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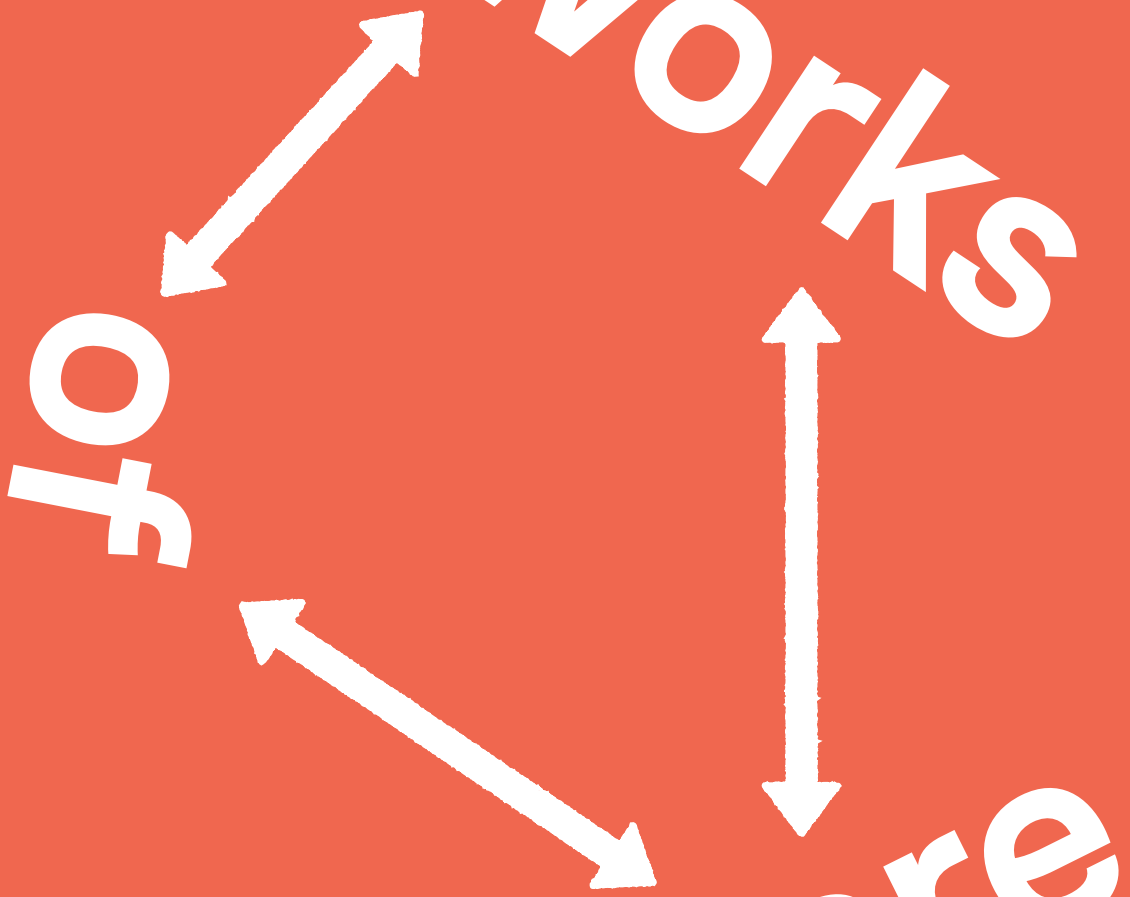
Networks of Care

Politiken des
(Er)haltens und
(Ent)sorgens



Herausgegeben von
Anna Schäffler
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MELA DÁVILA FREIRE

¿Archivo queer? - Queer Archive? Activism and Institutionalism Clash in the Archival Arena

The documentary collection *Queer Archive?*, which is kept in the Library and Documentation Center of the Museo Reina Sofía in Madrid, was amassed between 2012 and 2016 following a collective project involving independent researchers, the museum's library and its study center, which at the time was headed by Jesús Carrillo. This project set out to map and document the struggles of gender activist communities in Madrid in the 1990s in their efforts to give visibility to the AIDS epidemic and inform the public about how to prevent contagion and promote safe sex, especially given the dramatic lack of institutional policies tackling the health crisis.

Researchers and activists Sejo Carrascosa, Lucas Platero, Andrés Senra and Fefa Vila obtained a residency grant from the Museo Reina Sofía Study Center to investigate these struggles, and their findings helped Guillermo Cobo, one of the museum's librarians, locate all the various documents testifying to it, which, for the most part, had been preserved in the homes of former activists. Cobo accommodated the various expectations that their owners—"domestic archivists"—had regarding the arrangements that could be reached with the museum library, and set about managing the corresponding donations, long-term loans, or digitization contracts needed. After that, he described every document in the library catalogue and made it available to library users, either as original or as digitized copy.

This simple summary of the process may sound quite straightforward, but the fact is that, for many reasons, *Queer Archive?* is exemplary in illustrating the tensions (positive and negative) which can arise when a museum library or archive abandons the role of passive collector and becomes actively involved in defining, mapping and bringing together the documentary traces of events, movements and conflicts of any kind.

In fact, the fanzines, photographs, posters, press clippings, stickers, flyers, photocopied manifestos, videos, and sound recordings that make up *Queer Archive?* present a complex challenge for the museum's documentary collections. These items are relevant not just per se or because of the information they contain, but also because of their capacity to destabilize and call into question the solid premises on which archives and documentary collections continue to be managed by institutions to this day.

To start with, this project illustrates very clearly how institutional collections can actively define fields of interest, serve as agents of memory, and promote collective reflection taking their documental repositories as a starting point. Indeed, *Queer Archive?* has inspired a long list of public activities since 2012, including exhibitions—in the Museo Reina Sofía and elsewhere—where documents from the collection have been shown. This is so even though many preconceptions held by institutional archives—even the most basic, such as the idea of "authorship" and the differentiation between "original" and "copy"—can hardly apply to this kind of collection, or may be very profoundly challenged by its heterogeneous perspective.

In terms of authorship, many of the documents in *Queer Archive?* bore no signature, were authored collectively, or their authors were anonymous. How does this fit into traditional archival perspectives which privilege authorship as one of the most relevant metadata? Besides, as these documents were intended to be photocopied or endlessly reproduced, it is debatable whether they can be considered "originals" in relation to the new "copies" made by the museum after digitizing them. Should they be treated as one or the other? How could the division between the two categories be obviated within a traditional archival system?

As if this were not enough, several of the "domestic archivists" behind the donations or long-term loans of documents for *Queer Archive?* had demanded that the documents be freely distributed by the museum under a Creative Commons license, so that users could download them in high resolution without any prerequisites and, above all, at no cost. This, however, clashed head-on with the copy-distribution policy established by the Spanish Ministry of Culture for its own network of museums, which holds a rather conservative view of copyright and has a keen interest in their (hypothetical) potential for economic exploitation.

These examples prove that the inclusion of this relatively small collection (consisting of some 300 documents) within the gigantic bibliographic and documentary holdings of the Museo Reina Sofía, laboriously put together over decades, whose operation and consultation depend on the rigid parameters of institutional regulations, has not been without its challenges, some of which are still unresolved. For an institution of the caliber of the Reina Sofía Museum, but surely also for many other smaller ones, the process of exploration is still open if the aim is to incorporate into its holdings documentary collections similar to the *Queer Archive?*—much closer to the idea of the commons than more traditional collections—without reducing their specificities or annulling their emancipating potential.

In her research, Mela Dávila Freire focuses on the conceptual and physical intersection between contemporary art and archives as well as experimental publishing as artistic genre. She has collaborated, among others, with the documenta Archive (Kassel, Germany), the Museum of German History (Berlin, Germany), Lafuente Archive (Santander, Spain), Universidad de las Artes (Guayaquil, Ecuador), the Academy of Art and Design FHNW – Institute of Experimental Design / Critical Media Lab (Basel, Switzerland) and The Cuenca Biennale (Cuenca, Ecuador). She has also been Head of Publications and Head of the Study Center at MACBA, Barcelona, and Head of Public Activities at Museo Reina Sofía, Madrid.

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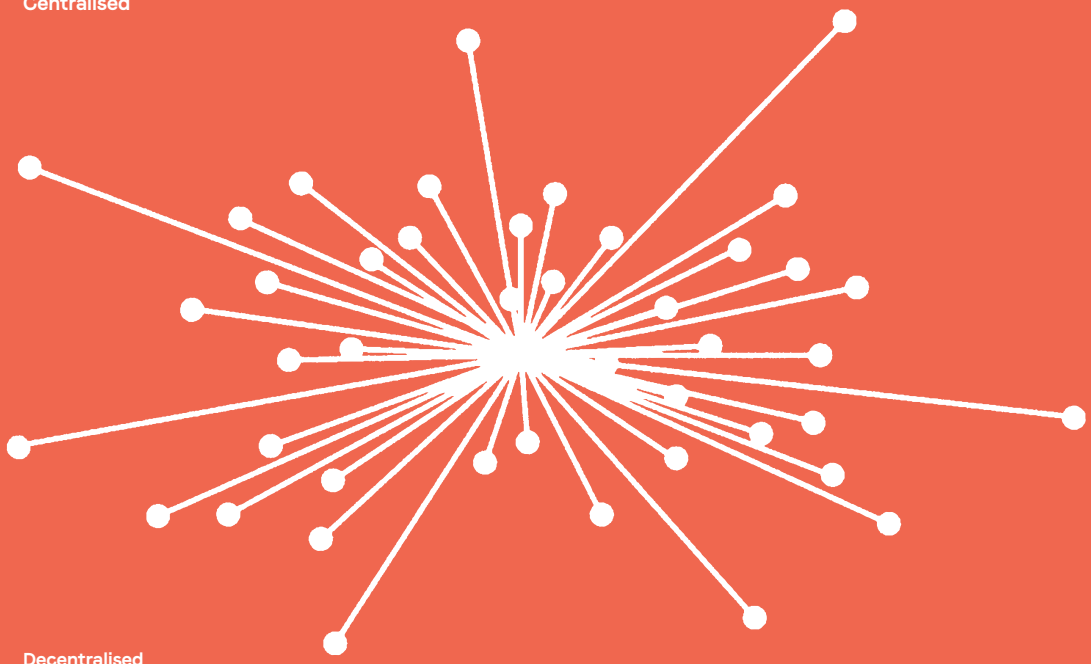

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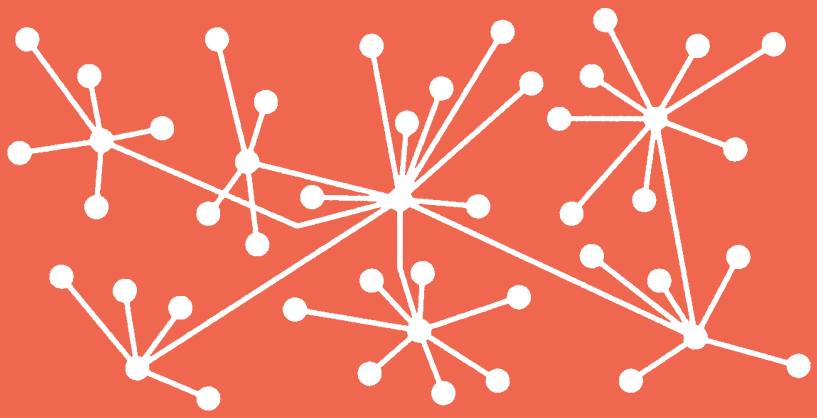

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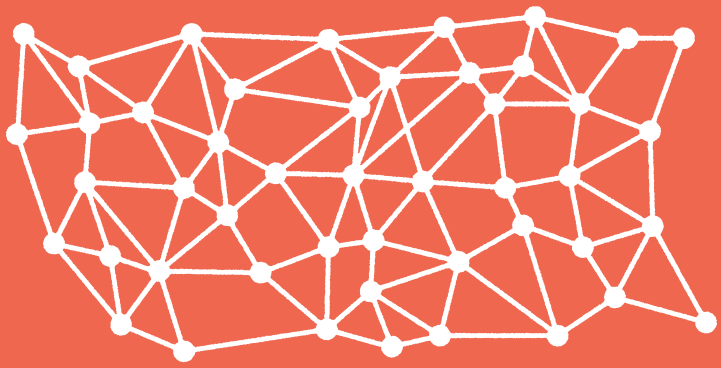

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