Research as Recontextualization: Uncovering the Underground

Ron Athey got his start in the underground queer nightclub scene in Los Angeles. At L.A.'s Club Fuck!, Athey was a regular performer, gogo dancer, and member of the "first family of Fuck!" These performances formed the basis of his practice, his work, and his community-building. Materials in his archive honor that community, and include photographs, writings, and copies of memorials and obituaries for community members and friends that died of AIDS. Eventually, Athey began performing on bigger stages, at Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions, in Mexico City at the Ex Teresa, in Slovenia and across Europe for performance festivals, and infamously for the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, which led to a national controversy and his embroilment in the political targeting of the National Endowment for the Arts. The latter performances, and especially that at the Walker, are documented very well by ephemeral standards previously mentioned, through fliers, videos, photographs, and performance plans. Athey's origins in the clubs are much less documented. In his cover story for *Poz* magazine, Athey quips "if you think theatre is ephemeral, nightclubs are gossip."¹³¹ Uncovering the gossip of his early performances and the foundations of his work are a difficult but important part of understanding his practice and career. They also constitute the imagined records and archival imaginaries of Athey's papers and require careful attention when describing and contextualizing them. Strict adherence only to what is available as physical documents (be they ephemeral or not) would leave significant gaps in Athey's early career. While it may not be my job as the archivist to spread the gossip of the nightclub, it is my job to explain that there was gossip being spread. What this framework will eventually produce is a finding aid with rich contextualization, that serves as a narrative of Athey's work and practice and will form the basis

¹³¹ Judith Lewis, "Wild Kingdom," *Poz*, 1997.

upon which his materials can be discovered easily and research can develop new understanding and recontextualization. In this way, the finding aid should become a living document just as much as the archive, the body, and the work.

The archive has already undergone many research-influenced recontextualizations. It has been the subject of two monographs, multiple exhibitions, and other research projects across the years. One of my favorite boxes in the collection, even after materials were packed, unpacked, and repacked from one container to another during their multiple iterations of organization and the final transfer to the GRI, is a medium-sized leather valise (*Figure 7*). After popping open the latches, the interior reveals a mass of photographs, snapshots, slides, and prints—hundreds of them. Going through this massive amount of photographs is an archivist and researcher’s dream, sifting through disparate potential evidence, messy material which contains the records of the past, of performances, parties, travels, dinners, and more. I constantly wondered why all of these photos were housed in a suitcase, until Jennifer Doyle explained to me that the entire case travelled from Los Angeles to London and back, so that Dominic Johnson could research and use the photographs in the first Athey monograph, *Pleading in the Blood*. Johnson’s use and research of the material and his authorship of *Pleading in the Blood* were incredibly significant for the art historical consideration of Athey’s career, but also served as important stages in the archive’s disposition as an archival collection that was meant to be accessed and researched.

Considering this, my ultimate fantasy was to keep the photos inside the valise, to provide the same thrill of opening it up to future researchers, but of course issues of organization and preservation prevent me from doing this. I asked myself how I would preserve these materials most effectively—if I should sleeve them in Mylar individually (which would be standard institutional practice depending on the volume), or leave them be. I also questioned whether or not I should attempt to organize or rearrange them, if it was even possible to discern through

which events, time periods, or even photo labs or film stock how these hundreds of photos should be grouped together. I nonetheless tried my best to ensure the prints remained in some semblance of previous order, the order that remained after multiple books, exhibitions, and researchers came through. The sheer volume of photographs prevented me from sleeving them individually in mylar (a standard archival processing practice at the GRI), but I was able to house them in Hollinger “shoeboxes” (*Figure 8*) so that they may be flipped through easily by gloved future researchers. Moreover, their arrangement when they arrived at the GRI was so far distanced from their original order as shot, developed, and printed, that frankly, their order hereafter does not matter. We will still require researchers to heed the original order in the box, but the repeated use of these photos, the organic mode of flipping through them, discovering new material, demonstrates the significance and importance of the archive’s use and the parallel provenance that is established upon repeated use of the materials.



Figure 7 (left): The suitcase/valise that arrived at the GRI as "Jones F," and registered as "Box T13." It contained hundreds of 4x6 snapshots, dozens of slides and negatives, polaroid photos, and a few newspaper clippings and magazines.



Figure 8 (right): Two archival "shoeboxes" containing most of the photos and snapshots from the valise.

The valise photos however, present one of the biggest descriptive challenges out of the whole archive. I hesitate to make this generalization, but these photos are mostly ephemeral: they are almost entirely 4 x 6 color prints of snapshots, lab printed, likely developed from someone's disposable camera or point-and-shoot. Yet, these snapshots contain a wide variety of content that includes, among so much more, performance documentation, photos of Athey and his company together, and travel photos, as well as photos in clubs, of after parties, and at dinners and large gatherings. In order to properly contextualize these photographs, to situate them properly among the rest of the archive, some description is required. I cannot merely write these off as, for example, "Snapshots, bulk 1980-2010." This would contradict the frameworks with which I am engaging, and threaten my argument for proper contextualization and consideration of materials such as these. Therefore, I have decided to undergo a limited survey of these photographs in order to better understand their content and context. This includes identifying some of the most significant people depicted, especially Athey's friends, members of his company, other artists and performers, and people with whom Athey was close; as well as identifying the performances that are documented in these snapshots, and providing necessary component records under applicable performances that steer the researcher toward the snapshots while warning of their lack of physical organization. This would result in a scope and contents and/or arrangement note that looks something like this:

"Performance, *Martyrs and Saints*, Snapshots of performances, [date]

Scope and Contents: Snapshots of performances of *Martyrs and Saints* are included among a large collection of snapshots and color prints that include performance documentation, photos of Athey and the company, his friends and other artists, group gatherings, parties, travel, and more.

Arrangement: There is no specific order or arrangement to these materials. Photos are ordered randomly, and best effort has been made to locate specific records and events

among the materials. Some original groupings were retained from original photo lab sleeves, but most photos were loose upon transfer to the GRI.”

Among the varying contents of the valise, multiple boxes of color slide transparencies lined the bottom, buried underneath the hundreds of photos. The slides were out of order, in the wrong boxes, and contained quite a few gaps. Because slide transparencies are one of the few examples of materials in this box and of this type where an original order is evident (slide numbers, dates, film stock, and notes from the lab point toward a potential original order), I attempted to reorder some of the slides within their boxes and new groupings, but did not endeavor mixing between boxes (*Figures 9a and 9b*). What was left are PrintFile sleeves of slides ordered somewhat chronologically, within each likely arbitrary and random grouping that had preceded the materials’ transfer to the GRI. The slides are mostly of various trips and travelling performances in Mexico City, Slovenia, and Germany, but they also consist of performances, portrait shoots, and travels with friends. In description, I treat them similarly to the snapshots—where I can discern a specific event, person, place, or performance, I mention it. If not, I make sure to include a note that points researchers towards the possibility that what they may be looking for might be included in these materials, that these records hold the potentiality to provide evidence or meaning for a research question or an archival imaginary.



Figures 9a and 9b (left to right): Slides laid across a light table before and after sleeving in PrintFile sleeves.

This type of disclaimer, of letting a researcher know that what they might be looking for is not *not* included in the materials, I believe is an important tool of archival humility, as it acknowledges the fallibility of archival description and the human labor behind it. It is often impossible or highly impractical to fully inventory or fully describe every specific detail of every record within an archive. To do so would also wrest the role of research away from the user and inundate the archivist with unnecessary labor. It is a frequent topic of discussion in archives, libraries, and special collections amongst archivists, librarians, and other staff about just how far we should go in our service to the user and the collection. At what point does extensive reference work turn into doing the research on behalf of the researcher? How much description is too much description? I believe the job of writing about the archive belongs to the researcher. The job of describing, contextualizing, and drawing together disparate physical material and immaterial concepts together to aid the researcher in their research is the job of the archivist. There are

things, patterns, and systems that only an archivist or someone who spends days, weeks, months, sometimes years pouring through an archive can notice. These patterns are important context that should be carefully explained and described. It is in this way that the archivist does not necessarily do the research for the researcher, but rather presents the archive in a way that makes it as accessible, discoverable, and understandable as possible for the researcher.

Discussion

Over-Processing and Cleaning Up the Queer Archive

This brings me to a similar dilemma: what constitutes over-processing in a collection such as Athey's? When presented with a queer archive, an archive which is by nature messier physically or intellectually (or both), is it the archivist's responsibility to intervene and clean it up to make it as accessible, discoverable, and understandable as possible? What if the mess is the point? Does cleaning it up remove context, strip research value, or compromise the integrity of the collection? Does the archivist's positionality and identity play a role in how they view and apply these concepts?

I begin my answers by returning to conceptions of queerness that emphasize the acts of unbecoming, undoing, and unstructuring (or rather destructuring). As an identity, queerness is messy. Queer people engage in an ongoing personal, psychological, and discursive construction and deconstruction of identity. Archives are similar; over the course of their creation, use, and disposition, they undergo a similarly iterative cycle of archiving and unarchiving. In this way, as mentioned before, archives and queerness are always in a state of becoming and unbecoming. Thus, I believe that to clean up the mess of the queer archive would be intervening in an organic process that is beyond the scope or responsibility of the archivist. However, it is also possible that too much consideration of original order risks, as Jones writes in regards to the Athey

papers, “[rationalizing] the archival materials, and [forcing] them to make a kind of sense they in fact do not organically hold,” because they “might well not have had any logical organization at all in their lived state.”¹³² This is a risk I took when deciding to return the archival arrangement to its pre-exhibition state, but to keep it at the points of its archivization. While that decision could be interpreted as rationalization, I believe my restoration of the previous arrangement passes on the role of rationalization to the researcher. In all, I believe the debate as well as the arbitrariness of original arrangement is merely representative of the nature of queerness, of uncertainty and disorganization.

Jones also questions if “we [can] even call materials from someone’s apartment an ‘archive’ if they have not been organized as such?”¹³³ Archives exist, I believe, despite (and sometimes *in spite of*) their organization. They exist through acts of archivization and archivalization¹³⁴. For example, the first half, the “Doyle” half, of the archive exists as an archive because it was removed from Athey’s home, stored as an archive, and used in research. The “Jones” half underwent a similar process, albeit at a quicker and more unexpected pace. Its existence as an archive has less to do with organization as it does with the act of archiving. I believe that once we start to acknowledge these ways in which archives are created, organized, and influenced by the cultural frameworks within which they are created, and how that interfaces with the fallibility of our standards for archival arrangement, we can begin to enact a more effective critical praxis for archival arrangement, description, and stewardship.

Bridging the Paradigmatic Divide

¹³² Jones, *Hold it Against Me*, 14.

¹³³ Jones, *Hold it Against Me*, 14.

¹³⁴ Ketelaar, “Tacit Narratives,” 132.

Until then, we must begin to bridge the divide between institutional and community-centered archival work, to “find a new identity that reconciles our twin missions of evidence and memory.”¹³⁵ I have attempted this by making conscious decisions regarding the context of the Athey papers’s original order, their custody and use history, their acquisition and disposition history, and their unique ephemerality, while still working within the standards and policies of my institution and dominant archival best practices and content standards. The original order of the material has been retained, preserving the unconventional form of organization and the mess of the queer archive, while, in keeping with *DACS*, the intellectual arrangement has been reworked to provide an accessible, discoverable, and operable access point for researchers to engage with materials. In this finding aid, I have leveraged our required notes fields at the collection, series and subseries, and file levels, such as the scope and contents notes, arrangement notes, and processing history to additionally contextualize the materials using queer and critical theoretical frameworks. This includes additional explanation of the arrangement of queer archives, their evolving systems of organization, and their research value as a form; context on the creation of the records as the biproducts of queer archival drives, co-creatorship, and community orientation; and information on what records may or may not be included in the physical archive but which constitute an imaginary archival element which emphasizes the evidentiary potentiality of the archive. I have also, in an effort to elucidate as many potential records as possible, treated ephemeral materials with higher levels of consideration in providing evidence of past events, performances, and activities, resulting in a larger range of records than what could have been inferred just from conventional forms of documentation. Just as well, my attention to the numerous photographs and snapshots and my treatment of them as performance

¹³⁵ Cook, “Evidence, Memory, Identity, and Community,” 117.

documentation and evidence of community gathering has resulted in clearer and more transparent descriptions that provide opportunities for the discovery of potential evidence without obscuring materials with vague language. These are just the largest practical steps I have taken in reorienting my one-size-fits-all institutional archival processing practices.

My research and implementation have not been without limitations, though. I am still bound by my institution's policies, procedures, and required content standards. In preserving the original order of the materials, I was limited by our preservation and storage policies. As acts of preservation, we separate out color photographs, prints, negatives, slides, organic materials, audiovisual materials, and any other at-risk media for separate storage in our cold vault. This prevents the continuous degradation of the media and preserves it for future use. This is a policy that frankly, I do not choose to fight, but one that I also acknowledge prevents the full retention of some semblance of original order. I had the option to include "separation sheets," or forms indicating the removal of certain materials for preservation purposes, but this is a procedure that is often easier done in isolated circumstances and on a smaller scale. In an archive such as Athey's, implementing this is a bit untenable. Luckily, much of this material was already grouped together, and whole boxes, such as the boxes of valise photos, can be moved to cold storage as a whole without separating them too much.

Just as well, storage concerns necessitate that files are packed in archival boxes in ways that might deviate from their original box arrangement (see *Figures 10-12*). For example, one plastic tub full of files might only fill three and a half boxes, but it would be irresponsible storage-wise to leave that box half full. Some of this is solved by using a half-width box, but in cases where this isn't possible, a box might have to be split between two original containers. Cases like this are notated in the final matrix of box numbers and organizational systems (see Appendix II). This is a significant shift from my institutional workflows, which stipulate that I

should rearrange material physically to group them amongst their shared intellectual groupings, by the series and subseries of the finding aid.



Figure 10: Materials including books, magazines, and paper files in their original plastic bin.



Figure 11: Materials transferred to an archival box, including sketchbooks, magazines, VHS box covers for Hallelujah!, and original folders.



Figure 12: Part of the Athey papers, in-process, in new archival housing on shelves.

Intellectually, I am required by my institution to adhere to *DACS* as a content standard for crafting our finding aids, and I am required to use ArchivesSpace as our platform for describing content in Encoded Archival Description (EAD). Thus, I am limited in my output of access points and how I can use the platform. However, I am also presented with the opportunity to be creative in using other ways to relay important contextual information and description. As

mentioned before, I am leveraging the use of my institution's research files as accessible and requestable files that provide foundational information and processing history for interested researchers. My inventories, notes, and documentation will be included in the Athey research file for researchers to consult alongside the collection. I have also discussed at length how I have taken advantage of the required notes fields in our finding aids. In the end, this finding aid will circulate among my fellow archivists for peer review and editing before it can be published, and while I am lucky to work with forward-thinking colleagues who are supportive of creative ways of reconceiving our work, my output must still demonstrate an adherence to our standards and policies in a way that does not radically deviate from other collections.

On the other hand, my institutional positionality is not only a hindrance. Having already been featured in an internal exhibition, the Athey papers have been activated and used in outreach in heartening ways. This has, through exhibiting the Getty Research Institute's holdings of queer art and archives in the exhibition *\$3 Bill: Evidence of Queer Lives in the Archives*, proven very efficacious in spotlighting the archival labor behind our queer materials and showcasing the significance of queer community, existence, and history in our collections. Moving forward, I will continue to advocate for the use of materials in the Athey papers in exhibitions internally and externally, and plan to pursue opportunities for future programming that highlights the collection. Athey's crowns of thorns (made of hypodermic needles), art pieces inspired by the crown of needles in his performances depicting religious iconography of Jesus and St. Sebastian, have already been featured in *\$3 Bill* and can likely be showcased again. They also present unique conservation challenges in providing proper storage and access, and open up opportunities for cross-departmental coordination and programming that celebrates and demonstrates the unique conservation of a collection such as Athey's.

Lastly, it is important for our artists, creators, donors, and subjects of our collections to feel seen, appreciated, and included by what can often be seen as an extractive dynamic of archivization. At the Getty, it is not standard practice for us to engage in participatory archiving and description with our creators. In the future, I intend to push back and coordinate more transparently with Athey on the preservation and description of his collection, as well as with the friends, art historians, and community that helped produce, archive, organize, and initially describe pieces of the collection. I intend to start more conversations and conduct oral history interviews with them as part of my effort to better understand the archivization of the collection. I also believe that continuous opportunities for talks, presentations, and activation of the archive through events, tours, and classes are some of the best ways to continue engaging with the materials that fosters further research, community building, and consideration of Athey's work and the significance of the queer archive. These engagements also constitute use and research that serves to recontextualize, clarify, provide new understandings, and amplify specific narratives within the materials. The Getty Research Institute has a practice of continuous collecting for many of our archives, donors, and creators, meaning that creators can continue to add material to the collection in the future. This practice doesn't just have implications for the growing breadth of materials that we steward, it also shows how every collection in our holdings has the opportunity to undergo continuous iterations of recontextualization and restructuring.

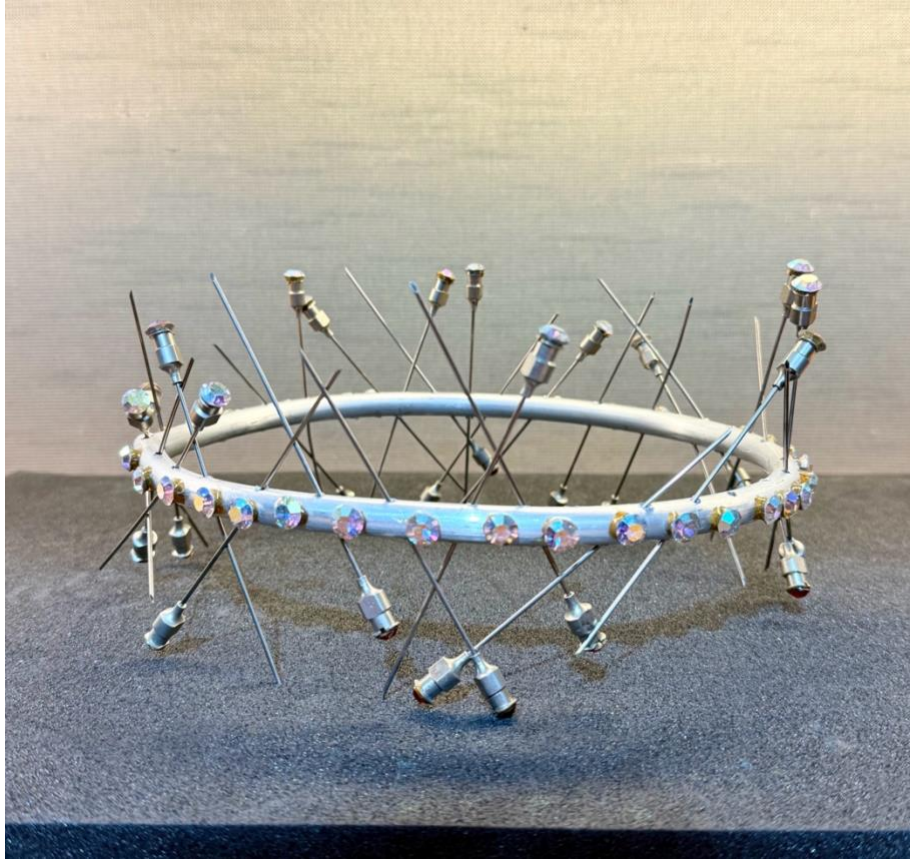


Figure 13: One of four crowns of thorns made of hypodermic needles contained in the Athey papers.

As such, the finding aid becomes a living document, and in the future as new materials are rediscovered, descriptions are revised, or materials are added, the finding aid must be edited to reflect these developments. In this way, the archive, the finding aid, and every record are snapshots. But these snapshots are always subject to future revisions, additions, and recontextualizations. I believe that no matter how static the physical records appear to be, no matter that they are locked up in “the cushy storage areas of one of the wealthiest museums and art history study centers in the world,”¹³⁶ *archives*, just like *the archive*, are never wholly uncovered.

¹³⁶ Jones, *Hold It Against Me*, 6.

The Artist's Archive

In this way, it became clear to me that while Athey's materials constitute an incredibly rich example of a queer archive, it is also by nature of his profession, an artist's archive that serves as vital documentation of his work and artistic practice, and the two cannot be separated. Never wholly uncovered, the Athey papers are situated at a unique intersection that demonstrates the commonalities of creation, process, and product shared by the artist's archive and the queer archive; the becoming and unbecoming of the queer identity is not unlike the artistic process. Ann Cvektovich's writes that the artist's archive often showcase a commitment to process and "daily practice...because it includes work that is not necessarily designed for public circulation but registers the activity along the way." She also writes that "access to life behind the scenes is especially important for understanding lesbian artists whose lives may differ from the norm and whose ways of working maybe connected to their politics or their social networks." This is certainly the case for Athey, as a large component of his writings and performance documentation include outlines, sketches, and notes on the formulation of performances, from concept to story to stage production. The materials he collected, his research, and his references also demonstrate his thought processes, politics, and practice.

This consideration, I believe, also comprises a full-scale recontextualization of the collection on a macro-level, and demonstrates the entire collection's evidentiary value in demonstrating Athey's practice as both queer and artistic. Whereas individual pieces of material stand as records of individual activities, it is possible to broaden the scope to recognize how larger pieces of the collection serve as potential evidence of broader patterns and cycles of his artistic practice. For example, a single flier might represent a specific performance at a specific venue on a specific date; a collection of fliers of a specific performance might indicate a tour of said performance; and a grouping of fliers, notes, photos, and videos might serve as evidence of

the entire work. That larger chunk of material (which I have intellectually grouped in the finding aid as a topical subseries of each performance work) then represents one cycle in Athey's continuous body of work. Athey's practice is similarly iterative, cyclical, and reconstructive; it borrows from preceding performances, reinvents them, and recontextualizes them.

Widening even further, I believe we can then view the collection as a whole as evidence of both his artistic practice and his queer identity. These are qualities evident also in both the content and form of the collection; the material itself is concerned with his art and his identity, while the organization and structure (or lack thereof) are indicative of his artistic process and the experience of queerness. These are important designations to make, because the collection's disposition at the Getty Research Institute also allows it to be further contextualized among the holdings of the GRI as an art historical institution. This has thus become another important consideration of mine in processing the Athey papers, and demonstrates to me yet again, the evidentiary potentiality within records and collections of records.

Conclusion

To conclude, queer archives—their creation, use, organization, mess, materials, ephemerality, affect, and so much more—tend to challenge standard conceptions of archival arrangement, processing and descriptive practices; provenance and stewardship; and use and activation. It should therefore be our job as archivists to describe and contextualize these unique archives and their materials using the cultural and theoretical frameworks of the community/ies in which the archive was created. This is a practice which has many applications and that can be used across many different types of archives and communities, but I have specifically focused on how the queer archive, as an archive that has originated from a community whose identities are

so in flux and by definition at odds with normative standards, is formed, used, described, and accessed.

What I have found is that the queer archive is a system of information, an unconventional body of evidence, that is heavily community-oriented and community-created. It is formed through trauma, emotion, commemoration and memorialization, hope for the future, and as a demonstration of the potentiality of evidence and meaning. Its mediums and forms of documentation are nontraditional, and take the forms of highly ephemeral material, nontextual documentation, artifacts, and materials that serve as mnemonic entities that form archives of queer memory and affect. These qualities affect the ways with which the queer archive is engaged, and should therefore also affect the ways that we describe them as archivists.

I began by employing autoethnography to document and narrate my experience, my decisions, and my work processing the archival collection of queer performance artist Ron Athey. Using ideas gleaned from critical archival studies and queer/ed archival methodology, as well as theoretical frameworks in critical theory and queer studies, I critically reflected on the processes of archiving and archivization, the role of the archivist in arrangement and description, and my personal and institutional positionalities. What I gained from this was a better understanding of how to begin bridging the divide between the processing and descriptive practices of the modern archival era and the emerging praxis of community-centered, activist archiving. This insight allowed me to leverage my existing institutional systems and practices to infuse my critical conceptions into the archival description of the Ron Athey papers.

This was not a straight-forward method however, there were many times over the course of this thesis, during processing and description, while doing research, and really any time I considered this work, that I had to ask myself: is this even worth doing? Is it that much different from standard, albeit slightly more progressive, archival processing policies? Am I wasting my

time trying to queer something that didn't need as much queering as I thought? At a certain point I realized that, whenever I began to strip down my own argument and deconstruct the premise of my entire research project, I was reenacting, in my own way and through my own experiences, the queer processes of becoming and unbecoming.

As a queer person myself, I am no stranger to the construction and destruction, or structuring and destructuring, of the queer identity. This heavily informed and influenced my work on this project and on this archive, and demonstrates my positionality as an archivist with deep ties to the type of material with which I am working. As such, I already view this material through a specific lens, with a specific world view, and from a specific position. I believe this positionality has helped my perception of the queer archive as unique and deserving of additional consideration, but I don't believe that it has served as a prerequisite for working with queer archives. I believe that all archivists should be able to process all types of collections from all types of creators and communities, as long as they are able to engage with the material in meaningful ways. This requires viewing the materials through applicable frameworks that properly contextualize the materials within their specific communities and elucidate their evidentiary potential, which enhances the description and discoverability of the archive.

In the future, as archival institutions begin to move toward what Terry Cook refers to as the fourth archival paradigm, the era of community, participatory archiving, and the activist archivist, I believe we will see more adoption of critical archival theoretical frameworks in archival processing. After all, as Marika Cifor writes that when ACT UP/NY donated their papers to the New York Public Library, prominent organizer Stephen Schapiro, "recounted at one early meeting sharing some ACT UPers' apprehensions that an organization outside of the lesbian and gay community wouldn't know how to handle their materials. He remembered the

NYPL staff laughing ‘because half of them were queer, as well. After all, it’s a library!’”¹³⁷ In this way, I believe the archival field is ready for the challenge.

But how do we begin, and where are we going? I have started by allowing these critical practices to influence my archival processing and reframe how I conceive of the standards and practices of my institution. I have used these critical insights extensively, as thoroughly demonstrated, in my processing of the Ron Athey papers, and have allowed them to begin entering into my thinking when processing other collections of non-queer creators and corporate entities. This well-rounded reframing of conceptions of the archive and archival processing is ultimately, I believe, what helps us grow the most as professional archivists and archival studies scholars. Eventually, we can begin to work to shift our practices at the institutional level and foster more widespread change that allows archivists the agency to reconceive of their processing and descriptive practices as necessary to best serve their collections and their creators.

Cook writes that this paradigm shift, the one from postmodern to community-oriented activist archiving is being heavily influenced by the internet, by the democratization of information, and the influence of community-building as archival process. He writes that “there is simply too much evidence, too much memory, too much identity, to acquire more than a mere fragment of it in our established archives.”¹³⁸ He also notes that as this growing wealth of information and memory begins to become archived, the act of “removing such archives, such memory, such evidence, from the originating communities to our archives may be problematic and undesirable.”¹³⁹ Thus, we are called on as archivists to begin sharing the process of archiving.

¹³⁷ Cifor, *Viral Cultures*, 89.

¹³⁸ Cook, “Evidence, Memory, Identity, and Community,” 113.

¹³⁹ Cook, “Evidence, Memory, Identity, and Community,” 113.

This sharing requires that we understand how to approach the archives of communities, which makes learning about these communities' frameworks as I have discussed that much more necessary. We can proselytize archival best practices and institutional standards ad nauseum, but if we cannot effectively rework our institutional practices to meet communities' already established systems, practices, and histories, then we will not be able to sustain our field's significance in the next era of information and archiving. In this way,

“professional archivists need to transform themselves from elite experts behind institutional walls to becoming mentors, facilitators, coaches, who work in the community to encourage archiving as a participatory *process* shared with many in society, rather than necessarily acquiring all the archival *products* in our established archives.”¹⁴⁰

What this might look like varies: it can take the form of community archiving workshops, of participatory description, of post-custodial stewardship, and/or, as Geoffery Yeo explains, as an obligation to “revisit traditional perceptions and extend [our] understanding of records to encompass new forms of evidence and more fluid manifestations of human memory.”¹⁴¹ The latter is an obligation I have taken on, and I believe it is one that we should all be looking towards as we seek to grow our understanding of our collections and the communities from which they are produced in order to be prepared for and become active participants in the future of archiving.

Considering this, I return to futurity. Derrida explains that the archive is a pledge to the future, and we must be ready for that future. Queerness is also a thing of the future. Muñoz writes that “we may never touch queerness, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality. We have never been queer, yet queerness exists for us as an

¹⁴⁰ Cook, “Evidence, Memory, Identity, and Community,” 114.

¹⁴¹ Geoffery Yeo, “Introduction,” in *Community Archives: The Shaping of Memory*, ed. Jeannette Bastian and Ben Alexander (Facet Publishing, 2009): x.

ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future.”¹⁴² The same can be said for archives, as Michelle Caswell explains how “the future can be conceived through kernels of what was possible in the past.”¹⁴³ In these ways queerness and archives are intrinsically linked, and in order to view the future in constructive ways (or dare I say, destructive ways in the spirit of becoming/unbecoming), we must invest ourselves in understanding how these conceptions of queerness and archives can learn from one another.

In the end, this thesis does not purport to be a processing manual for queer archives. It does however, serve as a demonstration of the possibility of reenvisioning institutional archival workflows using important cultural and critical theories that properly situate archives. Through this, I have been able to embed descriptions that effectively contextualize the unique materials of queer archives. I also intend for this thesis to serve as inspiration for those archivists, scholars, and students hoping to employ more meaningful memory work in their archival processing and preserve aspects of intangible cultural heritage that may hide in materials that are not deemed valuable enough for archiving or description.

At a Q&A during the run of *Queer Communion: Ron Athey* at the Institute of Contemporary Art, LA, Ron Athey said, “I firmly believe you don’t have to live in the big picture. That’s what’s wrong with this moment. Everyone wants to be president. I don’t get it...I firmly believe in making a strong, local movement. And not waiting for the system.”¹⁴⁴ I hope that this spirit inhabits this project, and I hope that this project has not only contributed meaningful input to the preservation of queer memory, but will also help preserve and honor the materials and the work of a legendary artist.

¹⁴² Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 1.

¹⁴³ Caswell, “Inventing New Archival Imaginaries,” 49.

¹⁴⁴ Matt Stromberg, *Ron Athey, Transgressive Performance Artist*, September 2, 2021, <https://hyperallergic.com/ron-athey-transgressive-performance-artist/>.

APPENDIX I

An abridged diary of my early archival processing of the Athey papers. It provides examples of what materials I inventoried, what I did with them, and notes on my thought processes. Immediately following is a pared-down version of the processing plan I submitted as part of my early administrative tasks when beginning my processing of the collection:

2/19/26

- reboxed T2 (Doyle E)
 - o kept og folders with material, will eventually transcribe
 - o not sure if I'll reorganize or not
 - o a mix of teaching, personal, correspondence, performance files
- went through T3 (Jones A) photos
 - o reunited jones exhibition pulls with this box (items in ADD1-T4 that were marked Jones A were placed back into T3)
 - o unsure how to mylar these... there is no sensical order. individually in a shoebox? and by size? or in a binder. or in a printfile and a folder...

2/20/26

- reboxed T4 (Doyle G)
- reboxed T5 (Jones L)
- reboxed T6 (Doyle H)
- reboxed T7 (Jones M)
- Removed objects from T8 (Jones B)
 - o hot comb
 - o little wooden box
 - o wax carving?
 - o branch with thorns
 - o framed item
 - o vaginal davis painting
 - o nipple piercing jewelry

2/25/26

- reboxed T8 and T9
- started working on the suitcase photos

Slides – unsure how in order they should be. best practice is to order them based on slide number, but does this defeat the purpose of preserving queer mess? probably not, because some of these slides are scattered between different boxes, so they're still not even in proper order. But also, shouldn't it be reordered to some extent, and what can't be reordered should be disclaimed?

Right now I'm going by the idea of maintaining most of the physical arrangement and only reorganizing it intellectually.

Also, as far as intellectual arrangement: I'm concerned that the division of personal and professional papers tends to reject the common blend between the personal and professional in queer (and artists') lives. I think they should be incorporated. Divisions such as Performances and Writings can be placed to imply professional...

3/2/26

Proposed Series and subseries:

- Performances and projects
 - o Organized by performance or project title
 - o Specific performances, events, or trips
 - o Notes, outlines, plans
 - o Fliers
 - o Props/objects (not as common)
 - o Specific correspondence
- Photos
- Writings, drawings, and notes
 - o notes, outlines, sketches, drawings
 - o drafts, notes, ms for publications
 - o publications with athey writings
- Teaching
 - o UCLA, Calarts, any others?
- Correspondence
- Photos and snapshots
 - o Portraits of Athey
 - By photographer, event, performance, etc
- Art by others
 - o by artist, then by item
- Collected publications
 - o Magazines
 - Honcho – or should this go in writings?
 - Zines
 - Pamphlets, etc
 - o Books

Fighting the urge to process normally, to fix the arrangement.

When going through the photos, originally sorting them between subseries of Portraits of Ron, Portraits of others, but running into the issue of 1) portraits of Ron with others, and 2) what is a

portrait? Some snapshots look like they're portrait quality, and some portraits seem to be more performance documentation than actual studio portraits (Cathy Opie portraits). This makes categorizing and organizing these very difficult, and seems to be an extension of the queer performance and community-centered aspect of all of this

Processing Plan

Collection title: Ron Athey papers, 1981-?

Collection creator(s): Ron Athey

Date span: 1981-2017 ?

Provenance information: Material was created and accumulated by Ron Athey. Prior to transfer to the GRI, the physical material was moved from Athey's apartment and split between the homes of Amelia Jones and Jennifer Doyle (both of whom contributed to the organization and packing of the material), but all material remained in the possession of Athey until its acquisition by curator John Tain in 2017. Some material was held back by Jones for exhibition, and was transferred to the GRI 2024 as ADD1.

Extent (before processing): ca. 25 ln. ft (23 boxes) + ADD1 ca. 19 ln. ft. (16 boxes) = ca. 44 ln. ft. (39 boxes)

Formats present: Paper records (notebooks, correspondence, fliers, performance programs, ephemera, etc), Photographs (snapshots, original prints, negatives, some slides), Objects (art, performance props, ephemeral objects, each with specific conservation concerns), Works of art on paper, A/V of all kinds (mentioned above), Books, magazines, newspapers and clippings, and other publication material.

Description of the collection/abstract: The Ron Athey papers consists of the papers, photographs, research material, ephemera, art objects, props, audio, and video that document the life, career, and performances of Ron Athey, one of the most pioneering and controversial performance artists in contemporary art. Athey's work addresses issues around trauma, sex, religion, HIV/AIDS, and loss through extreme use of body art and S&M. The Athey papers document his artistic process, his personal life, and his connection with various communities across performance art, queer art, and the Los Angeles club scene.

Processing Information

Present arrangement and condition: Material is somewhat coherently organized, with many file folders, photographs, books and other publications housed separately and with some purposeful arrangement, but overall the collection lacks structure. The acquisition came with at least 3 distinct inventories: a preliminary description of Athey's papers without any correlation to container types or boxes, a spreadsheet with box numbers (1-10, A-Z) with description, some dates, and original storage locations; and an inventory of all items that would be held back from the original acquisition in 2018 for an exhibition in 2021 (this list uses a separate and new container label scheme which are represented on post-its on some original boxes (Jones/Doyle A-Z)). Many boxes have been matched up with their assigned labels across each system, but

some boxes are not represented in one or another system, or have been created as a result of removing items for the 2021 exhibition. Just as well, items were removed from the unprocessed collection (both the original and the ADD) for use in the 2024 exhibition \$3 BILL at the GRI, and returned to the collection in March 2026.

Processor's note: Careful consideration will be taken to account for and document the multiple iterations of arrangement in order to demonstrate how queer archives (and just as often artists' archives and feminist archives) are accumulated and organized. I believe the organic nature (or lack thereof) of organization is of high research value. Much care will be taken to keep the material in its original physical arrangement (excepting conservation, of course), while the intellectual arrangement will serve as the more organized and structured point of access and discovery.

Descriptive standards to be applied: DACS

Source of Component Titles: Many folders have donor-supplied titles (either by Athey, Jones, or Doyle). Others, especially for many loose photographs and ephemera, will be devised.

Proposed series:

I. Performances and works

- Contains material related to Athey's performances, works, and other projects. Includes notes and outlines, documentation of works in the form of photos and video.
- Arranged in three subseries: I.A. Performance files; I.B. Other works and projects; I.C. Press, media, and public reception. Subseries will be further arranged chronologically.

II. Writings, notes, and drawings

- Contains material related to Athey's writings, both published and unpublished, as well as notes and diaries.
- Arranged in two subseries: II.A. Published writings; II.B. Unpublished writings. Using Amelia Jones' publication as general reference.

III. Correspondence

- Contains correspondence between Athey and various people including his family, friends and contemporaries, and galleries and performance spaces
- Arranged alphabetically by last name.

IV. Teaching

- Contains material related to Athey's teaching career
- Arranged by subseries by institution, if there is enough materials; otherwise alphabetically by institution.

V. Portraits, photos, and snapshots

- Contains portraits, photos, and snapshots of Athey's performances, works, and projects.
- Includes portraits of Athey, of his co-performers and contemporaries, photos of performances and events, and snapshots of Athey and his friends before and after performances, at parties, and other events.
- Arranged in four subseries: V.A. Portraits of Athey; V.B. Portraits of others; V.C. Portraits by Catherine Opie; V.D. Snapshots.

VI. Research, artist, and family files

- Contains research files related to Athey's various projects, works, writings, and research interests.
- Arranged in three groupings: research files; artist files; family files.

VII. Collected publications

- Contains various magazines, books, zines, and other publications collected by Athey.
- Arranged chronologically by publication

VIII. Artwork by others

- Contains works of art collected by Athey or gifted from friends, contemporaries, and fellow artists.
- Arranged by work.

IX. Materials relating to *Queer Communion: Ron Athey* exhibition

- Contains material related to the 2021 exhibition *Queer Communion: Ron Athey*, held at the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA), Los Angeles. Includes material created and reproduced for the exhibition, facsimiles of original materials, and other material regarding the organization, publicity, and public reception of the exhibition.

Proposed level of processing: The collection will need varying levels of processing.

Performance and professional files will need less intervention and description, so long as individual performances are cataloged; most of these are already foldered and labeled. Magazines, newspapers, and publications will also need less attention, but may require item-level mylaring for newspapers and clippings. Boxes of photographs will require at times item-level description and careful attention to their organization or lack thereof. Additional effort may be required to also discern whether photos are personal/misc snapshots or performance documentation. There are also photographs and high-value prints that will require more intensive conservation and housing. Ephemeral material (flyers, posters, performance programs) will also need an increased level of attention and vigilance in description, but less physical intervention. Certain objects such as the crowns of needles, plaster cast, gas mask, and some textiles will require significant conservation and specialized housing. About one third of the collection consists of audiovisual materials to be numbered and digitized. The numbering, arrangement, and description of these materials will be done last. Published monographs and serials without significant annotations will be transferred to the library. Annotated publications that are important within the context of the archive will be retained in the archive.

APPENDIX II

Systems of Organization for Boxes of the Ron Athey papers

Excel	Doyle-Jones	GRI T-numbers	Final boxes
	Doyle A	T21	1 - 4
	Doyle B	T18	5 - 9
	Doyle C	T19	10 - 15
	Doyle D	T20	16 - 20
7	Doyle E	T2	21 - 22
6	Doyle F	T9	23 - 24
9	Doyle G	T4	25
8	Doyle H	T6	26
	Loose Doyle Material		27 - 29
U (part)	Jones A	T3	30 - 34
	Jones B	T8	35 - 39, 46, 49 - 50
R	Jones C (filing cabinet)	T22 and T23	40 - 42, 47
	Jones D	T3	43 - 45, 48, 53 - 54
G	Jones F (valise of photos)	T13	55 - 58
T	Jones G	ADD1-T9	unprocessed
S	Jones H	T1	unprocessed
W	Jones J	ADD1-T7	59
X	Jones K	ADD1-T8	59
Z	Jones L	T5	60
Y	Jones M	T7	61
10	Jones N	T12	62 - 63
F	Jones O	T11	A/V
D	Jones P	T10	A/V
		T14	books
E		T15	A/V

Systems of Organization (continued)

Excel	Doyle-Jones	GRI	Final
K		T16	unprocessed
M		T17	unprocessed
		ADD1-T1	unprocessed
		ADD1-T2	absorbed
		ADD1-T3	absorbed
A?		ADD1-T4	absorbed/books
U (part)		ADD1-T5	unprocessed/digital
		ADD1-T6	A/V
		ADD1-T10	absorbed
B		ADD1-T11	books
A?		ADD1-T12	books
C		ADD1-T13	absorbed
		ADD1-T14	unprocessed
		ADD1-T15	unprocessed

Notes:

- Connections between systems are assumptions based on prior inventories and descriptions and may not be entirely accurate.
- Boxes labeled “absorbed” mostly consisted of materials removed for exhibition that were returned to their original location(s).
- Boxes labeled “books” were inventoried and most of the books are to be transferred to the GRI Library
- Boxes labeled “unprocessed” have not yet been assigned final box numbers because their contents are pending conservation or other physical processing
- Boxes labeled “A/V” contain audiovisual materials and have not yet been assigned final box numbers.
- Not all boxes have matching counterparts across systems. This can be for a variety of reasons, including the movement of material between boxes, the absorption of boxes into each other, the creation of new boxes especially during movement, or oversight in some stages of inventorying.

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