



KISS & TELL

Lesbian Art & Activism

By Kristen Hutchinson

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PREFACE

Kiss & Tell was an innovative lesbian art collective active in Vancouver from 1988 to 2002. Its three members—Persimmon Blackbridge, Lizard Jones, and Susan Stewart—are mostly known for their inaugural work, a travelling exhibition of photographs called *Drawing the Line*, 1988–90. Yet they collaborated on equally important performances and writings about censorship, lesbian sexual practices, activism, and identity that are rarely discussed or even acknowledged.

During my fellowship at the Art Canada Institute, I consulted the Kiss & Tell archive at Simon Fraser University Library Special Collections and Rare Books in Burnaby; The ArQuives: Canada's LGBTQ2+ Archives in Toronto; the BC Gay and Lesbian Archives in Vancouver; and the Artexxe archives in Montreal. Over two years, I conducted interviews with the members of Kiss & Tell to unearth the largely untold story of the collective. This book seeks to rectify the erasure of their oeuvre—a fate too often shared by LGBTQ2S+ artists in Canadian art history.



Portrait of Kiss & Tell (left to right: Persimmon Blackbridge, Lizard Jones, and Susan Stewart), 1998, photograph by Della McCreary.

My fascination with Kiss & Tell's work, and the issues they tackled, can be traced back to the early 1990s. At McGill University, I wrote a thesis on, and gave a presentation about, the feminist sex wars—positioning myself in the sex-positive camp. I still remember my professor's shock when I handed out photocopied images from mainstream and lesbian pornographic magazines. An editorial I co-wrote for the *McGill Daily* in 1992 argued against censorship because "it hides sex away, placing it out of the reach of public pleasure, scrutiny, or criticism.... We need to make it public. To look at it, criticise it, understand it better, and have fun with it."¹ In examining and exploring sex and our relationships to it, Kiss & Tell was doing just that.

For the "Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual Special Issue" I coordinated at the *McGill Daily* in the following year, I wrote about Kiss & Tell's *Drawing the Line* project and included excerpts from a presentation in which Lizard spoke about how the rhetoric of anti-pornography feminists was negatively affecting queer communities. I also publicly announced my queerness in that issue for the first time, in an article titled "Coming Out as Bisexual in a Queer Movement."



LEFT: Kiss & Tell, *Drawing the Line*, 1988-90, photographic print, 27.9 x 35.5 cm, Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby. RIGHT: Kiss & Tell, *True Inversions*, 1992, multimedia performance at the East Vancouver Cultural Centre, still from video documentation, Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby.

The 1990s were a significant era for queer liberation, art, and activism. Kiss & Tell was at the forefront of those battles, making art that brought lesbian sexual practices and sex positivity out of the closet and into the public sphere to foster greater understanding, empathy, and acceptance for queer lived experiences. The collective challenged the notion that lesbians needed to remain invisible to stay safe. The artists employed humour, storytelling, photography, video, sculpture, interactivity, cheekiness, sexiness, and political and theoretical discussions to push back against censorship and the limitations placed on how lesbians lived their lives and represented themselves. This book tells the story of Canadian lesbian art and activism through the art of Kiss & Tell and other lesboqueer voices—so we can learn from those who came before in our ongoing, and still necessary, fight for queer rights.

Content Notice: This book contains sexually explicit imagery and language.



OVERVIEW

Kiss & Tell (1988–2002), the lesbian art and activist collective, pushed back against lesbian invisibility with its photography exhibitions, multimedia performances, and books. Its three members, Persimmon Blackbridge (b.1951), Lizard Jones (b.1961), and Susan Stewart (b.1952), met in Vancouver in the early 1980s and worked together for fourteen years. Initially galvanized by debates surrounding the ethics of pornography and by limited representations of lesbianism in popular culture, the three women publicly tackled questions central to feminism at the time, such as whether pornography is harmful to women. Encompassing experimental theatre and cutting-edge media art practices, Kiss & Tell's groundbreaking works spoke from the margins,

addressing issues of censorship, relationship and family dynamics, disability, and class struggle with humour, audacity, cleverness, and resilience.

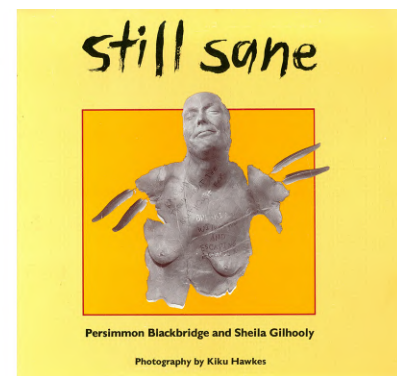
BEFORE AND BEYOND KISS & TELL

Visual artists Persimmon Blackbridge and Susan Stewart and writer Emma Kivisild (a.k.a. Lizard Jones) came together in 1988 to form the Kiss & Tell collective. While they worked collaboratively until 2002, they also engaged in solo artistic and writing careers before, during, and after their time as Kiss & Tell.

Born in Columbus, Ohio, in 1951 and based on Hornby Island in British Columbia, Persimmon Blackbridge is a sculptor, writer, curator, performer, and fiction editor. She began her career as an artist in the 1970s, creating works that addressed disability and mental health. Persimmon's first major contribution to queer art in Canada happened in 1984, four years before the formation of Kiss &



LEFT: Portrait of Persimmon Blackbridge, 2015, photograph by SD Holman. RIGHT: Cover of *Still Sane*, by Persimmon Blackbridge and Sheila Gilhooly (Vancouver: Press Gang Publishers, 1985).



Tell, when she produced *Still Sane*, a collaborative sculpture and writing project with author Sheila Gilhooly (b.1951). The project was inspired by Gilhooly's experience of being incarcerated in a psychiatric hospital after coming out as a lesbian. *Still Sane* consisted of twenty-seven life-size body casts made with clay, each accompanied with text written by Gilhooly. Many of the works created for *Still Sane* were exhibited as part of the Women, Art and Politics conference held at AKA Gallery (now AKA artist-run centre) in Saskatoon. The entire series was shown at Vancouver's Women in Focus Gallery in the fall of 1984.¹

Persimmon's decades-long work in disability arts continued during and after her time with Kiss & Tell. Her 1993 exhibition and book *Sunnybrook* focused on abuse at the Woodlands School in New Westminster, British Columbia, and won the Ferro-Grumley Award, a prestigious American LGBTQ literary award. Five years later, she collaborated with twenty-eight former inmates with intellectual disabilities on an exhibition titled *From the Inside/Out*. The project chronicled their lives in institutions across British Columbia and was a factor in gaining reparations for former residents of the Woodlands School.



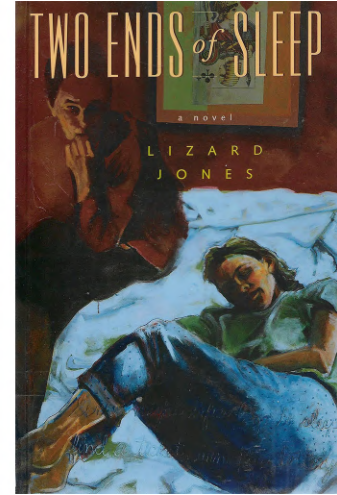
Installation view of *Constructed Identities* by Persimmon Blackbridge, at Âjagemô, Canada Council for the Arts, Ottawa, January 23-June 3, 2018, photograph by Della McCreary.

Persimmon has stated that creating art about disability helped her understand the ways in which it affected her own life. "In my life," she said, "disability was always something that you hid from people.... I hid my learning disabilities from people because I knew [they] made them treat me like I was stupid. I hid my own psychiatric history because I knew that would make people doubt my perceptions and reactions, it makes you a person who's not taken as able to speak for themselves or understand what's going on around them."² Since embracing her role as the "old dyke auntie of the disability movement,"³ Persimmon has continued to make work that disrupts conventional understandings of the arts in Canada. In 2015, she exhibited a series called *Constructed Identities*, which used mixed-media wood carving and found objects to question why disability is framed as a fracturing of ordinary life rather than a central part of it.⁴ *Speak No (emergency)*, Persimmon's installation about climate change, was exhibited at the Richmond Art Gallery in B.C. in early 2025.

During her time with Kiss & Tell, Emma Kivisild went by the pseudonym Lizard Jones. When asked why, she said, "I have a very, very recognizable Estonian last name—like, there are two families in Canada [with this surname]. Did I want my parents to deal with this? I wasn't really out at that point."⁵ Emma is a writer and artist living with multiple sclerosis (MS) in Prince Rupert, British Columbia. She was born in Vancouver in 1961 and spent her childhood in Taipei, Toronto, and Calgary. In 1977, she attended Princeton University and received a bachelor of philosophy of science. She completed her graduate studies in Vancouver at Simon Fraser University (SFU) and the University of British Columbia (UBC) with the support of a doctoral fellowship from the Social Sciences and Humanities

Research Council. Her performance *Hope against Hope: Looking Forward to the Apocalypse* at the SFU Harbour Centre examined predictions of the end of the world.

As a writer, Emma authored the 1997 novel *Two Ends of Sleep*, which explored her diagnosis of MS and life in the queer community. She was also a contributor to the *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies* and the anthology *Body Breakdowns: Tales of Illness & Recovery* (2007). As an artist, she has participated in the Canadian disability art community with several shows and performances. From 2001 to 2012, many of her pieces, including *Message in a Bottle*, *Waiting Room*, *Hoop Jumper*, and *Sow's Purse: You can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear*, were exhibited at the Roundhouse, Pendulum, and InterUrban galleries in Vancouver. Each of these projects addressed the intersection of queerness, disability, and multiple sclerosis. In 2019, as part of the Sick + Twisted Cabaret in Winnipeg, Emma performed *Sometimes When We Touch*, which addressed intimacy and physical contact.

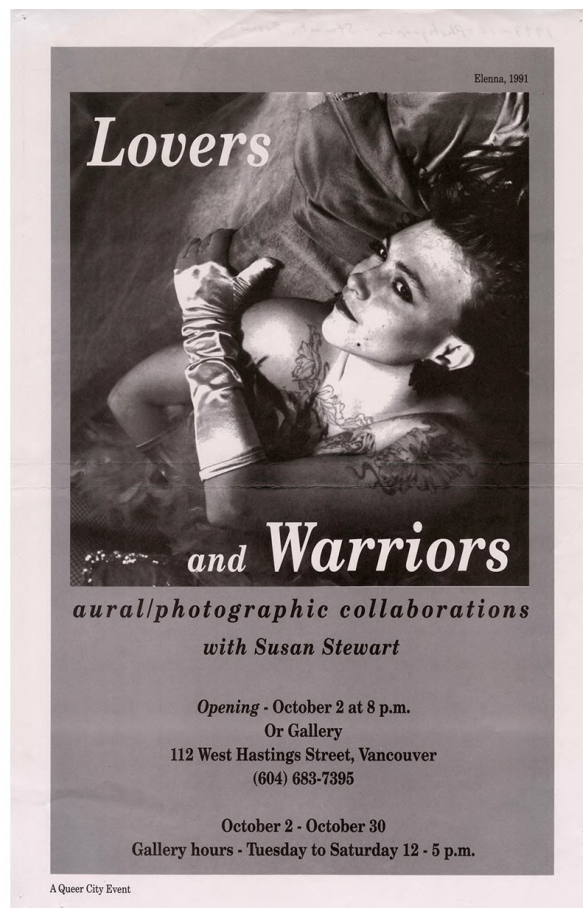


LEFT: Portrait of Emma Kivisild, 2018, photograph by Suzo Hickey. RIGHT: Cover of *Two Ends of Sleep*, by Lizard Jones (Vancouver: Press Gang Publishers, 1997).

From 2013 to 2015, Emma was artistic director of Kickstart Disability Arts & Culture in Vancouver. In 2016, she moved to Prince Rupert, where she continues to work as a writer and an artist. Her short story "Limoncello" won the 2018 Paint Swatch competition in *Northword Magazine*, and her freelance writing has appeared in *Northword*, *The Northern View*, and *Thimbleberry Magazine*.⁶ She was on the board of the Prince Rupert Community Arts Council and currently sits on the accessibility committee of Prince Rupert city hall. For seven fun years, she was the mainstage emcee of the Vancouver Folk Music Festival.

A photographer and videographer with Kiss & Tell, Susan Stewart was born in Vermont in 1952 and immigrated to Canada twenty-one years later. Susan said her decision to leave the United States was propelled by her objection to the Vietnam War: "My identification with fighting for civil rights and the anti-war movement gave me passionate though incoherent political convictions and I just had to act on them."⁷ Susan enrolled at Mount Allison University in Sackville, New Brunswick, where she was introduced to time-based media in courses taught by video artist Colin Campbell (1942-2001). She continued her study of lens-based media at the Alberta College of Art (now Alberta University of the Arts) in Calgary and at the Ontario College of Art and Design (now OCAD University) in Toronto, where she attended courses with Noel Harding (1945-2016). About building a career as an artist, Susan has said, "I realized I had two choices. I could have a place in the art world and base my art on pleasing myself and satisfying my own intellectual curiosity. The other option would be to direct my art toward social change. I could engage and act on my political convictions

and put my work in conversation with culture and society. I chose the latter knowing I would be an outsider and marginalized within the art world.”⁸



LEFT: Portrait of Susan Stewart, 2024, photograph by Rhea Borkowicz-Stewart. RIGHT: Poster for *Lovers & Warriors: aural/photographic collaborations with Susan Stewart* at Or Gallery, Vancouver, October 2-30, 1993, City of Vancouver Archives.

Susan identifies as a social practice artist concerned with social justice and enactments of resilience, working both inside and outside conventional institutions. Before she began working with Kiss & Tell, she was a practising studio artist and had been experimenting with “narrative fragments” and portraits depicting fraught and repressed desire using photography. Like Persimmon and Lizard, she was active in the Women’s Liberation Movement, as it was first known, before settling into feminist and queer activism. Following Kiss & Tell’s *Drawing the Line*, Susan’s photography exhibit *Lovers & Warriors* extended her work with the collective. Over a three-year period, she collaborated with twenty-one sex-positive genderqueers prioritizing diversity and inclusion. This work was exhibited in Vancouver and toured Germany in 1997.

In addition to her work with Kiss & Tell, Susan has forged a creative practice that revolves around ecological awareness and ethics, as well as Buddhism. In 2017, she participated in a residency program called the Arctic Circle, where she used photography to address human culpability in catastrophic ice loss. (She investigated a similar theme eight years earlier with her immersive video installation *Change Without Notice*, 2009, a project that investigated new modes of interconnectedness through durational media—evoked by layering multiple video projections.)



Installation view of *Pilgrimage Boudhanath Stupa (Kathmandu, Nepal) Moraine Lake (Alberta, Canada), 2019*, by Susan Stewart in *In the Present Moment: Buddhism, Contemporary Art, and Social Practice* at Walter Phillips Gallery, Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity, 2023.

More recently, Susan has conducted image explorations of Buddhist pilgrimage sites in Canada and Asia, documenting the search for the sacred in an era of radical disconnection. The resulting video installation, titled *Pilgrimage Boudhanath Stupa (Kathmandu, Nepal) Moraine Lake (Alberta, Canada), 2019*, was presented in 2023 at the Walter Phillips Gallery in Banff as part of the exhibition *In the Present Moment: Buddhism, Contemporary Art, and Social Practice*. Susan's artistic life has always included forms of mentorship; a committed educator, she taught art and served as an administrator at the Emily Carr University of Art + Design in Vancouver, where she is based, and was the founding dean of the school's Faculty of Culture + Community.

BECOMING KISS & TELL

In September 1987, a poster created by Vancouver artist Laiwan (b.1961) for International Lesbian Week caused an uproar within the lesbian community. Published in the local queer newspaper, *Angles*, the poster featured a grid of sixteen black-and-white photographs of fragments of nude female bodies engaging in sexual acts. The bodies, alone and in pairs, were shown in close-up views that focused on the sex rather than the individuals participating in it. Curator Amy Kazymierchuk wrote about the poster: "In the 1980s it was dangerous to be a visible, vocal lesbian. So much so that Laiwan cropped the models' faces from the photographs to protect them from public scrutiny, ostracization, and violence. Fearing the same retribution, she was credited under the pseudonym Li Yuen."⁹

Criticism from within Vancouver's lesbian community was varied and included the erroneous assertion that all the women featured on the poster were white. While some observers celebrated the work for daring to put lesbian sex out in the open, many others took issue with the fact that the women's faces were obscured and their bodies fragmented. Persimmon commented: "At that time in feminist theory... fragmentation was violence."¹⁰ Because "lesbian scenes" had long been a staple of straight men's commercial pornography, lesbian artists and activists in the feminist counterculture movement of the 1970s were sensitive to images that reduced women to their bodies.¹¹ Fragmentation was equated with violence because it was seen as a patriarchal tool to show a woman's body as a series of eroticized parts. But this theory would be refuted by a new generation of artists, including Kiss & Tell, who negotiated the politics of lesbian visibility by embracing sex positivity in their art. Reflecting on the outrage against Laiwan's poster—one of the catalysts that brought together the members of Kiss & Tell—Persimmon defended the "intimacy of extreme close-up"¹² as a way of protecting the women who had agreed to be part of the work.

Persimmon and Susan had met in 1984, when they joined Canadian video artist Sara Diamond (b.1954) and several other women artists to talk about sexual imagery and censorship. Those meetings transformed into a group that made exploratory art about sex. Canadian filmmaker, writer, and activist Marusya Bociurkiw described this group: "The women created a situation of openness in their group and prioritized explicit sexual conversation. They passed around images they liked, created what they called a 'lust journal' in which images and narratives were contributed anonymously... and told one another their complete sexual histories."¹³ Lizard, a writer who had become friends with Susan in Calgary via feminist activist circles, often attended meetings while babysitting Susan's child.



Li Yuen (Laiwan), *International Lesbian Week*, poster published in *Angles* 4, no. 10 (September 1987).



ACT UP rally, Vancouver, c.1989, photographer unknown, City of Vancouver Archives.

When Laiwan's poster came under scrutiny, Susan reached out to the members of the former art-and-discussion group to dissect the uproar. Wholly engaged in the resulting conversations, Persimmon, Lizard, and Susan decided to form an art collective that would address issues of queer lived experiences and sexual representation within Vancouver's lesbian community and beyond.

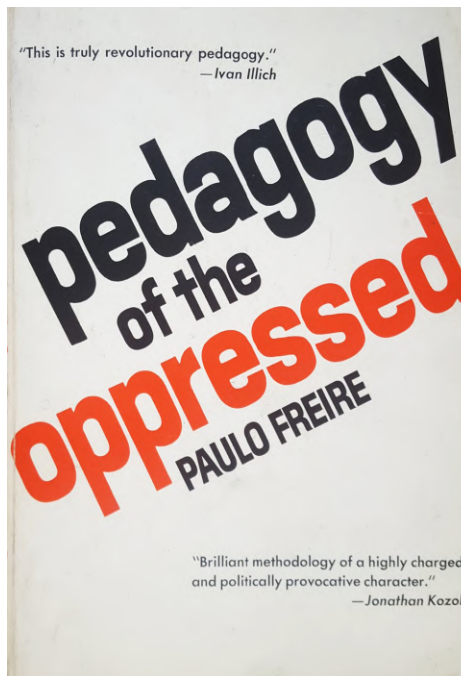
The artists' decision to band together and create socially engaged art was timely because Canadian queers had weathered conservative backlash for decades, from the Canadian government's purges of gay and lesbian civil servants and military personnel to homophobic responses to the AIDS crisis. Diverse representations of women loving women were sorely needed to combat institutional violence, stigmatization, and moral panic. As Susan wrote in Kiss & Tell's co-authored 1994 book, *Her Tongue on My Theory: Images, Essays and Fantasies*, "Lesbian photographs (published and unpublished) get circulated, passed hand to hand, discussed and debated within the community. There is a tremendous demand and need for self-representation by a community whose psychic survival depends on the sure knowledge that there are others like ourselves."¹⁴

Persimmon, Lizard, and Susan initially responded to debates about the scarcity of queer representations made by queer people within and beyond the lesbian community. They continued to collaborate because they were united in their fight for social change and justice. They were tuned in to the intellectual projects of radical thinkers, and they read everything from the foundational works of anarchist Emma Goldman and second-wave feminists Adrienne Rich and Angela Davis to Paulo Freire's 1970 *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and

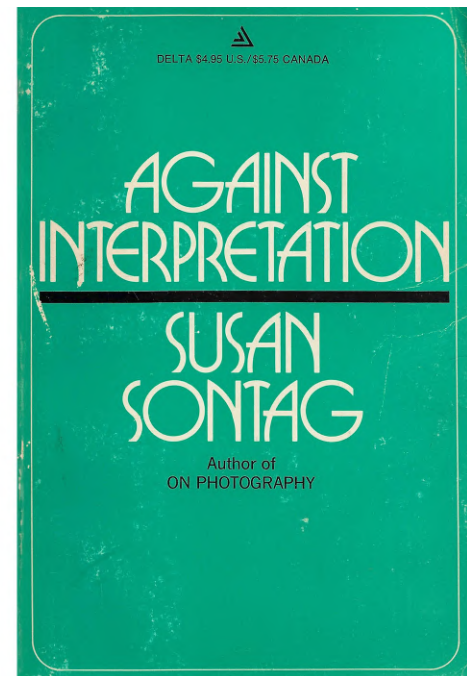
writings by critics such as Susan Sontag and Monique Wittig. The artists made it their mission to destigmatize lesbian desire, to build community, and to begin to heal from the trauma perpetuated by a society that had demonized lesbianism for so long.

The artists landed on the name Kiss & Tell, a play on the outdated expression "A lady doesn't kiss and tell." This appropriation seems particularly apt for lesbians who had once stayed in the closet rather than risk losing their jobs, families, religious communities, children, homes, and friends. The women of Kiss & Tell kissed and told. They recounted their sexual exploits and fantasies, bringing lesbian sexuality out of the closet and into the public realm.

Between 1988 and 2002, Kiss & Tell created a touring photography exhibition and four multimedia performance works. They published two books and wrote a twenty-eight-minute film, directed by Vancouver filmmaker Lorna Boschman (b.1955). (They also collaborated with her on two other videos.) But despite their trailblazing body of work, little has been written about Kiss & Tell's oeuvre and how radical they were for their time, and there is little information about them online. Their provocative photographs of lesbian sex captured audiences, and once they had that attention, they continued to "complicate the narrative to include class analysis, trauma, ableism, sexism, oppressive political systems/laws, and love."¹⁵ The collective experimented with a variety of media to create art that spoke back to power. They never shied away from making images that might be received negatively, and they constantly pushed the boundaries of what was considered acceptable, despite the risks.



LEFT: Cover of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, by Paulo Freire (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970). RIGHT: Cover of *Against Interpretation*, by Susan Sontag (New York: Delta Publishing Co., 1979).





Kiss & Tell, *That Long Distance Feeling: Perverts, Politics & Prozac*, 1997, multimedia performance, Roundhouse Community Theatre, Vancouver, photographer unknown, Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby.

A COLLABORATIVE APPROACH TO LESBIAN VISIBILITY

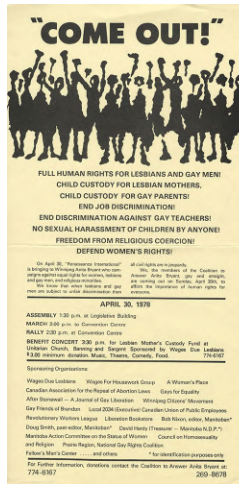
"For lesbians, invisibility has been our safety and our trap," wrote Kiss & Tell in their 1994 book, *Her Tongue on My Theory: Images, Essays and Fantasies*.

"Being in the closet may be stifling, but it could save you from losing your job, your children, your life. It's frightening to leave that trap. When other lesbians do it, it can feel like they're endangering us all, giving us all a bad name.

Sometimes we are quicker to punish each other than the outside world."¹⁶

By making work that was distinctively and openly lesbian, Kiss & Tell sought to combat invisibility and discrimination.

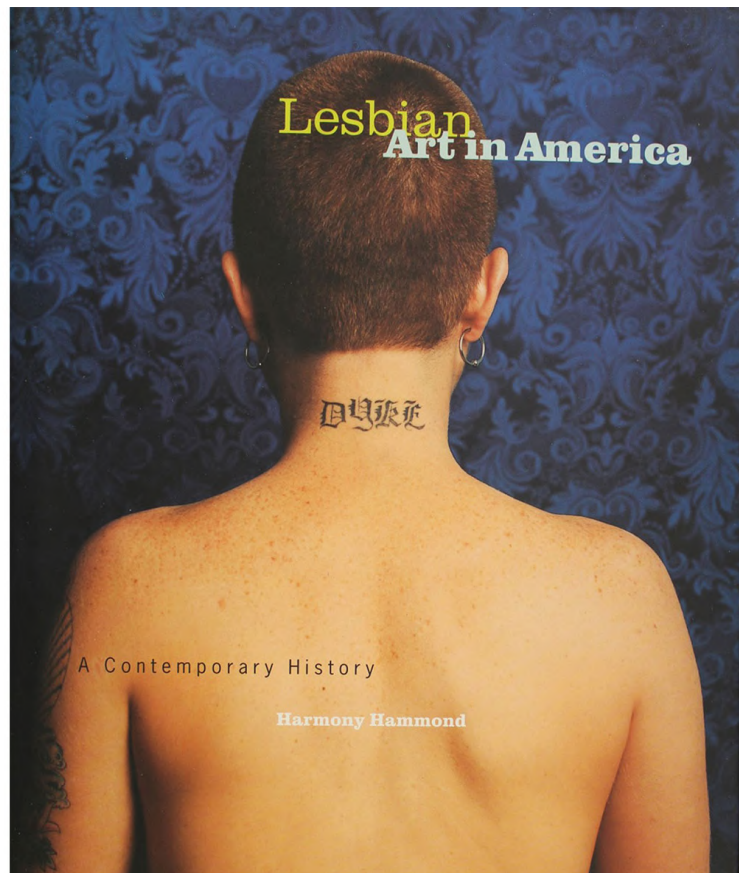
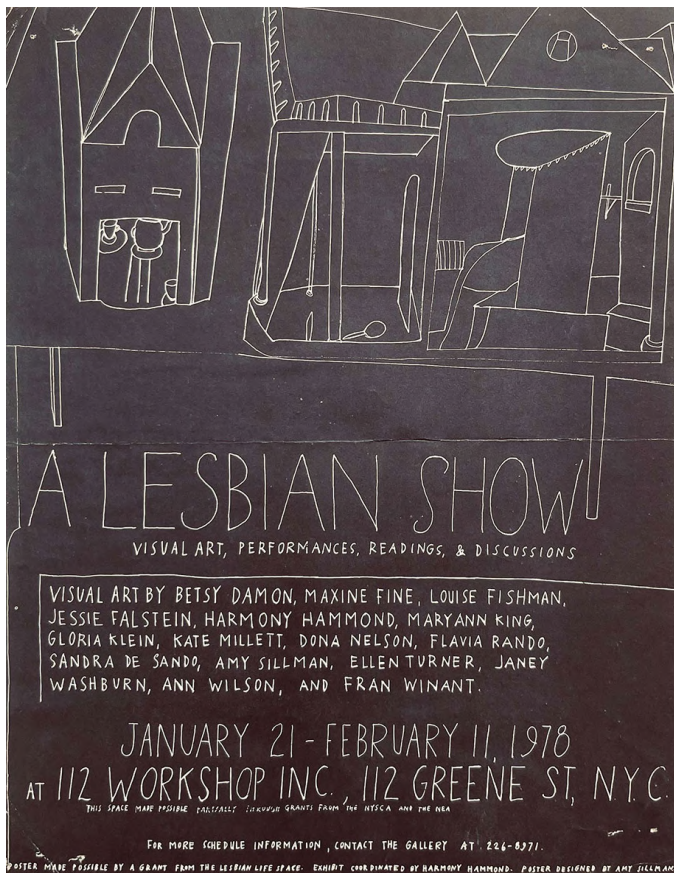
The first Canadian law condemning homosexuality was enacted in 1841. In 1890, "gross indecency between male persons" became a crime; it was extended to lesbians in 1953. Homosexuality wasn't decriminalized in Canada until 1969, and even then, only partially (parties had to be twenty-one or older).¹⁷ It was only in 1996 that the Canadian Human Rights Act was amended to include sexual orientation as prohibited grounds for discrimination.¹⁸ In the late 1980s and early 1990s, out lesbians in Canada still risked social stigma, violence, job loss, institutionalization, insecure housing, and loss of child custody. Being forced to hide their identities contributed to a lack of lesbian representations made by lesbians.



LEFT: Poster for a LGBTQ2S+ rally in Winnipeg, April 30, 1978, Canadian Women's Movement Archives collection, University of Ottawa Library. RIGHT: Participants at an International Women's Day demonstration in Toronto, 1987, photograph by Johanne Pelletier.



Lesbian invisibility and erasure persist, especially in Canadian art history. How many lesbian visual artists can you name? When I ask my undergraduate students this question at the beginning of a Canadian art survey course, the vast majority are unable to do so. Feminist art historians have worked tirelessly to bring women artists from the margins into galleries, museums, and the canons of art history. Much of their work has been intersectional, accounting for race, gender, ethnicity, class, disability, embodiment, and sexual identity when criticizing women's exclusion from the male-dominant discipline. But as Susan writes in *Her Tongue on My Theory*, "women artists have had to fight and push for every bit of ground they can claim in the high-stakes game of recognition, support, and success in 'the art world.' For lesbian artists, this slice of the pie is smaller yet, with even more shut doors, glass ceilings, and heterosexist barriers."¹⁹



LEFT: Poster for the exhibition *A Lesbian Show* at 112 Workshop Inc., New York City, January 21-February 11, 1978. RIGHT: Cover of *Lesbian Art in America: A Contemporary History*, by Harmony Hammond (New York: Rizzoli, 2000).

Despite institutional erasure, many queer women artists during the second wave of feminism made it their mission to exhibit works focused on their lesbian identities. Still, some lesbian artists in the 1970s and 1980s were reluctant to participate in exhibitions explicitly labelled as lesbian. For example, when American artist and curator Harmony Hammond (b.1944) mounted *The Lesbian Show* in 1978—the first U.S. exhibition to include work solely by out lesbian artists—many of those invited to take part declined because they feared it might negatively impact their careers. In 2000, Hammond published her groundbreaking book *Lesbian Art in America: A Contemporary History*—still the only art historical survey about lesbian American art to be published to date.²⁰ Hammond wrote the book so the work of queer women artists from the 1970s to the 1990s would be recognized and remembered. “We cannot afford to be silent or to let others decide what kind of art we may or may not make,” she asserted, “nor let our creative work be ignored, ‘straightened,’ dehistoricized, decontextualized, or erased.”²¹ No similar survey book has been written about Canadian lesbian artists.

Outside the Canadian academy and art institutions, Kiss & Tell found strength, camaraderie, and support within feminist and lesbian communities. Like many lesbian artists of their generation, they learned how to collaborate by participating in feminist grassroots activist organizations. In Vancouver, the artist-run centres embraced the ideas of radical socialist political movements, and fought for women’s equality, queer liberation, and Indigenous rights. Many artists were drawn to spaces where they could exhibit works that emphasized their politics. When Intermedia, Vancouver’s first artist-run centre, disbanded in 1972, many more organizations were founded in its wake, including the Or Gallery (founded by Laiwan), the grunt gallery, the Western Front, and Women in Focus Gallery. The latter two were strong supporters of Kiss & Tell. Women in

Focus's public gallery space became the venue for the collective's first photo exhibition, *Drawing the Line*, in 1988. These centres, and many others, operated with mandates that combined art and politics. The members of Kiss & Tell brought this grassroots emphasis on politics and activism into their creative practice.



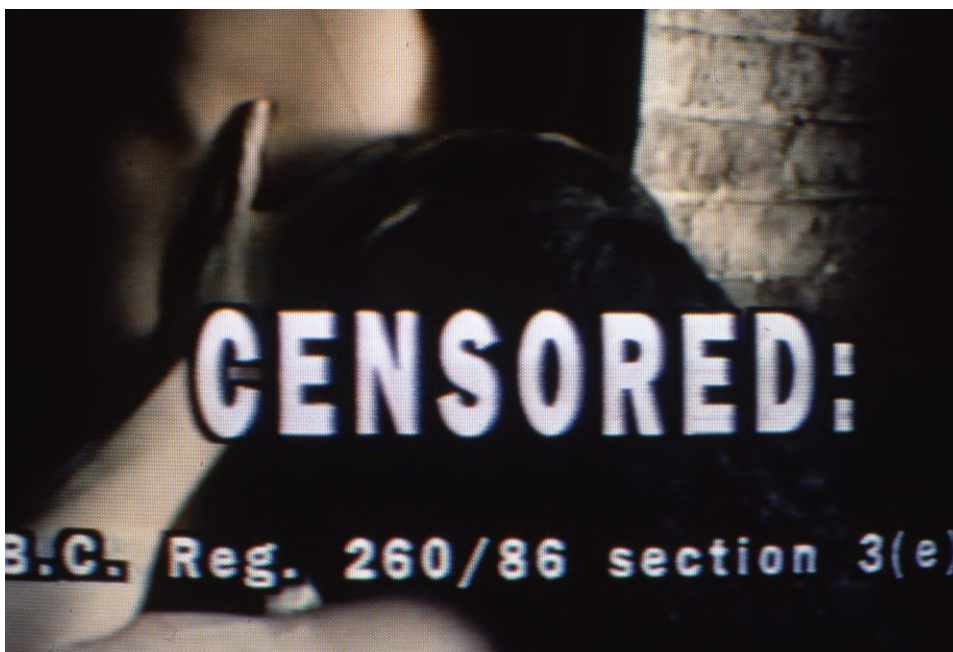
Installation view of *Drawing the Line* at the Western Front, Vancouver, August 3-18, 1990, photograph by Eric Metcalfe.

Working together, with other artist-collaborators, and in dialogue with activist peers, Kiss & Tell questioned and created alternatives to a hegemonic male gaze that saw women only as sexual objects. The collective represented lesbian desire as empowerment and lesbian sexuality as a space for play, intimacy, discussion, role play, experimentation, fun, power exchange, sensations, orgasms, and connections. "We start by riffing off ideas from each other but then begins the conversing, wrestling, and dealing with one's attachment to ideas," said Susan about the collective's creative process. "It takes time to process ideas collectively as you must go through a psychological and spiritual change. You must develop a generosity of spirit."²² For Persimmon, collaboration heightened the formal experience of the work: "The thrill of collaborating... is the way we all three are in love with both form and chaos. Our performances are unstable structures that create meaning by juxtaposing chaotic images and stories. Meaning is never actually defined or stated, never nailed into place. Everything is always shifting—like our lives."²³

An example of Kiss & Tell's collaborative approach to experimentation is seen in the twenty-eight-minute video *True Inversions*, 1992, that accompanied their performance of the same name. Written by Kiss & Tell and directed by Lorna Boschman, the video intercuts masturbation and fantasy sequences with behind-the-scenes discussions with the cast and crew. In one scene, Lizard and Persimmon can be seen making out on a swing—an object that also appears on stage in the *True Inversions* live performance—while one of their camerapeople, author and visual artist Shani Mootoo (b.1957), says, "Most people with

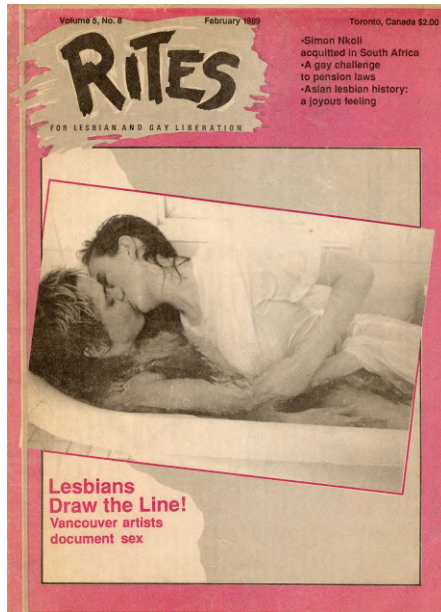
privilege are not aware of when certain people are being oppressed, and it is really important for those things to be called out and that's different from censoring. Censorship implies that there is a penalty. It has more to do with things being prevented by law." Like much of Kiss & Tell's work, the *True Inversions* video was self-referential and commented on events and issues that impacted their personal and creative lives. *True Inversions* sought to complicate discourses of power, pleasure, and censorship by drawing attention to the framing power of the camera and the director.²⁴

Kiss & Tell's collaborative creative processes were built from shared politics. Their aim to make transformative, conceptually complex work aligned with approaches taken by some of their queer contemporaries. As Canadian artist Shawna Dempsey (b.1963) has stated: "It is no coincidence that so much contemporary Canadian lesbian artwork is collaborative. The double marginalization of gender and sexual orientation makes voicing our positions difficult, and indeed dangerous. Do I have a right to speak? What is my language? How much abuse will I incur for being too visible?"²⁵ Since 1989, Dempsey has collaborated on performance works with Lorri Millan (b.1965). Like Kiss & Tell, the duo privilege collective authorship as an artistic strategy, a radical act that undermines the patriarchal and capitalist structures of the art world. Rather than centring the individual artist (read: male, straight, and white) as a solitary genius, collaboration allowed for the creation of more nuanced and multivalent artworks.



Kiss & Tell, *True Inversions*, 1992, multimedia performance at the East Vancouver Cultural Centre, still from video projection, Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby.

Queer writers and editors during this time were also working toward increased lesbian visibility. Starting in the 1970s and 1980s, Canadians could purchase queer magazines made in Canada, including *The Body Politic* and *Rites*. During her time with *Kiss & Tell*, Lizard was an editor and writer for the national feminist newspaper *Kinesis*. Vancouver's *Angles* was another significant venue for building queer solidarities. The 1990 founding of the U.S. lesbian magazine *Deneuve*, which later became *Curve*, was another important milestone. The publication touched on many facets of lesbian culture—including marriage equality, genderqueer fashion, and cybersex—long before these topics became mainstream. Its founder, Franco Stevens, noted that having the word “lesbian” on the cover was controversial because “that meant every time somebody wanted to buy it, they were essentially coming out to anyone standing around them, anyone who saw it in their house.”²⁶ Although the magazine initially had trouble securing advertisers and subjects for its covers, its first issue sold out in six days. Queer women in the early 1990s were hungry for representation on their own terms—and it was finally beginning to happen.



LEFT: Cover of *Rites: For Lesbian and Gay Liberation* 5, no. 8 (February 1989), Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby.
RIGHT: Cover of *Deneuve: The Lesbian Magazine* 1, no. 1 (May-June 1991), The ArQuives: Canada's LGBTQ2+ Archives, Toronto.



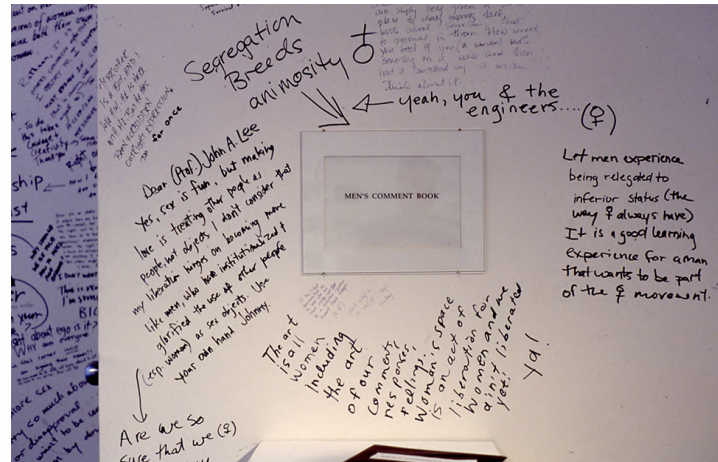
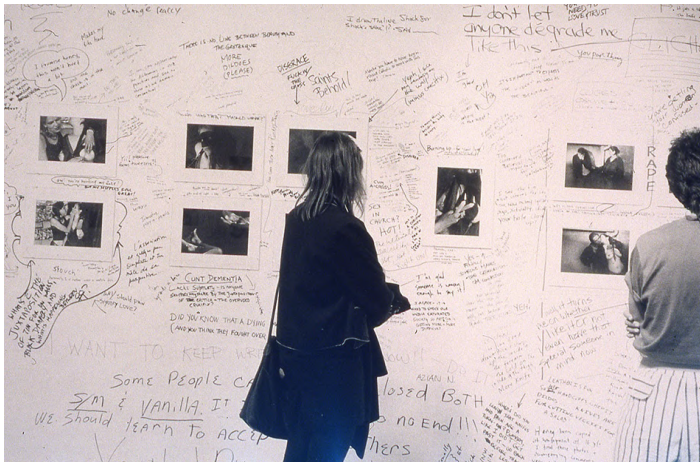
MAKING PROVOCATIVE PHOTOGRAPHS

The last thing Kiss & Tell expected from their first exhibition was a line stretching for three city blocks. With hindsight, it's easy to see why women (and lesbians in particular) were so eager to visit this exhibition at Vancouver's Women in Focus Gallery in 1988. Those waiting in line were clamouring to see images of lesbians made by lesbians in an era when that was sorely lacking in art, news, media, and popular culture. Kiss & Tell's *Drawing the Line* project, 1988-90, began with forty images and ended with ninety-eight black-and-white photographs of lesbian sexual practices. Shot by Susan, with Persimmon and Lizard as models, the images ranged from cuddling and kissing to BDSM and male voyeurism.



Kiss & Tell, *Drawing the Line*, 1988-90, photographic print, 27.9 x 35.5 cm, Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby.

Drawing the Line was groundbreaking not only because Kiss & Tell dared to display sexual photographs in public but also because they invited women viewers to respond to the photographs by writing directly on the gallery walls. Men had to leave their comments in a guest book. "It was important to separate the genders to enable women to feel confident being on the fence on the sexuality issue," Lizard explained. "Women were being told what they thought, and felt, [by men], and the only way to clarify things was to keep men out of the discussion. It was the only way to find out what women actually felt."²⁷ The walls of the exhibition quickly filled up with comments, drawings, and debates. Some viewers even went so far as to draw and write on the photographs themselves. *Drawing the Line* marked the beginning of Kiss & Tell's fourteen-year project to build community, an endeavour that brought them into dialogue with lesbians, feminists, political activists, and cultural theorists of many stripes.

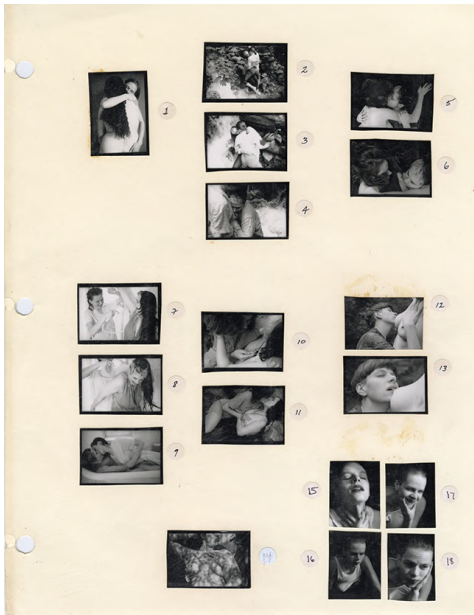


LEFT: Installation view of *Drawing the Line* at Cameraworks, San Francisco, 1991, photographer unknown, Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby. RIGHT: Installation view of the men's comment book in *Drawing the Line* at Women in Focus Gallery, Vancouver, 1988, photograph by Susan Stewart, Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby.

After its debut in Vancouver, the exhibition toured Canada, the U.S., Australia, and the Netherlands. It drew attention to questions that many feminists were asking at the time, such as how the debate around pornography and erotica changes if the sexual images are created by women for women.²⁸ One way that the members of Kiss & Tell sought to address these questions was by collaborating with each other and the audience. Susan talks about the importance of making art as a collective:

I think we started complicating meaning right in the beginning with *Drawing the Line*—we really worked around any easy reading of anything we did. And that's what was great about having three of us, because with three different artists contributing, it's not a singular vision.... And we needed each other badly when we did this work. At the time, it was so edgy to be putting this out there. It felt very dangerous. I could have never done it without [Lizard and Persimmon].²⁹

Exhibiting *Drawing the Line* carried significant risk. In Susan's case, she was terrified her young child might be taken away from her.³⁰ Her fear wasn't unfounded. Canadian lawyer Joanna Radbord, writing in 1999 about lesbian mothers and custody, stated: "Judges have frequently distinguished between 'good' and 'bad' lesbian mothers on the basis of whether the mother is closeted and 'discreet.'" To this day, there are still cases of Canadian lesbian mothers who are denied custody and granted only limited access to their children.³¹



LEFT: Layout sheet for *Drawing the Line*, 1988-90, Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby. RIGHT: Kiss & Tell, *Drawing the Line*, 1988-90, photographic print, 27.9 x 35.5 cm, Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby.

The photographs in *Drawing the Line* were arranged to form narrative fragments that explored complex relationships between desire, sex, transgression, rage, and freedom. In each photograph, Kiss & Tell engaged with the formal conventions of the camera. Framing was one tool the artists used to make audiences question their relationship to the images. In some photos, the camera zoomed in tight, focusing on parts of Lizard's and Persimmon's bodies as they writhed in pleasure. In others, the camera took in the women's entire bodies or situated them within their surroundings. The artists used the camera to consciously expose how lesbians see and are seen. They questioned what kinds of images are constructed as "lesbian," exploring a query expressed by artist and curator Harmony Hammond: "Is the quality 'lesbian' embodied in the art object, the sexuality of the artist or the viewer, or the viewing context?"³² The answer for Kiss & Tell was any or all of the above.

Audiences found it difficult to draw a definitive line between the photographs that could be construed as erotica, including one of two fully clothed women embracing and kissing beside a waterfall, and those that might be considered pornographic, such as a photograph of Lizard fisting Persimmon. Each photograph drew a range of responses that demonstrated how viewers' opinions weren't as monolithic as one might assume given the binary enforced by some feminist critics at the time. A 1988 review of the exhibition at Vancouver's Women in Focus Gallery described the interactions: "The abundance of comments compared to the drawn lines indicated that what is personally erotic is complex and cannot be graded on someone else's scale."³³ For example, when a photograph of two kissing women (one of whom is bare chested) was exhibited in Sydney, Australia, the comment thread started with "Great tits!" was followed by "If we say, 'great tits,' aren't we just copying the patriarchal way of fetishizing bits and pieces and ignoring the woman as a whole?," and ended with "Can't we just admire her tits? Is this a crime?"³⁴



Kiss & Tell, *Drawing the Line*, 1988-90, photographic print, 27.9 x 35.5 cm, Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby.

Drawing the Line was pioneering and subversive not just because it unabashedly depicted lesbian sex. In featuring middle-aged bodies of different sizes, the project provided an alternative to mainstream sexual imagery that only celebrated the bodies of thin young women. As Persimmon stated in Kiss & Tell's 1994 co-authored book, *Her Tongue on My Theory: Images, Essays and Fantasies*:

On the covers of women's magazines in every supermarket check-out line, we see extremely provocative and sexualized pictures of half-clothed women.... In North American culture, these images shape most (lesbian as well as straight) women's ways of seeing sexualized pictures of other women, as well as our relationships with our own bodies. When I put my plump, 40-year-old body in front of the camera, this is the context I am addressing: a very different context from that of the straight male consumers of commercial porn.³⁵

Kiss & Tell refuted the stereotype that older women aren't desirable or sexual. They highlighted their desires, and what might be desirable to other women, with bold and celebratory acts of disclosure.

TRANSGRESSIVE AND EXPERIMENTAL PERFORMANCES

In 1991, Kiss & Tell produced their first public performance during a conference talk at a Holiday Inn in Vancouver. For *Drawing the Line*, 1988-90, only Persimmon and Lizard got naked for the camera. They teased Susan that she never got naked for their art, so while Susan presented a paper, Lizard and

Persimmon consensually undressed her slowly until all she wore was a strap-on. "I had a leather harness with a dildo," Susan recounted. "And that's it. And they just stripped me down completely. And I just read an academic paper. And then they put my clothes back on."³⁶

Monologues, confessionals, and humorous anecdotes were at the heart of Kiss & Tell's multimedia performances. They mixed storytelling with photography and video projections and music to provoke and connect with audiences and as strategies for experimentation. The energy at a Kiss & Tell performance was electric. Dance and performance artist Margaret Dragu (b.1953) described their final performance, *Corpus Fugit*, 2002, as "like sharing last night's vivid dream with someone who is neither your therapist nor your lover. You gush inarticulately '... well, like, there are three women, right, and they talk and talk and, like, there are slides of the Berlin Wall and dying flowers and, oh, yeah, a video of this painting and it is breathing, and you know, these women are so funny—they tell real stories—sexy, sad, political—and all three of them are really, really, hot.'"³⁷



Kiss & Tell, photographic projections from *Corpus Fugit*, 2002, multimedia performance, Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby.

Performance art emerged in Canada in the 1960s and 1970s in tandem with the establishment of artist-run centres—or "parallel galleries," as they were then called, a reference to their existence outside the official infrastructure for the arts. Many artist-run centres supported programming for music, dance, theatre, media art, and the visual arts, making them welcome spaces for the multidisciplinary nature of performance art. As a renewed and expanding art form from the 1960s into the 1990s, performance was taken up by many women who, like Kiss & Tell, wanted to disregard the standards and confines of the mainstream art world. In conceptualizing their transgressive and experimental works, Kiss & Tell turned to diverse references, including the avant-garde performances of Dadaist poet Emmy Hennings (1885–1948), the body art works of Carolee Schneemann (1939–2019), the deconstruction of the social expectations of women found in the work of Martha Rosler (b.1943), and the protest art of the Guerilla Girls (formed in 1985). Kiss & Tell also embraced strategies pioneered by experimental theatre groups such as the New York City-based Living Theatre and Montreal's Theatre 1, along with the radical street theatre techniques used by the AIDS activist group ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power).



LEFT: Carolee Schneemann, *Eye Body #11* from *Eye Body: 36 Transformative Actions for Camera*, 1963, gelatin silver print, dimensions variable, photograph of Schneemann by Erró, various collections. © Carolee Schneemann Foundation / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / CARCC Ottawa 2025. RIGHT: Guerrilla Girls, date unknown, photographer unknown.

Kiss & Tell included sexual imagery and stories in their performances to grab the audience's attention and deliver a broader critique of what reviewer Caterina Pizanias called "the systems of signification within which sex, gender, race, and wellness/illness are performed."³⁸ Sexy stories of longing were sprinkled throughout Kiss & Tell's performance *That Long Distance Feeling: Perverts, Politics & Prozac*, 1997. Two humorous phone-sex sessions, with Lizard as the client and Persimmon as the sex worker, were filled with titillating repartee. In one of these encounters, Susan tied a white scarf around Lizard's eyes (reminiscent of the bondage photographs in *Drawing the Line*) while Persimmon, as the phone-sex worker, told a tale about a sexual interlude between "your lover and her other lover.... They're having such a good time, and you can't even touch yourself."



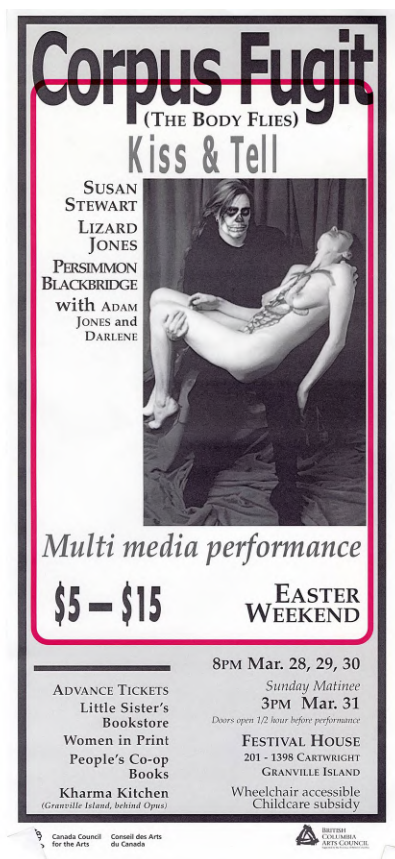
LEFT: Kiss & Tell, photographic projection from *That Long Distance Feeling: Perverts, Politics & Prozac*, 1997, multimedia performance, Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby. RIGHT: Kiss & Tell, photographic projection from *That Long Distance Feeling: Perverts, Politics & Prozac*, 1997, multimedia performance, Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby.

The monologues were juxtaposed with onstage visuals (often video and photographic projections), music, and other physical props that connected sex to ethics, politics, embodiment, class, disability, gender, race, identity, and art. One reviewer of *That Long Distance Feeling* noted: "In a series of personal recollections, rants, vignettes, fantasies, and parodical social commentary, [Kiss & Tell] engage in the logic of time (social and personal changes of the last thirty years) and space (the post-industrial inner city) while reflecting the old dicta, 'the personal is political.'"³⁹

Kiss & Tell mined their personal experiences for content for their performances. One section in *True Inversions*, 1992, tackled familial relationships and included letters that the members had written to their mothers but never sent. Lizard's letter read, in part, "When you're a lesbian there is no turning back.... We lesbians have a past. No one wants it, but it's ours.... The desire still outweighs the risks. I live in a community of people who have chosen to follow their desires." The trio returned to discussing family in their final performance, *Corpus Fugit*, where both Susan and Persimmon talked about the deaths of their fathers.

Their performances were often self-referential and tackled issues pertaining to the censorship of queer art and publications in Canada. In a review of their first performance of *True Inversions* at Vancouver's York Theatre on April 11, 1992, Heather Reiger wrote: "The power of *True Inversions* was in its manipulation of

juxtapositions: censorship vs pleasure, desire vs sexual abuse and religion, lesbianism vs family. The mixed media form used in the performance was extremely effective in portraying these juxtapositions."⁴⁰ Kiss & Tell saw their performances as opportunities to frame conversations among themselves and within their communities. Both the content and the form of their work supported the way they engaged with the world around them: critiquing, dissecting, and laying bare oppression in its many insidious varieties. Their visuals and stories were provocative and evocative—and at times brave—but they were also formally and conceptually ahead of their time. Kiss & Tell refused to remain unheard, and their performances, presented outside gallery walls, evoked pleasure, understanding, and even turmoil in their audiences of queers and allies.



LEFT: Poster for Kiss & Tell's performance of *True Inversions* at York Theatre, Vancouver, April 11, 1992, City of Vancouver Archives. RIGHT: Poster for Kiss & Tell's performance of *Corpus Fugit* at Festival House, Vancouver, March 28-30, 2002, Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby.



Kiss & Tell, *That Long Distance Feeling: Perverts, Politics & Prozac*, 1997, multimedia performance at Roundhouse Community Theatre, Vancouver, photographer unknown, Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby.

BURGEONING LESBIAN ART SCENES

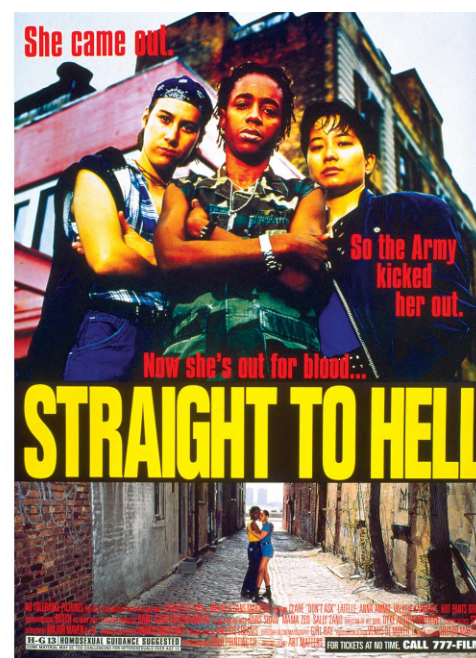
In depicting aspects of lesbian sexualities openly and positively, exhibiting works in numerous venues across multiple countries, and inviting debate about lesbian sexual practices and representation, Kiss & Tell were well ahead of their time. As American artist and curator Harmony Hammond wrote in *Lesbian Art in America*: “Lesbian expression and self-representation continue to play an important role in keeping the w(hole) lesbian in all her fluid, layered, messy, and unruly manifestations intact—sexual, creative, political, and powerful.”⁴¹ Kiss & Tell brought the multiplicity of lesbian identities described by Hammond to the forefront by creating artworks and spaces where women could finally see themselves represented through a queer female gaze. The collective was part of a new and increasingly vocal wave of lesbian representation led by queer women in the 1990s.

In the U.S., lesbian art collectives such as fierce pussy, which formed in New York City in 1991, brought “lesbian identity and visibility directly into the streets.”⁴² One of their tactics was to create and display posters in public areas with slogans such as “I AM A lezzie/butch/pervert/girlfriend/bulldagger/sister/dyke AND PROUD!” and “Lesbian chic. My ass. Fuck 15 minutes of fame. We demand our civil rights. Now.” As Lauren O’Neill Butler wrote in *Artforum*: “fierce pussy strongly encouraged people to take, copy, and distribute its pieces, and so its production can be placed squarely in the genealogy of the multiple while also anticipating the logic of the self-propagating digital meme.”⁴³ Just as Kiss & Tell encouraged women to share their opinions about the photographs in *Drawing the Line*, 1988–90, fierce pussy encouraged public engagement and made lesbian identities more visible via the proliferation of ready-made posters.⁴⁴

Created the same year as fierce pussy, the American lesbian art collective Dyke Action Machine (DAM!) was founded by artist Carrie Moyer (b.1960) and photographer Sue Schaffner. DAM! brought lesbian identities into the public sphere through billboards, light boxes, matchbooks, buttons, stickers, and posters. Each month, they wheatpasted five thousand posters in neighbourhoods with significant pedestrian traffic. In a 1992 campaign, members riffed on ads in *Family Circle* magazine by placing images of diverse lesbian families on posters that read, “Dykes were family by golly, before families became trendy.”⁴⁵ Two years later, in response to the U.S. military’s Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell policy, DAM! created a poster promoting a fictional film called *Straight to Hell* and featuring images of BIPOC women to draw attention to how lesbians of colour were being



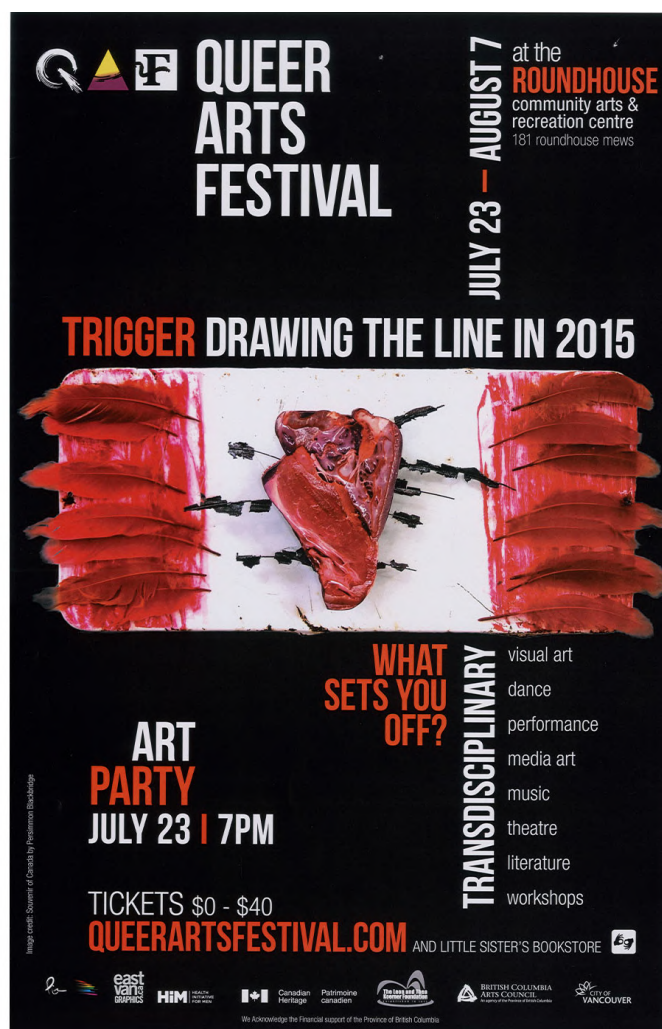
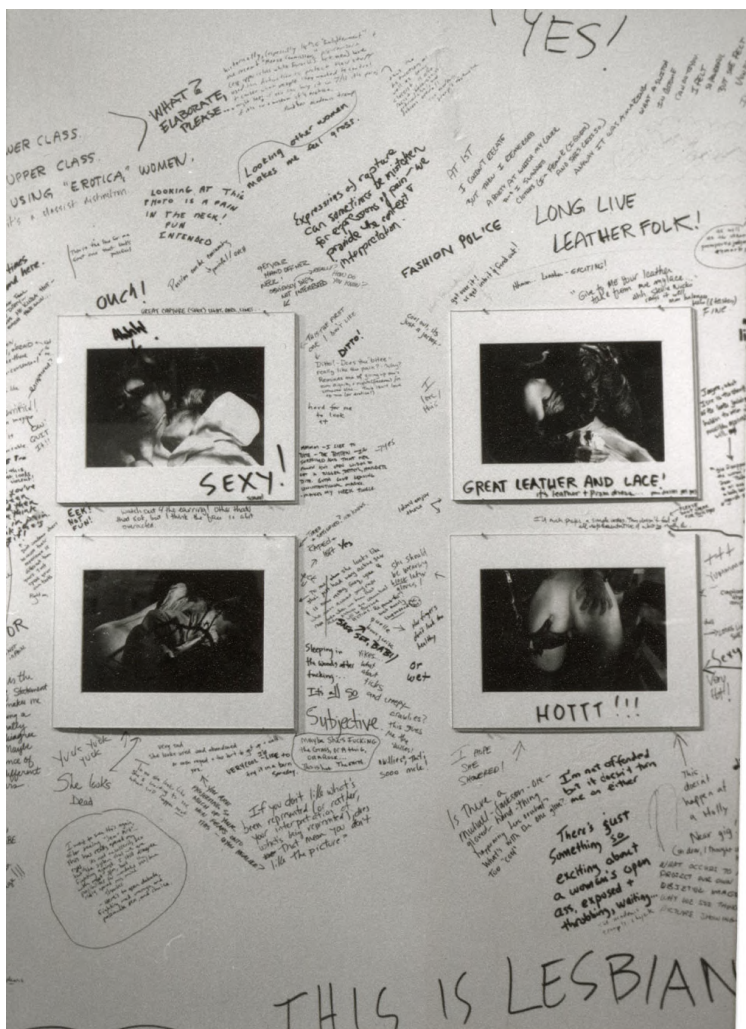
LEFT: Dyke Action Machine! (DAM!), *The GAP Campaign*, 1991, set of six Xerox posters, 43.2 x 27.9 cm. RIGHT: Dyke Action Machine! (DAM!), *Straight to Hell*, 1994, poster, 63.5 x 48.3 cm.



expelled at a higher rate than white soldiers. The text read, "She came out. So the Army kicked her out. Now she's out for blood."⁴⁶

Like DAM! and fierce pussy, Kiss & Tell explored the intersections of the personal and the political, often with a sense of humour. In their performance *That Long Distance Feeling: Perverts, Politics & Prozac*, 1997, Lizard said: "Well, you know they say every revolution needs its artists. Here we are! I really like to match it up, you know, the personal and the political. Arise, ye prisoners of starvation / My girlfriend's fucking someone else. What I want to know is when we storm the presidential palace, are we going to be putting up lesbian sex photos? Because if we are, I could supply them." The audience responded with raucous laughter. Humour was deployed as a mechanism for uncovering social truths. "At the very root [of our work]... was trauma," the artists explained. "We pushed into the edges of collective trauma by exposing our own, and allowing for a little release. Dressing this up in sexiness, flirtation, laughter and fun was what made it healing in a way."⁴⁷

In 2015—more than twenty-five years after Kiss & Tell debuted their groundbreaking photography exhibition *Drawing the Line*—Lizard reflected on how the collective had helped propel the feminist and lesbian movement forward. "These images were difficult to look at for some, but art has always been about challenging people and sexual images have always been created by the art world," she said. "The purpose of art is to look differently at the world around you, and you can't do that without opening up and exploring."⁴⁸



LEFT: Installation view of women's comments written on the wall of the *Drawing the Line* exhibition at Western Front, Vancouver, 1990, photograph by Susan Stewart, Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby. RIGHT: Poster for *Trigger: Drawing the Line in 2015* at the Queer Arts Festival, Vancouver, July 23, 2015, City of Vancouver Archives.

The same year, Vancouver's Queer Arts Festival delved into the historical significance of Kiss & Tell when it showed a selection of the *Drawing the Line* photographs as part of an exhibition titled *Trigger: Drawing the Line in 2015*. In an interview with *The Georgia Straight*, curator SD Holman spoke about the influential yet largely unknown collective and their work. "Not a lot of people know about this unless they're a dyke of a certain age," Holman observed, "and I just thought if it was any other medium, or even some white guys, they'd probably have a statue in Vancouver, quite frankly."⁴⁹ For the exhibition, the festival asked Vancouver artists Afuwa, Bryan Bone, James Diamond, Suzo Hickey, Toni Latour, Jono Nobles, Coral Short, and Jonny Sopotiuik to create artworks in response to Kiss & Tell's iconic photographs. Some explored topics such as religion, BDSM, and disability, while others drew connections with the queer artists who preceded them.

By creating art that openly represented lesbian desire, identities, and lived experiences, Kiss & Tell gave their fellow artists—and queer women—something they had never seen before. In 2002, after fourteen years of making work together, Kiss & Tell agreed they had accomplished what they set out to do and disbanded. Like many lesbians after a breakup, they remain good friends who continue to support each other.



Portrait of Kiss & Tell (left to right: Persimmon Blackbridge, Susan Stewart, and Lizard Jones), 1994, photograph by Ali McIlwaine, Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby.



Kiss & Tell innovated, transformed, and expanded multimedia and interactive art practices. They combined spoken word, audio, video, sculpture, props, music, songs, and photography in their performance works, and created innovative ways for viewers to directly interact with their photography exhibitions. The collective confronted issues of censorship and feminist sex wars debates; embraced queer joy; engaged in class analysis; tackled oppressive systems of power, ableism, and sexism; explored traumatic experiences; challenged disability stereotypes; and fostered greater understanding of queerness through humour. They depicted lesbian sexual practices and brought lesbian identities and experiences into the public sphere with their art.

DRAWING THE LINE 1988–90



Kiss & Tell, *Drawing the Line*, 1988–90

Photographic print, 35.5 x 27.9 cm

Simon Fraser University Library Special Collections and Rare Books, Burnaby

Kiss & Tell's first and most well-known work, *Drawing the Line*, earned them accolades and citations, including from the *Oxford Dictionary of Art*, which declared that the project "best embodies the spirit of gay and lesbian art."¹ In this work, Kiss & Tell depicts the female nude photographically, giving the models as much agency as the photographer and representing a range of lesbian sex acts. This photograph of two women hugging is the only stand-alone piece in the exhibition. One woman is naked, her long black hair contrasting with the white skin of her back and arms. The other holds her, and only the top half of her face is visible. This image was purposefully chosen to kick off the exhibition because of its relative tameness. However, one of the women is touching her partner's naked bottom (cropped by the edge of the frame), a foreshadowing of the more sexually explicit photographs to come. One reviewer commented that the exhibition "feeds a craving for imagery by a community alternately written out of history or misrepresented by commercial straight porn."²

In creating their inaugural work, the collective drew inspiration from the debates between the pro-sex and anti-pornography camps during the feminist sex wars of the 1980s, as well as discussions within Vancouver's lesbian community around what was considered permissible in representations of lesbians. Over three years, Kiss & Tell photographed lesbian sexual practices ranging from kissing—clothes on, clothes off, clothes torn away, and completely naked—to fisting, threesomes, BDSM, and voyeurism. As they explained in their artists' statement, "We all agreed that to do the series right we had to be willing to do things we'd never do in our lives. And to try to make it look real. There was a lot of nervous giggling." First shown at the Women in Focus Gallery in Vancouver in 1988, *Drawing the Line* grew in reputation as it travelled to fifteen cities in Australia, Canada, the Netherlands, and the United States.



Kiss & Tell, *Drawing the Line*, 1988-90, photographic print, 27.9 x 35.5 cm, Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby.

In the spirit of collaboration, the members of Kiss & Tell began by taking photos of each other but soon settled on Susan Stewart, who was the expert in the medium, as the project's photographer. Persimmon Blackbridge and Lizard Jones became the models. In most of the photographs, their faces are seen in profile, from behind, partially obscured, or cut off by the frame. The poses and camera angles suggest that these could be any white women, any lesbians. With this project, Kiss & Tell explored the grey areas between the black-and-white positions taken in the feminist sex wars and were determined to see where viewers would draw the line when looking at a continuum of lesbian sexual practices produced by lesbians.

Hung in groups of two to four, the unframed black-and-white photographs in the exhibition were meant to be read linearly, from what could be considered least contentious to most controversial. The models were photographed in diverse locations, including a bathtub, parking garage, public washroom, rooftop, woodworking shop, warehouse, and forest, and they engaged in a variety of sex acts. The images most often viewed as controversial involved S&M practices: bondage with rope, submission, domination, wax play, power play, nipple clamps, leather, whips, aggressive grabbing, and being chained up.

The exhibition was a pointed response to lesbian erasure, to the creation of lesbian sexual imagery by men for the male gaze, and to lesbian activists who believed queer women shouldn't portray themselves as sexual beings. As Canadian writer and cultural critic Jean Bobby Noble wrote in an exhibition catalogue for *Drawing the Line*, these activists wanted "to desexualize lesbianism to make it more acceptable to both feminism and mainstream heterosexual culture, and to challenge clinical definitions of lesbianism as sexual deviancy."³

Kiss & Tell broke with tradition in their approach to viewer interaction in a gallery context. When viewing *Drawing the Line*, women could write comments on the walls with black markers, and some even scrawled on the photographs themselves. Male viewers, however, could write only in a book located at the end of the show. At the time, sexual imagery was discussed in a way that echoed the gender binary, where women's voices were silenced or secondary. Separating men's comments was a strategy to centre women. As documentation of the exhibition shows, the walls became covered with comments from viewers responding to one another. This kind of exchange is now common in the age of social media, but it was groundbreaking in the early 1990s. Persimmon noted: "The pictures float in a sea of text, no longer functioning as separated as sexual images, but literally within the context of debates, discussions, and disagreements about sexual representations."⁴

The final photographs in the exhibition were a grouping of three images of a man watching two women kiss and touch each other. These photographs most closely approximated sexual representations of lesbians within mainstream porn created by men for men. But Kiss & Tell turned that convention on its head by setting them in an unexpected location (a woodworking shop) and revealing the presence of the male voyeur rather than simply implying it.



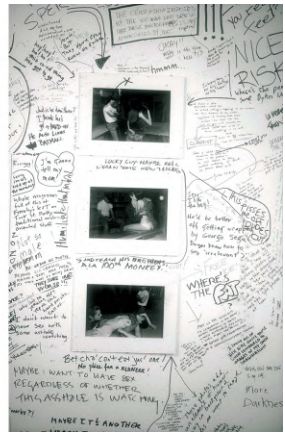
LEFT: Review of *Drawing the Line*, "Photo Exhibit Succeeds by Letting Its Audience Talk Back" by Lou Cove, *The Valley Optimist*, May 11, 1992, page 40, Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby. RIGHT: Kiss & Tell, *Drawing the Line*, 1988-90, photographic print, 35.5 x 27.9 cm, Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby.



That last grouping prompted a lot of negative feedback. In one gallery, a viewer blacked out the figure of the man using sharp lines. Comments over the course of the exhibition's tour included "I find the presence of the boy really disturbing," which elicited this response: "He's a man, not a boy. I couldn't get sexually aroused in front of a man. I don't draw any line because I would not want a photo of me fucking at all and a photo is a photo, not the act itself."



LEFT: Kiss & Tell, *Drawing the Line*, 1988-90, photographic print, 27.9 x 35.5 cm, Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby. RIGHT: Installation view of viewer responses to *Drawing the Line* exhibition at Western Front, Vancouver, 1990, photograph by Susan Stewart, Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby.

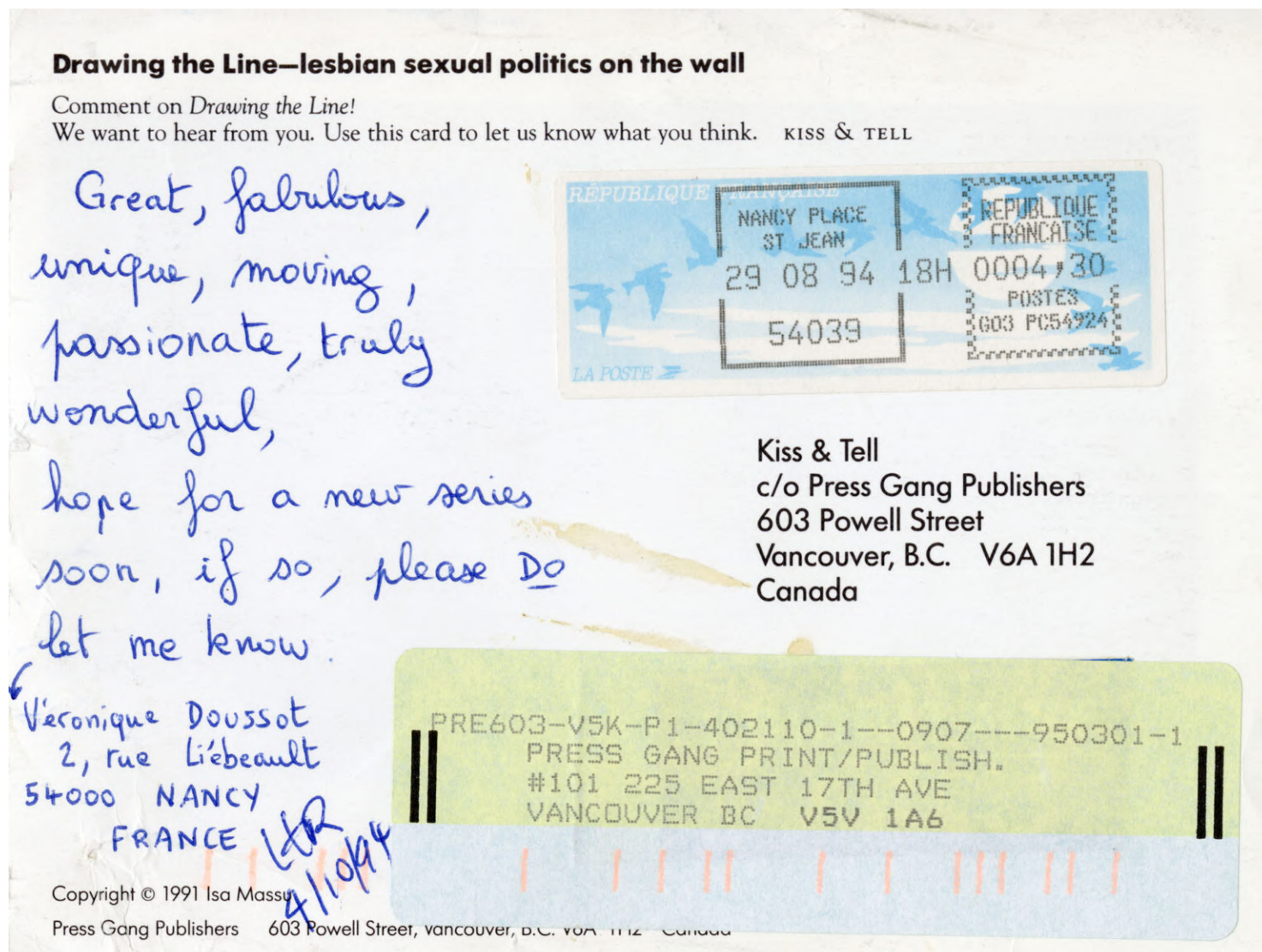


Many commenters in the men's book took issue with not being allowed to write on the walls. "Great show," wrote one male viewer. "But I really think the impact and emotion would be better if men & women wrote on the wall." Other men were appreciative of the exhibition, including H.L., who signed with two male symbols and noted: "Growing up male I'm still trying to get rid of a lot of crap about women being 'sexless' (i.e., not wanting it). I really enjoyed the photos and the comments (learned quite a bit). Thanks for not making this a woman-only space. I want to know how my sisters feel." By taking lesbian sexuality out of the closet and displaying it for people to see and comment upon, Kiss & Tell furthered their goal of battling against lesbian invisibility.



Installation view of visitor engagement with *Drawing the Line* exhibition at Cameraworks, San Francisco, 1991, photograph by Isa Massu, Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby.

DRAWING THE LINE: LESBIAN SEXUAL POLITICS ON THE WALL POSTCARD BOOK 1991



Kiss & Tell, *Drawing the Line: Lesbian Sexual Politics on the Wall* postcard book, 1991
Simon Fraser University Library Special Collections and Rare Books, Burnaby

The image above is an example of a mail-in response from a viewer who attended Kiss & Tell's exhibition *Drawing the Line*.

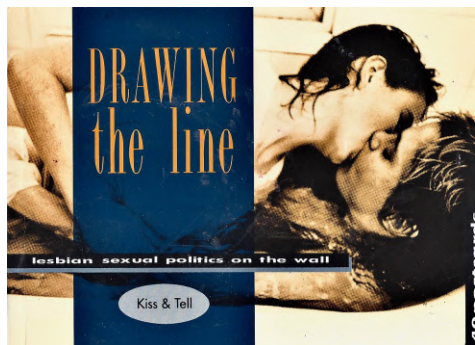
Inspired to create a companion piece to *Drawing the Line*, 1988-90, to reach a larger audience, Kiss & Tell selected forty photographs from the exhibition and made them into a postcard book titled *Drawing the Line: Lesbian Sexual Politics on the Wall*. The introduction set out their intentions: "By using the same [two] women in all the pictures we attempted to limit the judgments to being about what the models are doing and how they are depicted.... *Drawing the Line* is a collaboration between women who have built trust over an extended period of time. It is our history together that let us explore the often scary dynamics in explicit sexual photography."¹

Select comments from exhibition walls were included on the backs of the postcards. In response to one photograph of the two women nude in bed, in a

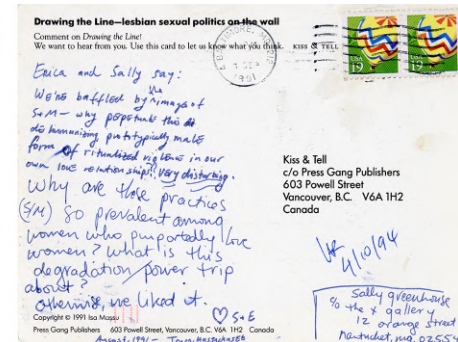
seeming moment of orgasm, viewers from Los Angeles, Toronto, and Vancouver wrote: "I want to do it, not to look at it. It's a skin thing for me," "Was inspired to try this out. It's wonderful but hard on bad backs," and "Looks like the decisive moment to me!" Kiss & Tell didn't shy away from including criticisms and negative comments in the book. The point of the project was to foster dialogue that included differing voices and opinions. For example, one viewer in Melbourne wrote: "Role playing = power = men = boring." Another in Toronto commented: "I understand your reasons for only using two models, but I still want to see my coloured face here."²

The final postcard in the book, photographed by Isa Massu in 1991, featured a woman writing on the walls of the San Francisco exhibition. This postcard could be removed from the book and mailed back to Kiss & Tell. Erin, who sent hers back from California, wrote, "What we do is fall in love with women. Sure, we do. It is so much harder to say we are sexual with women and yikes! We do some awfully good & dirty & sexy things. Love is out of the closet, how about sex? I'm tired of doing it in the dark." Erica and Sally from Truro, Massachusetts, wrote, "We're baffled by the images of S&M. Why perpetuate this dehumanizing, prototypically male form of ritualized violence in our own love relationships? Why are these practices (S/M) so prevalent among women who purportedly love women?" Most commentators who sent in postcards focused on how affirming it was to see these images and expressed a desire to view the entire series and have the exhibition travel to their city.

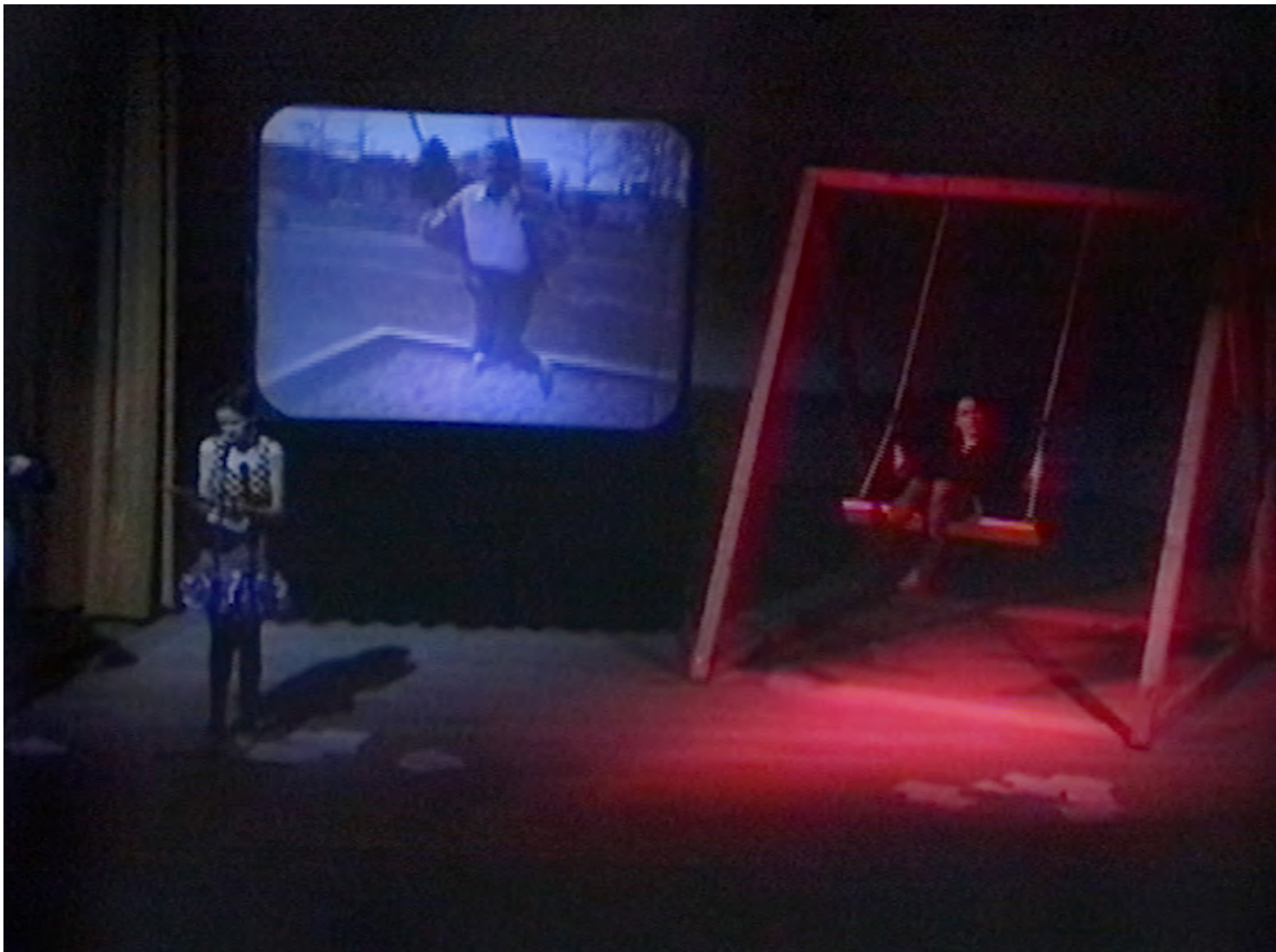
The postcard book significantly broadened the audience for the project and was another tactic by Kiss & Tell to bring images of lesbian sexuality created by women into the public sphere. With it, the collective blurred the line between high and low art by transforming analogue black-and-white photographs into a commercially available form of mail art. Photographs could be sent through the post, putting lesbian imagery into the hands of postal workers and others. On one returned postcard, a woman wrote: "I have wanted images in which I could recognize the love and lust I feel for my lover. For a while I felt that it was impossible to capture lesbian passion visually.... Here you have given me what I've been searching for. Thank you." This new method for disseminating Kiss & Tell's work also led to new restrictions: copies of the book were denied entry from the U.S. by Canada Customs, even though the work was published in Canada.



LEFT: Kiss & Tell, *Drawing the Line: Lesbian Sexual Politics on the Wall* postcard book, 1991, Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby. RIGHT: Viewer response to *Drawing the Line* exhibition, August 1991, Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby.



TRUE INVERSIONS 1992



Kiss & Tell, *True Inversions*, 1992

Multimedia performance at the East Vancouver Cultural Centre

Simon Fraser University Library Special Collections and Rare Books, Burnaby

The above is an excerpt from *Before the New Millennium*, 2007, directed by Lorna Boschman.

Kiss & Tell embraced and made space for audience interactions with and responses to their work, so it made sense they would create and tour live performances as their next foray into lesbian storytelling. Susan Stewart spoke about being drawn to performance art: "For me, this live exchange which takes place in the present moment is what motivates the desire to produce performance art.... The desire for experience, the desire for expression, and the desire to learn."¹

True Inversions was an intricately layered work, especially for a first performance. It played with the conventions of theatre, stand-up comedy, installation, and performance art to tell stories, both auditory and visual, about lived lesbian experiences at a time when those narratives were rarely recounted

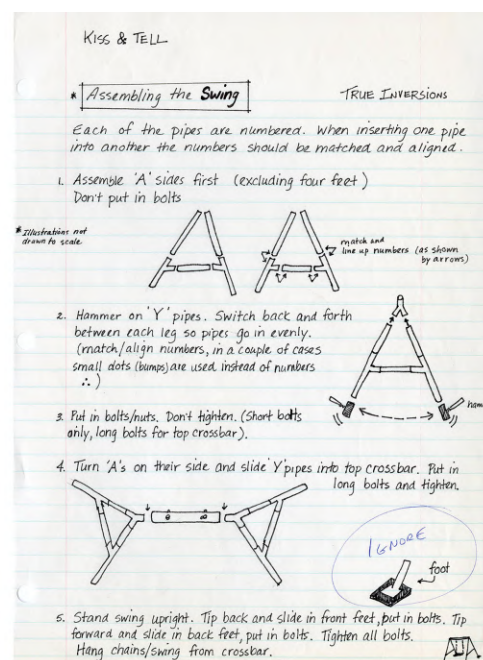
in honest, open, and public ways. As Persimmon Blackbridge described it: "It was monster. It ate our lives for months. Three performers, one singer, four scenes, three video tapes, four audio tapes, and over 200 slides. And three technicians."²

The title poked fun at nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century theories that claimed queerness was a pathological reversal of gender traits, referred to as sexual inversion. For example, German psychiatrist Richard von Krafft-Ebing's 1886 book, *Psychopathia Sexualis*, described lesbians as "the masculine soul, heaving in the female bosom."³ *True Inversions* toured to Vancouver, Banff (where photographs included in the performance were also shown at an exhibition titled *Much Sense: Erotics and Life* at the Banff Centre's Walter Phillips Gallery),⁴ and Northampton and Cambridge in Massachusetts.

In *True Inversions*, Persimmon, Susan, and Lizard Jones wove together emotional narratives of desire, wit, comedy, sexiness, self-reflection, lust, and trauma. Like most of their performances, this one mixed live monologues with audio recordings and photographs and videos projected onto the back wall of each venue. The piece began with a darkened stage and a loud soundtrack of women moaning—"a collage of recordings of us and our lovers having sex," as Persimmon put it.⁵ When the lights came up, the artists—who continued moaning—were revealed.



LEFT: Kiss & Tell, *True Inversions*, 1992, multimedia performance at the East Vancouver Cultural Centre, photographer unknown, Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby. RIGHT: Planning sheet for *True Inversions*, date unknown, Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby.



Persimmon's first monologue was about seeing her lover at an art show and fantasizing about tearing off her dress and having sex with her in an alleyway. "But I'm too goddamn practical. We can't afford to trash things and how would I get her home afterwards." The audience reacted with cheers and laughter. Susan talked about her desire for a butch lesbian: "I bet a lot of straight girls try to pick you up. They don't know what they are missing and I'm sure as hell not going to tell them.... Right now, you want me." Lizard told a story about longing for a co-worker she repeatedly described as a very hard worker. "Like a magnet, she draws me. I feel like a pile of iron filings pulled together by her.... When she's here I can only think of one thing, and that is fucking, fucking, fucking." As the performance progressed, the stories blended as the three women talked over each other more and more loudly, eventually reaching a crescendo reminiscent of an orgasm.



Kiss & Tell, *True Inversions*, 1992, multimedia performance at the East Vancouver Cultural Centre, still from video documentation, Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby.

This was a signature Kiss & Tell technique, inspired in part by live readings of simultaneous and phonic poetry performed at the legendary Cabaret Voltaire. Kiss & Tell continued to develop their technique in subsequent performances, using highly composed scripts that combined two or three voices in a variety of unique ways. The scripts were meticulously rehearsed and rewritten until the artists could shape a wave of overlapping voices that would still allow certain phrases to jump into the foreground, giving the audience a line to follow through the swelling intensity of sound.

During one section of the performance, Susan, Persimmon, and Lizard read letters to their mothers about being lesbians—letters that were never sent—while taking turns on a full-size swing built for the show. Susan talked about "deep, passionate, engrossing friendships between women" in her letter. "I followed your example in this. I thrive in the love of friendships. I cross the line... the line that separates our worlds. The line that gives me my name: lesbian." Later, a video of Persimmon's mother swinging in a playground was projected behind Susan, who swung onstage as Lizard read her letter to her mother. The video projection then shifted, and Lizard was shown swinging with Persimmon, dressed in the same outfit she wore onstage, thus tripling the image. At the end of her letter, Lizard got onto the swing. The performance ended with Lizard on the swing and Susan and Persimmon embracing each other against its wooden structure.



Kiss & Tell, *True Inversions*, 1992, multimedia performance at the East Vancouver Cultural Centre, still from video documentation, Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby.

In December 1992, controversy followed the *True Inversions* performance at the Banff Centre.⁶ Journalist Rick Bell, writing in the *Alberta Report* magazine, critiqued the show's explicit sexual representations—a criticism that was taken up by Alberta's deputy premier, Ken Kowalski, who called the performance "God-awful, abhorrent [and] not acceptable,"⁷ despite never having seen it. The performance included a screening of a twenty-eight-minute video of the same name directed by Vancouver filmmaker Lorna Boschman (b.1955). The video portion of the performance featured the artists monologuing about the impacts of abuse and religion on their evolving sexual identities. Tackling serious subject matter through the lens of sex, the video was singled out as especially obscene in Bell's review. Ironically, in the video, an official-looking "censored" stamp and a citation from Canada's Criminal Code were superimposed onto close-up images of explicit sex scenes as a critique of the censorship already occurring around queer art and publications at the Canada/U.S. border.

As Persimmon wrote, "*True Inversions* comes out of specific communities, at a specific point in time. We are addressing issues and debates that are ongoing with our communities—issues like censorship and allegations of censorship; how past sexual abuse affects our present sexuality; the way that 'whiteness' is seen as normal and universal; s/m; butch/femme; the constructed nature of sexual imagery; and the effect that a lesbian identity has on our relationships with our mothers."⁸

HER TONGUE ON MY THEORY: IMAGES, ESSAYS AND FANTASIES 1994



Stripped of history?

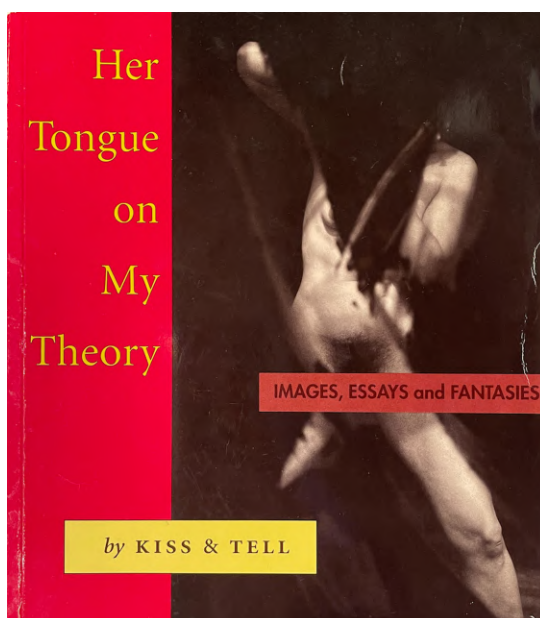
Kiss & Tell, Her Tongue on My Theory: Images, Essays and Fantasies, 1994
Published by Press Gang Publishers

Writing and textual analysis were central elements of Kiss & Tell's art practice. Their collaborative book *Her Tongue on My Theory: Images, Essays and Fantasies* functioned as a manifesto of sorts by analyzing the social and political contexts that informed their work. The book brought sexual fantasies to light and questioned the traditional meanings given to photographic representations of women's naked bodies. It further cemented the collective's reputation when it won two Lambda Literary Awards for the best LGBTQ book in the categories of Lesbian Studies and Small Press Book.

Designed by Lizard Jones, the layout of the book resembled the collective's performances: layered and multi-faceted. The title comes from one of the book's fictional sexy stories about a woman who keeps meeting a mysterious lover on her travels. While collecting feminist theory texts for a guest lecture, the protagonist sees her lover, whose name she does not know, in a university bookstore. They end up in a private area of a library and have sex: "Her hand under my shirt squeezing my nipple, pain making me gasp, her tongue on my

theory.”¹ Throughout the book, theoretical discussions are entwined with sapphic sexual practices, a major tenet of the collective’s overall oeuvre.

Much like Kiss & Tell’s multimedia performances, the book combined sexual representations with discussions of sexual theory, artistic processes, and censorship. Photographs of the collective’s nude bodies were interspersed throughout *Her Tongue on My Theory*. Susan Stewart explained that she photographed herself nude in her studio and included these images to “break down the assumed hierarchy of photographer/model” that people assumed were part of the *Drawing the Line* project.²



LEFT: Cover of *Her Tongue on My Theory: Images, Essays and Fantasies*, by Kiss & Tell (Vancouver: Press Gang Publishers, 1994). RIGHT: Susan Stewart, photograph from *Her Tongue on My Theory: Images, Essays and Fantasies*, 1994, direct positive transparency, Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby.



Statements accompanied the black-and-white photographs of the artists’ bodies: “Maybe I’m exactly what you think I am.” “Spot the invisible disability.” “Presumed homosexual unless specified otherwise.” Here Kiss & Tell engaged in a Barbara Kruger-style tactic,³ compelling viewers to examine images more closely by including text and using pronouns such as “you.” Kiss & Tell’s statements and questions beside the photographs turned viewers into voyeurs and ensured that the artists’ bodies weren’t merely sources of titillation (although they could also have that function). The photographs were vehicles to observe and question societal norms and assumptions about whiteness, queerness, sexuality, and ableism.

The book included short stories at the bottom of pages, as well as many stills from the 1992 *True Inversions* video. Larger photographs, projected as slides during the *True Inversions* performances, were paired with questions that made viewers reconsider what they were looking at: “Do I look like a lesbian?” “Is this sex?” “Whose absence is guaranteed by my presence?” The question “Do you notice my white skin and unbroken limbs?” drew attention to the problematic assumption that whiteness and ableism constitute the “normal” standard of beauty—and asked viewers to reflect on why that is.

With this book, Kiss & Tell once again refused to be censored. They made sure that the sexy talk and imagery continued in tandem with writing that reflected on the feminist sex wars, the particularities of Canadian censorship laws, the controversy over *True Inversions* at the Banff Centre,⁴ the genesis of the *Drawing the Line* exhibition, and the importance of transgressive lesbian visibility. The book tackled issues such as authorship, political correctness, equality, queer art, and freedom of speech. In it, Lizard explained: “I make art for queers first, cherish queer praise, wince at queer criticism. I want straights and the art world



Barbara Kruger, *Untitled (Your body is a battleground)*, 1989, photographic silkscreen on vinyl, 284.5 x 284.5 cm, The Broad, Los Angeles.

to be there, but do I care what they think? If they don't laugh, does that mean there is no joke? They live with me, down the hall, share an office, but they don't live here, in my queer city."⁵



LEFT: Susan Stewart, photograph from *Her Tongue on My Theory: Images, Essays and Fantasies*, 1994, direct positive transparency, Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby. RIGHT: Susan Stewart, photograph from *Her Tongue on My Theory: Images, Essays and Fantasies*, 1994, direct positive transparency, Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby.

In 1993, Lizard and Persimmon Blackbridge went on a book tour across Canada, during which they talked about *Drawing the Line*, showed slides, and performed monologues. The tour included some unusual venues, such as a student pub at Dalhousie University in Halifax, where a group of young lesbians surrounded the stage and listened intently while the rest of the bar patrons drank boisterously.⁶ Susan couldn't take part in the tour so filmmaker (and Kiss & Tell's frequent collaborator) Lorna Boschman (b.1955) made a video recording of her reading a passage about coming out to herself: "There was no way on earth that I could articulate this insurrection that was brewing at the depths of my being. Mere speech felt far too hazardous. The way I, and the women I worked with, found to describe this and other contradictions in our lives was by making pictures, photographs."⁷

THAT LONG DISTANCE FEELING: PERVERTS, POLITICS & PROZAC 1997



Kiss & Tell, *That Long Distance Feeling: Perverts, Politics & Prozac*, 1997
Multimedia performance at Roundhouse Theatre, Vancouver
Simon Fraser University Library Special Collections and Rare Books, Burnaby

That Long Distance Feeling: Perverts, Politics & Prozac premiered at Vancouver's Roundhouse Community Centre on November 8, 1997. The stage props were minimal: chairs, a bed, a ladder. Video and photographs of vegetables, fruits, flowers, graffiti, and a woman swimming were projected across the back of the stage. The soundscape included ocean, rain, and street noise. The performance weaved together the personal, political, economic, and medical with signature Kiss & Tell sexiness. Lizard Jones launched into the performance with a tale about a threesome: "When you close your eyes, all you can do is hear their sighs, their whispering, and your own jagged breath. When you close your eyes, it's impossible to know who, what, where. It makes no difference. Abandon is the only thing."

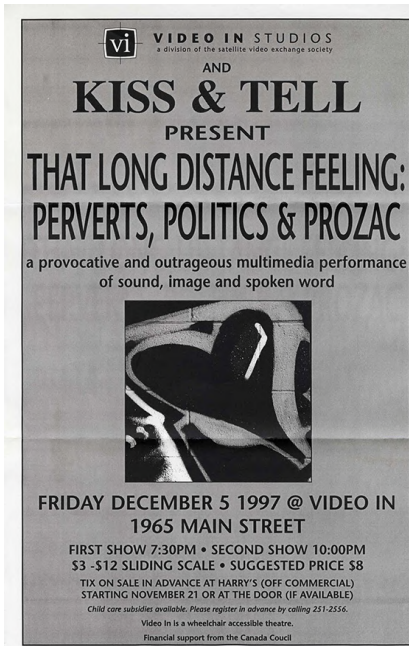
The first section of the work's title refers to a series of monologues by Susan Stewart about the roller coaster of pleasures, thrills, challenges, and disappointments that comes from living apart from your love. Melancholy, despair, joy, and longing are mixed with humour: "You've made a commitment, and it doesn't work.... A commitment to what? To long absence, to heartache, to

loneliness? A commitment to the phone company?" As reviewer Caterina Pizanias noted, "The subtitle of the performance, *Perverts, Politics & Prozac*, speaks best to their commitment this time to dwell longer and more explicitly at the intersection of sexuality, class, gender, and art making."¹

The performance explored the intersections between sexuality, gender, and the medical establishment's approaches to queer women's health. "Why do doctors always ask me if I use birth control before they ask me if I sleep with men?" asked Lizard when outlining the challenges of going to a doctor as a lesbian. She told a story about her partner, who had a child, and how doctors couldn't get their heads around the fact that a butch lesbian could be a mother. "Sometimes I think those are the women who run screaming from the ladies' room every time a butch dyke walks in; they're all doctors." This reflection led to a discussion about butch/femme identities, stereotypes, and relationships, and included a love letter written by Susan to butches. Persimmon Blackbridge, a self-identified femme, took issue with butch/femme stereotypes: "She's such a butch—so smart, so daring, so strong. And femmes aren't? I thought we were fighting sexism, not reinventing it. I like fucking people who fuck with the rules." Lizard responded, "Gender is there to be fucked with." Like queer theorists such as Judith Butler and Jack Halberstam, Kiss & Tell were before their time in pointing out that gender is performed.² Gender is not necessarily tied to biological sex; rather, it is a social construct.



Kiss & Tell, photographic projections from *That Long Distance Feeling: Perverts, Politics & Prozac*, 1997, multimedia performance, Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby.



LEFT: Poster for Kiss & Tell's performance of *That Long Distance Feeling: Perverts, Politics & Prozac* at Video In, Vancouver, December 5, 1997, Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby. RIGHT: Kiss & Tell, *That Long Distance Feeling: Perverts, Politics & Prozac*, 1997, performance at Video In, Vancouver, photographer unknown, Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby.

That Long Distance Feeling also poked fun at the anti-depressant Prozac, which was recommended to Persimmon for depression and to Lizard as a treatment for multiple sclerosis (MS). Persimmon recounted a story about going to a doctor for her depression and being told such ridiculous things as "quite a few artists seem to be bipolar." The doctor handed her pamphlets that called depression "the common cold of mental illness" and suggested Prozac as the solution. The Kiss & Tell members took turns satirizing these types of brochures. "Prozac is supposed to give you a chattier personality," they joked. "Shy girls find dates and job opportunities." They questioned the drug's side effects and mocked its supposed efficacy. Lizard said that Prozac was proposed to her as a solution for a sex drive lowered by MS, and yet "twenty percent of people who take Prozac lose their sex drive.... Not much of a solution for me.... Maybe the message is sex is only for the people who are already cheerful and physically fit. The rest of us should take our pills and go to bed alone." These lines were tongue-in-cheek, delivered in a sarcastic and playful manner, and the audience responded with raucous laughter.

In a short monologue, Lizard talked about what artists like her could bring to a feminist, queer revolution: "Well, you know they say, every revolution needs its artists. Here we are! I really like to match it up, you know, the personal and the political." Then, in a sing-song tone, she continued: "Arise, ye prisoners of starvation / My girlfriend's fucking someone else. What I want to know is when we storm the presidential palace, are we going to be putting up lesbian sex photos? Because if we are, I could supply them."

As they did with many of their performances, Kiss & Tell presented *That Long Distance Feeling* multiple times, and each version was slightly different as the artists tweaked the content throughout the run. There was no improvisation. What they did on stage didn't change based on audience interactions. Their works were scripted and rehearsed, and they featured multimedia elements atypical of theatre and performance art of the era.

BORDERLINE DISORDERLY 1999

Kiss & Tell, *Borderline Disorderly*, 1999

Image projection from multimedia performance

Simon Fraser University Library Special Collections and Rare Books, Burnaby

Kiss & Tell's *Borderline Disorderly* performance began with Susan Stewart and Lizard Jones sitting across from each other on a darkened stage. They wore head lamps and read from papers on their laps, telling a story of mounting desire in anticipation of reuniting with a long-distance lover: "I'll turn you over and fuck you from behind. I'll tell you to scream.... All this will happen." The piece was replete with references to their previous works. Persimmon Blackbridge read from a review of *Drawing the Line*, 1988-90, and all three members acted out the process of making the photographs. Images from the project were projected behind the performers, and their monologues were occasionally accompanied by performance artist and musician Glen Watts playing the accordion in drag.

Borderline Disorderly expanded upon discussions of censorship and the feminist sex wars in Kiss & Tell's 1994 book, *Her Tongue on My Theory: Images, Essays and Fantasies*. The title of the performance was a pun on the term "borderline personality disorder,"¹ as well as a critique of Canada Customs' pathologizing of queer sexual practices and materials by labelling them as obscene. Kiss & Tell was questioning who was being judged disorderly. Was it

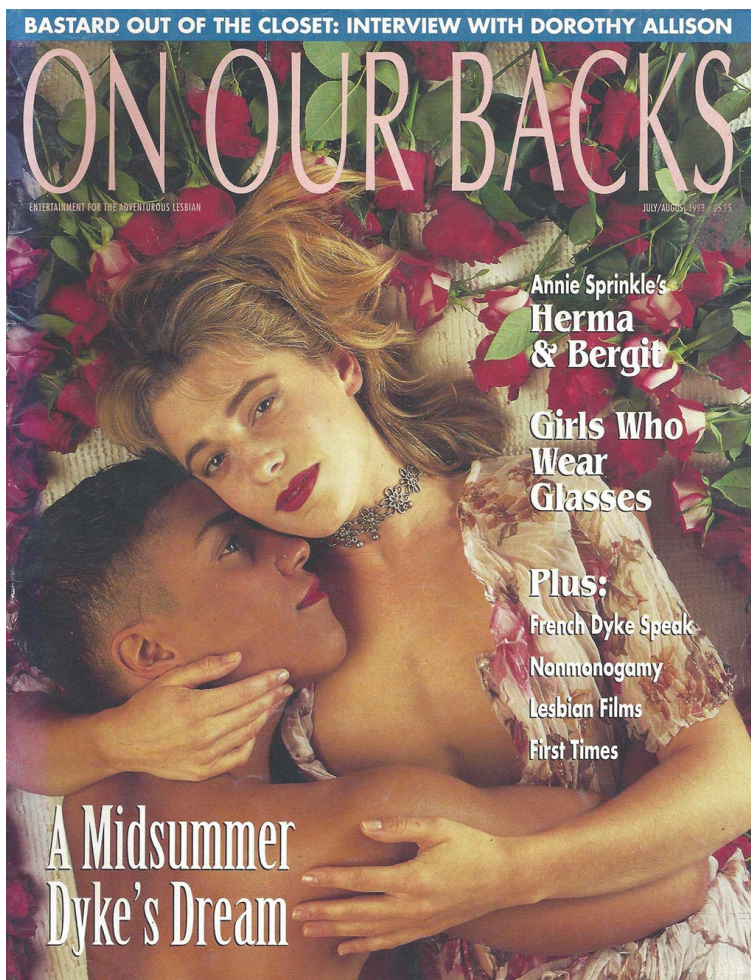
them for making and distributing sexual imagery (including two photographs of Lizard naked and tied up with ropes)? Or customs officials for confiscating these photographs at the border?

Borderline Disorderly addressed three types of censorship: state censorship, censorship within the lesbian community, and self-censorship. In a round-table interview, Susan explained how a key element in their work was combatting self-censorship. "The third one, the really insidious one, we're conditioned into, and we tried to work with [that] in our performances," she said. "I used Kiss & Tell's work to unrepres myself because my conditioning was so severe."²

In one monologue, Lizard imagined trying to get their *Drawing the Line* photographs back from Canada Customs after they had been seized on their return from the American magazine *Libido*, where they were published: "He's holding up one of the bondage photos. 'Who do you plan to educate with this?' he says.... 'Oh, forget it,' I say. 'Keep them.'... And then they fight over who gets to take them back to their office.... It still bugs me when I think about customs officials deciding whether it's obscene or not." While the fictional conversations between Lizard and the customs agents were quite comedic, they were grounded in real-life trauma. Persimmon talked about why she would not go to the customs offices to retrieve their photographs: "I don't want go down and talk to a bunch of government guys who've already decided that we are perverted lesbian something-or-others." Susan also refused to go but said: "It is tempting to go for one reason, and that is to challenge their stereotypes about what a pornographer would look like." Ultimately, their photographs were left to languish. Like many of the queer materials seized by customs, they were likely destroyed.



Kiss & Tell, *Borderline Disorderly*, 1999, multimedia performance at Video In, Vancouver, still from video documentation, Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby.



LEFT: Cover of *On Our Backs: Entertainment for the Adventurous Lesbian* 9, no. 6 (July–August 1993), The ArQuives: Canada's LGBTQ2+ Archives, Toronto. RIGHT: *Kiss & Tell, Drawing the Line*, 1988–90, photographic print, 35.5 x 27.9 cm, Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby.

To draw further attention to the censorship of queer publications and art, Persimmon read from a sexually explicit short story by Ann Wertheim published in the American lesbian magazine *On Our Backs*. This issue was seized by Canada Customs on its way to Vancouver's Little Sister's bookstore.³ Susan and Lizard re-enacted a scene from the Little Sister's court case against Canada Customs. Lizard played the role of Jim Deva, one of the co-founders and owners of the bookstore, and Susan portrayed a lawyer who tried to get him to say whether a section from a particular queer book constituted violence against women. Deva refused to pass judgment on a book after being read only three or four lines of it. Including this testimony in the performance was a pointed critique of people who seek to ban books, films, art, and more without having read or seen them in their entirety.

In an overarching way, the vignettes in *Borderline Disorderly* drew attention to the training (or lack thereof) that customs officers received, the homophobic attitudes they might have harboured, and the absurdity of allowing them decide what is obscene and what should be censored in Canada.

CORPUS FUGIT 2002



Kiss & Tell, *Corpus Fugit*, 2002

Photographic projection from live performance

Simon Fraser University Library Special Collections and Rare Books, Burnaby

Kiss & Tell's final performance, *Corpus Fugit*, was their most complex and sombre. First performed at Vancouver's Festival House over three nights in March 2002, the piece functioned as a *memento mori*, an homage to loss and loneliness. Lizard Jones described the performance as being about "death and the disintegration of bodies. That liminal space that we all inhabit."¹ The ninety-minute performance included four alternating projections of video and photographs featuring images of flowers in various stages of decomposition, a sculpture of the interior of a house surrounded by trees, and papercut figures on handheld sticks. In a round-table interview, Persimmon Blackbridge described the projections this way: "We had light reflected on water, we had rain coming down on windshields and windshield wipers wiping it. We had salmon after spawning up the river, dying. We had Susan's arms swimming. We had many, many video things."²

During Kiss & Tell's fourteen-year existence, its members honed their compelling blend of performance art, theatrical productions, and immersive

projections. The collective was very much ahead of its time in pushing the boundaries of performance and photography by fostering interactivity, projecting video and photographs, overlapping photos with text, and using unusual stage props (such as a sculptural miniature house and a full-size swing).

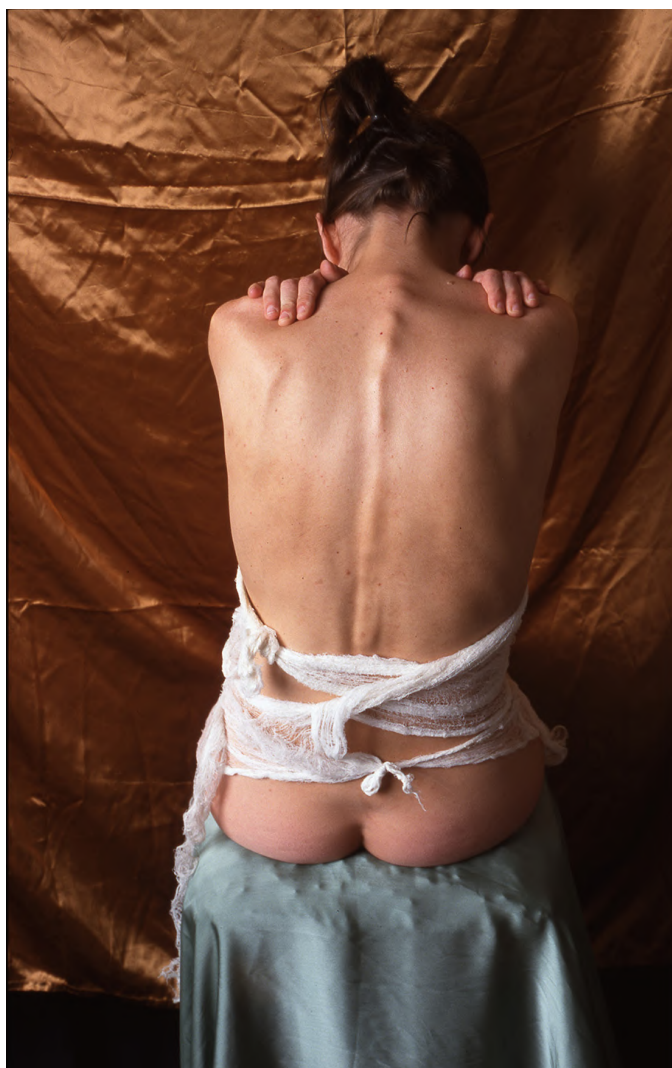
Corpus Fugit began with a humorous take on the story of the Rapture. Lizard, wearing a red wig, imagined how people in Vancouver would react to the Apocalypse.

"We all ran out into the street thinking this is it, the big one, the earthquake... but it was the other big one," she said. "On the sidewalks born-again were falling to their knees singing 'Hallelujah' and the rest of us, sinners, just stood around looking at each other like, 'No way, man—this cannot be happening. Armageddon!'" Two winged women took off Lizard's wig while Susan Stewart, Persimmon, and collaborator Glenn Watts sang in a chorus line and did jazz hands.

Later in the piece, Susan delved into heartbreak from a devastating breakup. "Your words, the scalpel, start cutting away the stitches from my wounds," she recounted while images of a desiccated fish against a velvet backdrop morphed into internal organs painted onto Lizard's skin. The body on screen suddenly moved, bringing a still image to life. Susan drew connections between her pain and sitting at the deathbed of her father, a man she both admired and feared. She talked of his life in the military and of how he left her a mending machine that helped her metaphorically reconstruct her broken heart: "Once I got the knack of it, I did all kinds of repairs, covered up despair with a solid weave, needle in, needle out, pulling the threads tight. Wouldn't call it fancy work, but the patches are holding."



Kiss & Tell, video projection from *Corpus Fugit*, 2002, multimedia performance, Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby.



Kiss & Tell, photographic projections from *Corpus Fugit*, 2002, multimedia performance, Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby.

In Persimmon's monologue, titled "Dead Dad," she spoke about how her parents, who both died from cancer, spent their final moments. The story is long and difficult to listen to. She acknowledged that her relationship with her father, who was violent, wasn't easy. With death looming, he asked her to find needles so he could inject himself with a lethal dose of morphine. The tale was told in a voice-over as Persimmon held a box of ammunition, her energy intense and sorrowful. When the collective performed *Corpus Fugit* at a conference on narratives of disease, disability, and trauma, Lizard remembered that during this scene, a woman started screaming. "The main thing was that she left the room, but the theatre was such that we could hear her running back and forth in the hallway behind the stage for a long time." Persimmon kept going with her performance as the woman paced and screamed in the background.³

In another poignant scene, Persimmon held Lizard in her lap like the Pietà while Susan brushed Persimmon's long hair. This image was repeated in a projection of a photograph of Persimmon with skeletal makeup and Lizard nude with her organs painted on the outside of her body. Red and yellow lights flashed against their bodies as Watts played a melancholy tune on an accordion. The three artists sang while pulling long red pieces of textiles from their chests. It felt like the end of a Greek tragedy, with the chorus mourning and letting go.

The last line of *Corpus Fugit* was given to Susan. Dressed in black, the members of Kiss & Tell stood in a row and read from scripts on music stands. Persimmon and Lizard looked to Susan, who said, "When Compassion comes, she'll stop our cries with a kiss." The accordion played, Kiss & Tell took a bow for the last time, and the stage turned to black.



LEFT: Kiss & Tell, *Corpus Fugit*, 2002, multimedia performance at Festival Theatre, Vancouver, still from video documentation, Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby. RIGHT: Kiss & Tell, *Corpus Fugit*, 2002, multimedia performance at Festival Theatre, Vancouver, still from video documentation, Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby.



CRITICAL ISSUES

Kiss & Tell's artworks were grounded in societal issues, including the feminist sex wars, the censorship of queer art in Canada, and disability. They used humour, photography, writing, and performance to bring attention to lesbian identities and sexual practices. The collective questioned the ethics of pornography and asked whether a line can be drawn between art and erotica. They focused not only on queer subject matter but also on queering the act of viewing by providing interactive spaces for audiences to respond to what they were seeing.

THE FEMINIST SEX WARS

The feminist sex wars of the 1980s and 1990s involved two opposing groups: the anti-pornography camp and the sex-positive camp. The former argued that all pornography objectified women and led to male violence against them,¹ while the latter argued for the “primacy of pleasure theory”—the idea that sexuality can be an exchange of physical and genital pleasure rather than simple intimacy and bonding.² The sex-positive camp also opposed obscenity laws, censorship, and measures that restricted sexual expression. Sex-positive feminist writer Gayle Rubin argued:

The women’s movement may have produced some of the most retrogressive sexual thinking this side of the Vatican. But it has also produced an exciting, innovative, and articulate defence of sexual pleasure and erotic justice. This “pro-sex” feminism has been spearheaded by lesbians whose sexuality does not conform to movement standards of purity (primarily lesbian sadomasochists and butch/femme dykes).³



LEFT: Kiss & Tell, *Drawing the Line*, 1988-90, photographic print, 35.5 x 27.9 cm, Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby. RIGHT: Kiss & Tell, *Drawing the Line*, 1988-90, photographic print, 35.5 x 27.9 cm, Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby.

These debates were a source of inspiration for Kiss & Tell. In their co-authored 1994 book, *Her Tongue on My Theory: Images, Essays and Fantasies*, the collective wrote about how the feminist sex wars led to censorship of queer art in Canada and became fodder for their projects. “As lesbian artists... one of the few ways in which we can count on seeing sex images and stories is by making

them ourselves.... What we don't love is how the state censorship denies our rights and threatens our queer culture. Yet this very censorship stimulates us to think of devious and delightful ways to challenge these prohibitions."⁴

Debates about the ethics of pornography and whether a distinction can be made between pornography and erotica were rekindled through the perspectives of second- and third-wave feminists in North America and beyond. Kiss & Tell's *Drawing the Line*, 1988-90, an exhibition of ninety-eight black-and-white photographs of lesbian sexual practices, sought to ask these questions rather than answer them. In a round-table interview, Lizard Jones said: "*Drawing the Line* came from a place politically in my community where everything was black and white. They're all perverts. They're all censor fascists. And so, we were the ones saying, 'Wait a minute, wait a minute, wait a minute.' And we were just always that way. There are no simple answers. We were always against the simple answers."⁵

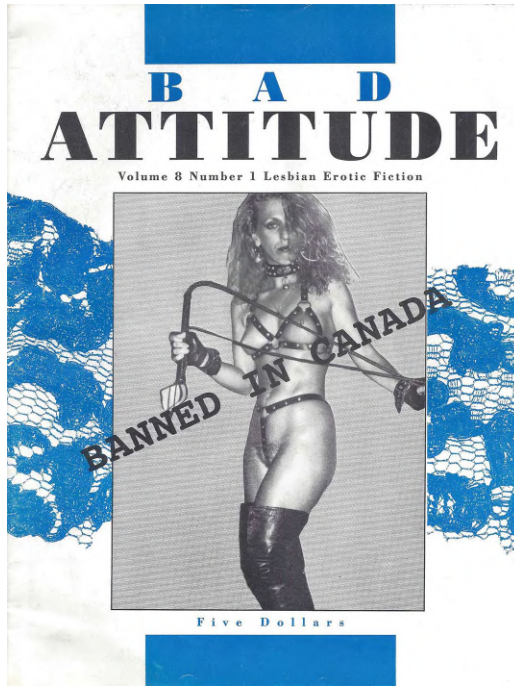
In *Her Tongue on My Theory*, Persimmon Blackbridge delved into the often-forgotten role that class plays in defining pornography and erotica. “Historically ‘erotic art’ has meant rich men’s sex pictures and ‘pornography’ has meant poor men’s sex pictures,” she wrote. “The legal defence of artistic merit protects work with high production values and high art aspirations—art that takes more money to produce and is aimed at a well-educated market. It’s a class distinction. The law is set up so we can use our art school diplomas to buy us protection that sex workers have no access to.”⁶

Susan Stewart said of the feminist sex wars, "People had radical passions about this issue, and it was intense."⁷ One result of these debates in Canada was the 1982 firebombing of three Red Hot Video stores that sold soft-core pornography in Greater Vancouver. The anti-pornography group the Wimmin's Fire Brigade claimed responsibility. The sex wars also led to changes in legislation about obscenity and what kinds of pornography could be censored. The 1992 *R. v. Butler* court case "concerned the impact of the *Charter [of Rights and Freedoms]* on the government's power to criminalize the sale of pornographic materials," and it changed the definition of obscenity from morals-based to harms-based.⁸ The Supreme Court ruled unanimously that obscenity laws constitute reasonable restrictions on freedom of expression.⁹ The decision meant that pornography that contained explicit sex with physical violence or threats of violence, portrayals of sex with children, and depictions of sex that were degrading or dehumanizing could be censored if the risk of harm was substantial.



"Protestors put heat on Red Hots," newspaper clipping from *The Province* (Vancouver, BC), December 12, 1982, page 4.

Kiss & Tell was critical of the Butler decision. As Persimmon wrote, "I recognize the good intentions of the women who backed Butler, but it seems the reason it passed with such ease is because it was and is easily co-opted into a right-wing anti-sex, anti-gay, and anti-feminist agenda. Despite some feminist window dressing, it is the same old anti-porn law that's intended to suppress sexual expression, not sexism."¹⁰ Many feminists and queer activists thought this ruling would negatively affect lesbian and gay sexual representations, and they were right. Shortly after the ruling, the sexually explicit American lesbian magazine *Bad Attitude* was seized in a 1990 government raid on Glad Day Bookshop in Toronto. Kiss & Tell's works were confiscated at the Canadian border the following year.



LEFT: Cover of *Bad Attitude* 8, no. 1 (1992), The ArQuives: Canada's LGBTQ2+ Archives, Toronto. RIGHT: Entrance of Glad Day Bookshop, Toronto, c.1980, photograph by Jearld Frederick Moldenhauer.



The feminist sex wars not only impacted the availability of lesbian publications but also dictated what was permissible for lesbian sexuality and sexual practices. S&M, penetration, and the use of dildos (all of which were included in Kiss & Tell's *Drawing the Line* photographs) were controversial territory in some queer women's circles. Susan commented: "Lesbians were putting such limitations on themselves, in terms of the sex that they could have.... Baby dykes who [saw the *Drawing the Line* exhibition] were like, 'Oh, I can use a strap-on. Like, that's okay?'... Because there was like that whole ridiculous idea that penetration is always violence."¹¹

The practice of S&M (referred to as S/M in the 1980s and 1990s) was particularly frowned upon. It was seen as replicating patriarchal relationships; negatively eroticizing pain, powerlessness, and dominance; and supporting patriarchy, no matter who was engaging in these activities. But for lesbians who engaged in S&M and kink, these sexual practices were liberating and grounded in respect, consent, and negotiation.¹² "In the lesbian community," Persimmon wrote, "S/M is an area of great conflict, and when we bring it up in our show, the anger and confusion of those debates are right there in the audience."¹³ The federal government took issue with the practice too: two photographs of bondage from the *Drawing the Line* project were stopped at the Canadian border, and what happened to them is unknown.

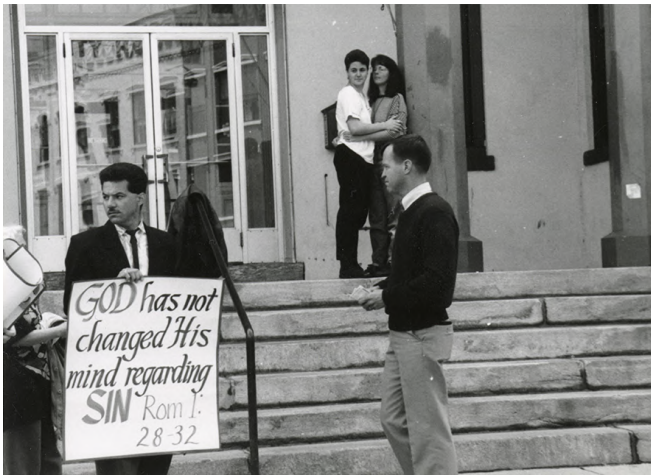


Studio session for *True Inversions*, Vancouver, 1992, photograph by Susan Stewart, Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby.

The members of Kiss & Tell certainly weren't the only Canadian LGBTQ2S+ artists to depict S&M lesbian sexual practices during the 1990s. G.B. Jones (b.1965), who is credited with inventing the term "queercore," created drawings, zines, video art, and films that centred on lesbian sex and kink.¹⁴ Jones's 1991 *Prison Break Out* drawings, in which two women seduced, overpowered, and tied up a female guard to escape a cell, and her 1992 Super 8 film *The Yo-Yo Gang*, about a girl gang that used yo-yos as a form of defence and entertainment, were included in a 1994 exhibition at Mercer Union in Toronto called *Girly Pictures*. Lorna Boschman (b.1955) and Kiss & Tell's video piece *True Inversions*, 1992, was also part of that exhibition. Like Kiss & Tell, Jones also had work that was stopped at the border after being exhibited in the U.S.

CENSORSHIP OF QUEER ART IN CANADA

The *Drawing the Line* travelling exhibition and the *True Inversions* performance prompted negative reactions that included protests and sage cleanses. The collective was picketed by the Christian right in Washington state and by lesbian separatists in Northampton, Massachusetts. While Kiss & Tell was hanging the exhibition in Northampton, a witch from a lesbian separatist camp smudged Susan and Persimmon, stating that they needed to be cleansed of their supposed violence against women.¹⁵



LEFT: Protestors at *Drawing the Line* exhibition in Northampton, Massachusetts, 1992, photographer unknown, Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby. RIGHT: Installation view of *Much Sense: Erotics and Life*, Walter Phillips Gallery, Banff Centre for the Arts and Creativity, 1992, Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby.

When Kiss & Tell performed *True Inversions* at the Banff Centre (now Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity) in December 1992, freelance journalist Rick Bell wrote an inflammatory and inaccurate review in the *Alberta Report* magazine. The headline read: "Kissing and Telling in Balmy Banff: Banff Hosts the Latest in Subsidized 'Alienation' and Lesbian Porn." The article led to public outrage in Alberta and significant media coverage across the country. CBC Radio shows debated "the morals of lesbian sexuality,"¹⁶ and encouraged people to call in to discuss whether gays and lesbians should have rights.¹⁷

This media maelstrom compelled Ken Kowalski, the deputy premier of Alberta, to denounce the collective. In a press statement, Kowalski called *True Inversions* "God-awful" and "an abhorrent lesbian show," and called for "an end to the homosexual shows at government-funded institutions."¹⁸ Alberta's labour minister, Stockwell Day, joined the fray by claiming that taxpayer money was being misspent, a commonly used argument to garner public support for the censorship of art and literature. These government representatives, who hadn't seen the show, were making decisions based on Bell's review. "Nobody ever phoned anyone in our group to ask whether that review was inaccurate," said Lizard.¹⁹

In the U.S., Republican senator Jesse Helms made a similar call to cut government funding to queer artists like Robert Mapplethorpe (1946–1989), Karen Finley (b.1956), and Andres Serrano (b.1950), whose “depravity... knows no bounds.”²⁰ Helms’s condemnation of Mapplethorpe’s homoerotic and BDSM photographs prompted the cancellation of a retrospective at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., in 1989. In protest, a group of activists projected slides of Mapplethorpe’s photographs on the facade of the gallery. In 1991, a congressional amendment to the National Foundation on the Arts and the Humanities Act was passed that prohibited the American National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) from using funds “to promote or disseminate materials that depict or describe, in a patently offensive way, sexual or excretory activities or organs.”²¹ Finley was the named plaintiff along with three other artists (John Fleck, Holly Hughes, and Tim Miller) in a case against the NEA, alleging that the federal agency’s “decency clause” was vague and violated First Amendment rights. The case was ultimately lost in the Supreme Court in 1998.

No such funding restrictions based on subject matter were passed by provincial or federal governments in Canada. But Canada Customs did act as censors for queer art and literature entering the country in the 1980s and 1990s. In 1995, when a New York-based publisher sent copies of a G.B. Jones monograph that included S&M images to Canada, customs “designated them as ‘immoral’ and prohibited their importation, citing their depiction of ‘bondage.’”²² The copies were confiscated and later burned. Despite being exhibited in several Canadian galleries, photographs from Kiss & Tell’s *Drawing the Line* exhibition were stopped at the Canadian border on four separate occasions, as were magazines with articles about the exhibition.

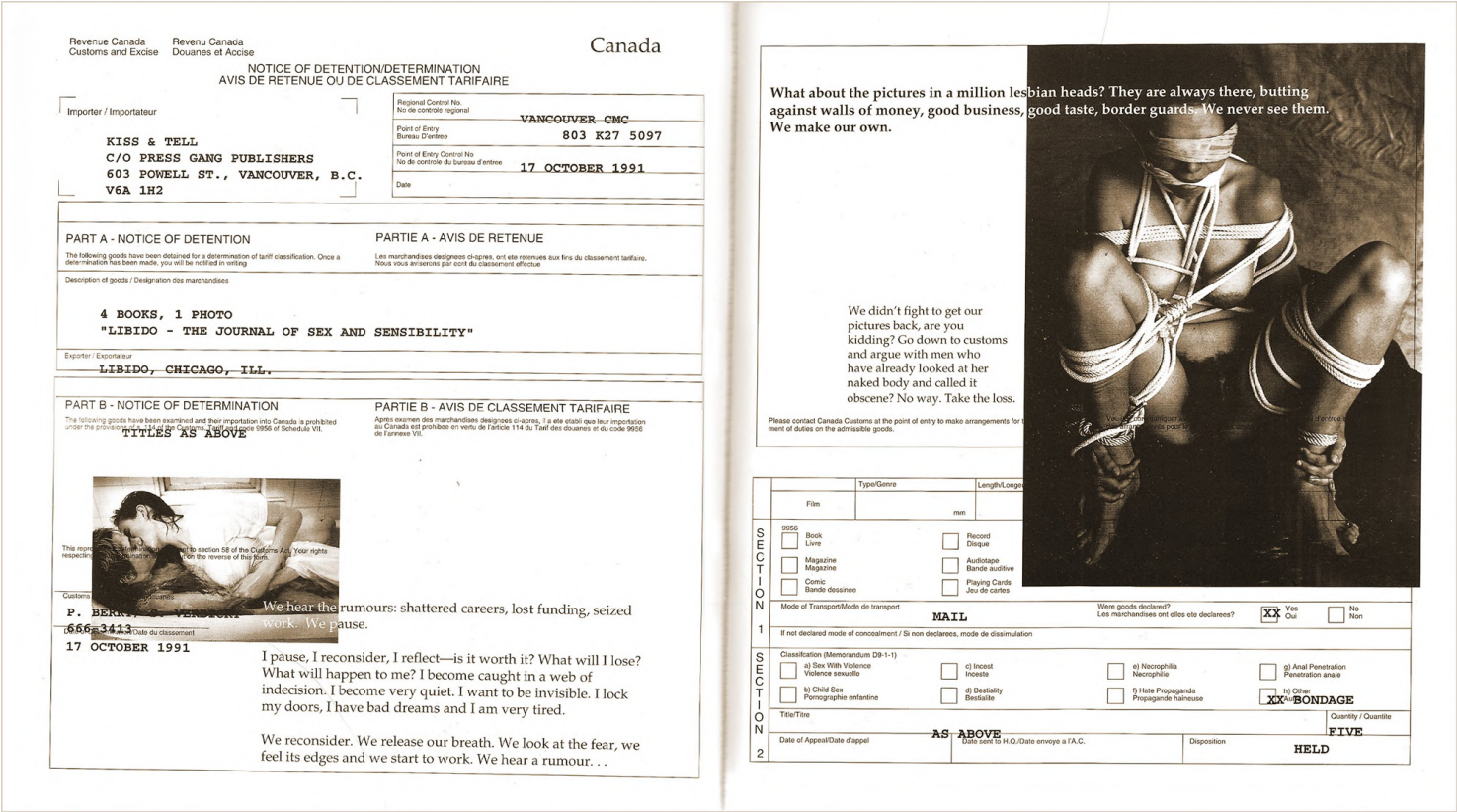


LEFT: Karen Finley performing at Cat Club, New York City, 1987, photograph by Dona Ann McAdams. RIGHT: Andres Serrano, *Piss Christ*, 1987, Cibachrome print, 152.4 x 101.6 cm.



KISS & TELL

Lesbian Art & Activism by Kristen Hutchinson



Spread from *Suggestive Poses: Artists and Critics Respond to Censorship*, edited by Lorraine Johnson (Toronto: Toronto Photographers Workshop, 1997), pages 82-83.

In 1991, the U.S. magazine *Libido*, which included a feature article on the exhibition with photos, was one of those detained at the border. The photographs sent to *Libido* for layout were seized when they returned to Canada. An issue of the lesbian magazine *Deneuve* with a review and photos from *Drawing the Line* was stopped on its way to Little Sister's, a queer bookstore in Vancouver. Copies of Kiss & Tell's *Drawing the Line* postcard book, published in Canada and distributed by Inland in the U.S., were seized en route to Edmonton from the States.

In their performance *Borderline Disorderly*, 1999, Kiss & Tell discussed why they didn't retrieve their work from border agents. Susan said, "No way I will go to get my photos.... I would have to say that I made them,... that I'm the evil pornographer whose work they have deemed fit to seize." Persimmon chimed in, "Down at customs, context doesn't count. There's a checklist. Bondage? Bingo!... Walk into a room where the context is set by a bunch of guys in suits with a checklist and their fingers on our photos? Nah, let the pictures go."



LEFT: Jim Deva, former owner and co-founder of Little Sister's Book and Art Emporium, speaks at an anti-censorship rally in Vancouver, 1986, photograph by Richard Banner, City of Vancouver Archives. RIGHT: Kiss & Tell, *Borderline Disorderly*, 1999, multimedia performance at Video In, Vancouver, still from video documentation, Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby.

The backlash against queer art in Canada wasn't centred solely on artworks and performances. Canada Customs flagged queer publications far more frequently than other types of literature and tended to target shipments to gay and lesbian bookstores. In 1994, fed up with the frequent confiscation and destruction of their orders, Little Sister's launched a lawsuit against the federal government over its customs policies. Joe Arvay, the lawyer for Little Sister's, argued that queer publications and artworks were being unduly targeted by customs, and that "gay and lesbian pornography is sufficiently different and complex from mainstream pornography" and thus the government should "allow entry into Canada of all books and magazines respecting gay and lesbian issues or relationships and intended for a gay and lesbian readership."²³

To help fund legal costs, the bookstore, in collaboration with the American publisher Cleis Press, put out *Forbidden Passages: Writings Banned in Canada*. The 1995 book featured excerpts from works that had been identified as sexually "degrading," "obscene," or "politically suspect" by Canada Customs, including writings by bell hooks, Jane Rule, Dorothy Allison, Susie Bright, and Joseph Beam, artworks by Tom of Finland and David Wojnarowicz, and comics by Diane DiMassa.²⁴ A short review about Kiss & Tell by Diane Anderson, originally published in the issue of *Deneuve* seized at the Canadian border, was also featured. Anderson writes:

At a time when censorship issues are on many women's minds, *Drawing the Line* is particularly important because it asks viewers to make choices and form opinions about sexual imagery—lesbian sexual imagery—that could have an effect on even the dominant culture audience.... Bringing images like fist-fucking and dildo play to the gallery wall... will merely bring them into the light so they can be discussed with free inquiry.²⁵



Kiss & Tell, image projection from *Borderline Disorderly*, 1999, multimedia performance, Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby.

As the first witness in the Little Sister's court case, Persimmon spoke about the complexities of lesbian sexual imagery: "Sometimes, as women, we are acknowledged only as victims, or only self-affirming subjects. Neither position reflects our actual lives. Our sexuality is far more complex. We respond to sexual images in very individual and sometimes conflicted ways."²⁶ Feminist law scholar Ann Scales, another witness, argued that lesbian depictions of S&M differ from heterosexual pornography because it is often the participants themselves who create the images, and they are the ones who set the consensual boundaries for what will and won't happen.²⁷ Scales's description of lesbian S&M imagery was in keeping with how Kiss & Tell created their own photographs of kink sexual practices.

The B.C. Supreme Court judge found that customs agents had unduly targeted shipments from Little Sister's, and that this violated section 2 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, which protects freedom of expression. However, he ruled that this violation was justified under section 1, which states that these rights and freedoms are subject to reasonable limits prescribed by law. Thus, the Butler decision overrode the right to freedom of expression. In 2000, the case was taken to the Supreme Court of Canada, where the ruling was upheld as not violating section 2. However, it ruled that the implementation of the law by Canada Customs officials was discriminatory and should be remedied. The Supreme Court struck down part of the law that required an importer to prove material was not obscene. Instead, the onus was on the government to prove the obscenity of seized materials. The ruling upheld Canada Customs' right to prevent materials already banned as obscene by the courts to enter Canada, but they could no longer pre-emptively detain material that had not been already adjudicated. Little Sister's had won its legal case against Canada Customs.²⁸



Kiss & Tell, *Drawing the Line*, 1988-90, photographic print, 27.9 x 35.5 cm, Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby.

Despite repeated seizures by Canada Customs, Kiss & Tell refused to be intimidated. As part of her testimony in the case, Persimmon said: "We'll continue to explore sexual representations.... We will continue to show our art internationally despite the fear of losing our work."

QUEERING PHOTOGRAPHY

Photography played a critical role in Kiss & Tell's oeuvre. *Drawing the Line*, 1988-90, queered photography through its lesbian subject matter and a collaborative process that didn't centre the photographer as the sole artist. As Persimmon wrote in *Her Tongue on My Theory*: "On our first *Drawing the Line* shoot we all took turns behind the camera, but since Susan's been a photographer for 20 years, it was no big surprise that her photographs were way more skillful. Lizard and I were more excited about taking on the challenges of modelling.... So on the shoots and in the darkroom, we had our individual roles, while the concept, decision making, and ongoing ideas happened among all of us."²⁹ The collective's purposeful collaboration challenged the notion of individual creative genius (usually reserved for white, male, and heterosexual artists) that is so often at the heart of art historical discourses.



LEFT: Kiss & Tell, *Drawing the Line*, 1988-90, photographic print, 27.9 x 35.5 cm, Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby. RIGHT: Kiss & Tell, *Drawing the Line*, 1988-90, photographic print, 35.5 x 27.9 cm, Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby.

The deliberate nature of Kiss & Tell's creative process in *Drawing the Line* extended to their artistic intention. They were photographing collaborative experiences between lesbians engaged in highlighting safe, sane, and consensual sexual practices that included S&M and kink. This part of the equation can be easily forgotten by viewers having a gut reaction to artworks, as was the case for some with two bondage images of Lizard tied up with white rope, her eyes wrapped with a white silk blindfold, her knees bent, and hands tied to her ankles. One woman wrote on the wall below one of these images: "I find this alarming. It evokes for me images of women who are subjected to this against their will." The Canadian government agreed—these photos were seized by Canada Customs. In their 1999 *Borderline Disorderly* performance, Lizard joked that Persimmon must have gotten a knot-making badge as a Girl Scout, given how good she was at tying her up for the photos. One woman who saw *Drawing the Line* echoed this sentiment, writing on the wall: "Girl Guides was good for something."

In the letter Persimmon read to her mother in 1992's *True Inversions* performance, she discussed the importance of photographing queer bodies:

You know my naked lesbian body is available in bookstores across the continent. On display in galleries, discussed in newspapers.... In your world, one doesn't kiss in public. It's cheap, you would say, but I kiss in public. I fuck for the camera.... I fuck this woman who's not even my lover, for the camera, making art. In your world, it's unthinkable.... Lizard [says], "We are people who will risk being killed in order to fuck each other." We queers, she means. She means there are people who want us dead. You know this is true, but you forget at times. We never forget.

Kiss & Tell's stories and photographs about lesbian lives were a form of radical and defiant activism in the face of censorship, homophobia, repression, and threats of violence. In the 1990s, lesbians, bisexual women, and gender non-conforming people were generally invisible in art and photography. Photographers and artists fought back against this invisibility by bringing representations of lesbian subjectivities into the public sphere.

One such photographer, the American Catherine Opie (b.1961), represented queer lives through photographs of queer women and men in her Portraits series, 1993-97, and of lesbians in her Domestic series, 1995-98. Both were grounded in the documentary style of portrait photography but shone a light on subjects usually absent from that format. The Portraits series depicted queer S&M communities, while the Domestic series focused on lesbian couples and families at home. Opie's work featured a diversity of age, race, class, and location to show the range of family structures that exist beyond the heterosexual paradigm.

Another American artist, Laura Aguilar (1959-2018), was at the vanguard of lesbian photographic portraiture. She created a series of black-and-white photographic portraits titled *Latina Lesbians*, 1986-90, that included the subjects' words in their own handwriting. For one portrait, the sitter, Carla, wrote: "I used to worry about being different. Now I realize my differences are my strength." By including the subjects' words in the photographs, Aguilar queered the genre by depicting the sitters as individuals rather than mere objects to be admired. In another black-and-white series, titled *Clothed/Unclothed*, 1990-94, Aguilar shows her lesbian sitters against a traditional black studio backdrop. We see them in two views: with and without clothes. According to Susan, who spent time with the artist, Aguilar was a strong supporter of Kiss & Tell.



Kiss & Tell, *True Inversions*, 1992, multimedia performance at the East Vancouver Cultural Centre, still from video documentation, Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby.



LEFT: Catherine Opie, *Gina & April*, Minneapolis, Minnesota, 1998, pigment print, 101.6 x 127 cm (print), 104.1 x 129.5 x 5.1 cm (framed). RIGHT: Laura Aguilar, *Clothed/Unclothed #30*, 1994, two gelatin silver prints, 50.8 x 40.6 cm (each), collection of Cheri Gaulke and Sue Maberry.

Like Aguilar's work, Kiss & Tell's *Drawing the Line* photographs were shot in black and white, which tied them to pre-1980 art photography. The format also referenced the black-and-white thinking of the feminist sex wars, and what better way to explore it than with grey tones? In *Her Tongue on My Theory*, Susan wrote: "Photographs have the wonderful ability to traverse the edge between what is commonly known as reality and the invented, making it unclear which is which."³⁰

Unlike Opie and Aguilar, Kiss & Tell blurred the boundaries between documentary and art photography by creating staged photographs that depicted actual sex acts. The project employed various locations, sexual practices, camera angles, compositions, and lighting to make two models appear to be multiple women. With analogue photography, there's an assumption that the photograph is providing factual insight into a particular event, era, or person. The *Drawing the Line* photographs were also significantly different from Opie's and Aguilar's works because the collective's photographs did not document women who were lovers in real life. Rather, the subjects in Kiss & Tell's project were models having sex for the camera. Director Lorna Boschman questioned what "real" sex entails in Kiss and Tell's *True Inversions* video: "Is it real sex if you have to stop and start when the director tells you to?"



LEFT: Kiss & Tell, *Drawing the Line*, 1988-90, photographic print, 27.9 x 35.5 cm, Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby. RIGHT: Kiss & Tell, *Drawing the Line*, 1988-90, photographic print, 35.5 x 27.9 cm, Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby.

Drawing the Line also queered the act of viewing by providing spaces—the walls of the exhibition spaces, the men’s comment books, the postcards—to respond directly to the photographs. The international exhibitions established a community of queer viewers and a place for queer women to voice what they thought of the lesbian sexual practices being represented. Kiss & Tell was battling against the invisibility of lesbians in contemporary culture, while also pushing back against a silencing of sexualities that stemmed from restrictive upbringings and the supposed protection granted by staying in the closet. Allowing women to comment anonymously provided a space for lesbians to share their perceptions and attitudes about sex without fear. For many of these women, it was their first time seeing photographs of lesbian sex created by lesbians.

Viewing the copious slide sheets at the Kiss & Tell archive at Simon Fraser University Library Special Collections and Rare Books in Burnaby, I was struck by the incredible amount of queer imagery they created. The hundreds of photographs in these sheets demonstrate the imagination, play, courage, camaraderie, and experimentation needed to create the work. They read like an archive of queer sexual practices, a behind-the-scenes account of lesbian image production. In some photographs, Lizard and Persimmon break into laughter. In others, they kiss passionately. They touch each other’s breasts and genitals. They enact power play scenes. They play with each other in the shower and the bath and so much more. The respect, trust, and care between the models and the photographer are palpable. A very rare catalogue of lesbian aesthetics and desire emerges from these slide sheets and in the final exhibition of *Drawing the Line*.



Kiss & Tell, *Drawing the Line*, 1988-90, photographic print, 27.9 x 35.5 cm, Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby.

HUMOUR IN QUEER PERFORMANCE

Humour has often been used as a survival strategy by marginalized and oppressed peoples. For their part, Kiss & Tell employed humour and comedy to provide catharsis and foster understanding. Funny stories and comedic deliveries offered a relatively safe entry point into subjects that might otherwise be difficult for audiences. In a round-table interview, Lizard quoted Lorna Boschman as saying: "If you're going to be sexual and make people really uncomfortable, and they're aroused and they don't know what to do, you got to give them some way to laugh because they won't know what to do."³¹ Susan concurred. "You know, it gave a release for people. We gave that opening to laugh because we had a lot of other complicated things that we were introducing."³²

Moving from potentially uncomfortable topics to more humorous, light ones was a release valve for viewers' potential discomfort. In their 1992 *True Inversions* performance, Persimmon told a fictional story in which she slapped her girlfriend as a part of a sexual encounter.³³ This section of the performance tended to make audiences particularly uncomfortable—they often reacted with an audible gasp, and some people even walked out. Persimmon followed up in an aggressive tone, "I slap her again just to make sure." The audience's attention was then pulled away by Lizard, who launched into a melodic monologue about an unrequited crush on a co-worker: "Part of me knows that she feels this thing." The transition from a story about rough sex to one of gently lusting after a

co-worker was jarring and humorous, and the audience did laugh (out of discomfort or because Lizard's comedic delivery was spot on, we'll never know).



LEFT: Kiss & Tell, *True Inversions*, 1992, multimedia performance at the East Vancouver Cultural Centre, still from video projection, Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby. RIGHT: Kiss & Tell, *True Inversions*, 1992, multimedia performance at the East Vancouver Cultural Centre, still from video documentation, Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby.

A similar comedic transition occurred in *That Long Distance Feeling: Perverts, Politics & Prozac*, 1997, when Persimmon discussed going to see a new psychiatrist for depression. "I'm at the corner going over my 'talk to the new shrink' script in my mind and then recklessly out loud: 'The laws of sanity are so flimsy once you get down to it, so easy to cross over.' I shouted for a whole block, scaring lawyers." Lizard humorously chipped in, "People get punished for scaring lawyers."

The collective's commitment to humour as an accessible entry point is shared by the Canadian art duo Shawna Dempsey (b.1963) and Lorri Millan (b.1965). In 1997, they founded Lesbian National Parks and Services "to insert a lesbian presence into the landscape."³⁴ Dressed as park rangers, the pair assisted tourists in Alberta's Banff National Park, handing out brochures about fictional lesbian flora and fauna and highlighting imaginary institutions such as the Invisible Plaque Dedicated to Our Founding Foremothers. Like Kiss & Tell, Dempsey and Millan brought lesbian subjectivities into typically heteronormative public spaces. In one interview, Dempsey and Millan recounted a typical encounter with a middle-aged, white Canadian man:

When he got up to us, he read the label of my shirt insignia out loud: "LESBIAN National Parks and Services." Realizing he didn't know (or couldn't acknowledge) what he was dealing with, he suddenly had to improvise. His conclusion—"Now that must be Federal, isn't it!"... When Dempsey responded (herself improvising) "Well no, actually we're international," the man remained steadfastly puzzled. Millan continues, "by the time we parted I still don't think the penny had dropped for him. Perhaps then he thought 'lesbian' was one of those supposedly obscure central European countries."³⁵



Shawna Dempsey and Lorri Millan, *Lesbian National Parks and Services*, 1997-ongoing, performance.

While Dempsey and Millan gave a few lucky park visitors T-shirts emblazoned with the slogan “Eager Beaver,” Kiss & Tell used inside jokes to bond with queer audience members. In their performance *Corpus Fugit*, 2002, Lizard talked about the pain of breakups while nodding to the stereotype that lesbians play softball: “I really loved her. I laid my heart at her feet and then she stepped on it, wearing baseball shoes with spikes on them. Hundreds of punctures all over my heart.”³⁶

Kiss & Tell extended grace to their audiences through comical moments and laughter, but humour was also central to their creative process. In an interview with the group, Persimmon talked about how many viewers assumed that the process of creating the bondage photographs in *Drawing the Line*, 1988-90, was uncomfortable. “[Susan and I] did a workshop with a bunch of people who were convinced that that was true. And we did this whole bondage thing with me with these tiny, tight black strings. And it was really disturbing looking. They got to see how [it was done]. How we cracked up laughing all the time and there was really no problem.”

DISABILITY ART & ACTIVISM

In Kiss & Tell’s co-authored 1994 book, *Her Tongue on My Theory*, a photograph of a broken wooden window frame rests against a white woman’s naked body viewed from chest to mid-thigh. The caption beside the black-and-white photograph reads: “Spot the invisible disability.” I recognize this body as Persimmon’s by the tattooed birds circling above her left breast, and I know the answer: learning disabilities, self-harm, mental health issues, and depression. But the average reader would not know these details, and they would wonder.



*Spot the
invisible
disability.*

Susan Stewart, photograph from *Her Tongue on My Theory: Images, Essays and Fantasies*, 1994, direct positive transparency, Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby.

Persimmon and Lizard brought to light how their disabilities affected their lives and other people's perceptions of them. In Kiss & Tell's performance *That Long Distance Feeling: Perverts, Politics & Prozac*, 1997, Lizard revealed:

When you have multiple sclerosis, you have really low energy and you get depressed.... In 1997, avoiding Prozac is an uphill battle.... MS [multiple sclerosis] and sex, it's a problem.... If I start taking Prozac like they say, I'll be perkier and less fatigued, and the sex will just come rushing back. Forgetting of course that twenty percent of people who take Prozac lose their sex drive completely.... I guess the message is sex is for people who are already cheerful and physically fit, and the rest of us should just take our pills and go to bed alone.

Both Persimmon and Lizard are long-time disability activists. From 2013 to 2016, Lizard was the artistic director of Kickstart Disability Arts & Culture, a Vancouver non-profit. In an interview, she discussed the similarities between queer people and those with disabilities: "On the one hand, people [with disabilities] want to be recognized as normal. And on the other hand, we're not, and we don't want to be. We have different things to say, and we have a different experience. Disability art is part of the revolt against normalization, while others believe that their disability does not define them."³⁷

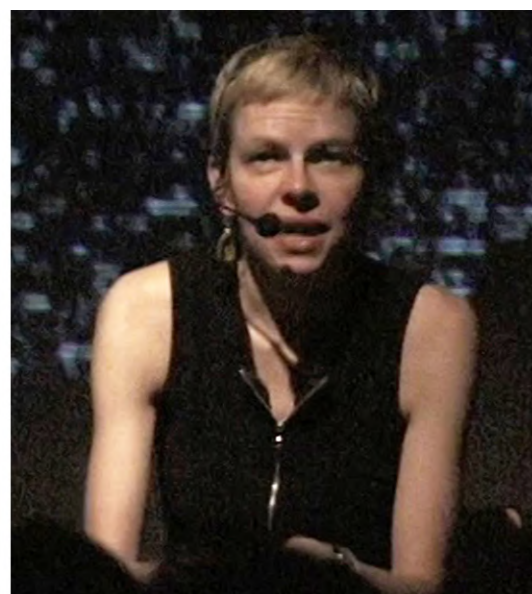
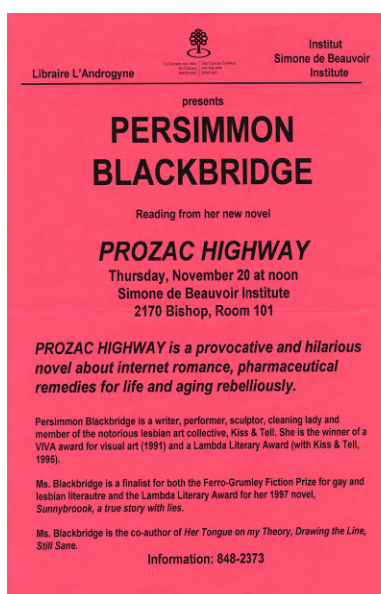
In 1997, Lizard wrote *Two Ends of Sleep*, a novel in which a lesbian named Rusty navigates her MS diagnosis and the increased amounts of sleep she now requires. The lines between fantasy and reality blur, like the space between waking and sleeping. Did she cheat on her girlfriend or was that just a series of erotic dreams? Like many of the stories in Kiss & Tell's performances, *Two Ends of Sleep* is humorous, heartbreaking, and sexy.



Persimmon Blackbridge and Lorna Boschman, still from *Sunnybrook*, 1995, time-based media, 45 min., Vtape, Toronto.

For her part, Persimmon has been creating works about disability, especially around mental health, since the 1970s. In 1996, she published *Sunnybrook: A True Story with Lies*, a book about working as a counsellor for people with intellectual disabilities at the Woodlands School in New Westminster. Five years later, she collaborated on the exhibition *From Inside/Out* with twenty-eight former inmates at B.C. institutions for people with intellectual disabilities—including Woodlands, the source of hundreds of reported cases of physical, verbal, and sexual abuse. The exhibition drew increased attention to what had happened at Woodlands and helped nine hundred former residents gain reparations.

Persimmon's novel *Prozac Highway* (1997) also included autobiographical elements. The protagonist, Jam, was an "an over-forty cleaning lady and lesbian performance artist,"³⁸ struggling to pay for food and her meds. She talked about the difficulties of being a performance artist: "Maybe they [the bookstore venue] hadn't known how to pull in an audience for a couple of queers, and we'd be performing to an empty room. Or to an audience of curious hets who wouldn't understand the sex or know when it was okay to laugh. Or to a room full of anti-porn dykes ready to hate us."³⁹



LEFT: Flyer for an author reading of *Prozac Highway* with Persimmon Blackbridge, at Concordia University, Montreal, November 20, 1998, Simone de Beauvoir Institute Fonds, Concordia University Archives. RIGHT: Kiss & Tell, *That Long Distance Feeling: Perverts, Politics & Prozac*, 1997, multimedia performance at Roundhouse Community Theatre, Vancouver, still from video documentation.

In an interview, Persimmon discussed how the medical system failed to diagnose her properly:

I was dealing with depression, which actually had a physical cause, but since I was a known nutcase, it never got diagnosed. It was just like, "Oh, look at you. You're the crazy person. And now you're crazy in a whole new way that you've never been crazy in before. But why investigate?" I was depressed and I did not know how to deal with depression.... So then, [many years later,] my depression was cured by parathyroid surgery. Ding. It's gone. But I was left with kidney failure which could have been avoided if I had been diagnosed earlier.⁴⁰

This frustration with doctors is discussed in *That Long Distance Feeling*.

Grievances include how doctors assume patients are heterosexual and butch women aren't biological mothers, how they simplify disability, and how they claim problems can be solved simply with a pill. During their time in Kiss & Tell, Lizard and Persimmon were in a writing group of two, encouraging and helping each other in their writing, art, and activism. In Kiss & Tell's performances and book of essays, and in their individual writings and artworks, Persimmon and Lizard brought, and continue to bring, much needed recognition and understanding of disability issues and ableism.



Kiss & Tell, *That Long Distance Feeling: Perverts, Politics & Prozac*, 1997, multimedia performance at Roundhouse Community Theatre, Vancouver, photographer unknown, Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby.



CONCLUSION

Kiss & Tell left an indelible legacy for queer artists and activists to follow and expand upon. The collective's storytelling through photography, performance art, and writing brought visibility to lesbian experiences and queer activism in Canada and beyond. While Kiss & Tell's works were in reaction to a particular place and time, their oeuvre remains just as fresh, poignant, cathartic, revelatory, and provocative today as it was more than two decades ago.

QUEERING THE ARCHIVE

When I first started research for this book, I thought I would have to piece together information about Kiss & Tell's performances from articles and interviews. Fortunately, when I met with Vancouver-based filmmaker and digital storyteller Lorna Boschman (b.1955), she brought out a box of video and audio recordings of the collective's performances from one of her closets. Aside from the contents of this box, snippets of these



LEFT: Recordings of Kiss & Tell's live performances by Lorna Boschman, 2022, photograph by Kristen Hutchinson. RIGHT: Lorna Boschman, still from video documentation, *Before the New Millennium*, 2007, time-based media, 26:56. .

performances could only be viewed in *Before the New Millennium*, a twenty-six-minute retrospective documentary film of Kiss & Tell's work created by Boschman in 2007. The film included excerpts from the *True Inversions*, 1992, *That Long Distance Feeling: Perverts, Politics & Prozac*, 1997, and *Borderline Disorderly*, 1999, performances, as well as their 1994 book, *Her Tongue on My Theory: Images, Essays and Fantasies*. Boschman shared with me how difficult it was to make this last video because she and Persimmon Blackbridge had broken up by this time, yet she felt it needed to be done to preserve the collective's legacy.¹

I am equally grateful that Susan Stewart donated her extensive collection of Kiss & Tell artworks, audio and video recordings, reviews, articles, scripts, and ephemera to the Special Collections and Rare Books Library at Simon Fraser University (SFU) in Burnaby. Susan explained how her archive ended up at SFU:

I wrote to the national [gay and lesbian] archives in Toronto first and offered them the Kiss & Tell holdings. They never responded, so I didn't follow up. I wasn't aware of the BC Gay and Lesbian Archive. This would have been about 20 years ago, and it seemed at the time that the national archive was really only interested in gay [male] content. SFU happened later because El Chenier contacted me... and they arranged [for] Special Collections to get in touch with me about our holdings. I agreed because they are very cool and have a great collection that is progressive politically: punk movement, queer archives, poets, etc., plus I am an alumni so it felt like a good fit.²

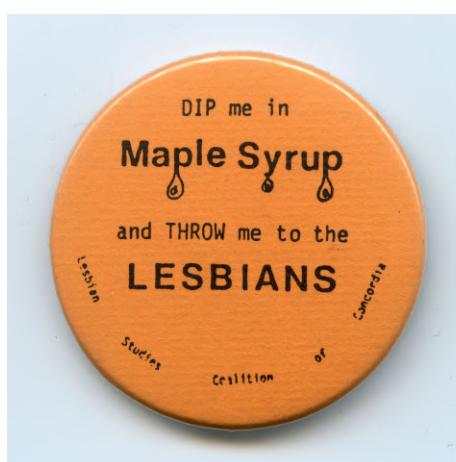
If Susan and Lorna had not amassed and kept these archives, my book would not exist in its current form.



Flyer for the event *Queer Culture*, at Buddies in Bad Times, Toronto, April 3-22, 1990, Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby.

The importance of queer archives cannot be overstated. As Lizeth Zepeda, a diversity librarian and the archivist at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles, wrote: “Traditionally, the archival institution has reaffirmed hegemonic power structures by erasing and ignoring histories of marginalized communities. [They] are complex, messy, disruptive, and extremely personal because they delve into the intimacies of gender and sexuality.”³ This in part explains why queer activists have been compelled to create their own archives to preserve their histories.

Initially called the Canadian Gay Liberation Movement Archives, the first queer archive in Canada was founded in Toronto in 1973 by the gay newspaper *The Body Politic*. Now known as The ArQuives, it “is the largest independent LGBTQ2+ archive in the world and the only queer archive in Canada with a national scope.”⁴ Regional queer archives also sprang up across Canada in the 1970s and 1980s, including the B.C. Gay and Lesbian Archives (in 1976) and the Quebec Gay Archives (in 1983). These institutions were created as an antidote to the invisibility of queer people throughout Canadian history. But despite having “lesbian” in their names, many of them tended to focus on gay male materials, at least initially. This led women to establish their own archives, such as the Lesbian Archives of Quebec (in 1983).



LEFT: “Dip me in Maple Syrup and THROW me to the LESBIANS,” metal button, c.1990-99, 4.5 cm (diameter), The ArQuives: Canada’s LGBTQ2+ Archives, Toronto.



RIGHT: “WOMEN’S BATHHOUSE DEFENSE FUND: PUSSIES BITE BACK,” metal button, c.2000, 4.5 cm (diameter), The ArQuives: Canada’s LGBTQ2+ Archives, Toronto.



Queering the archive upends traditional opinions on what is considered valuable and worthy of preservation. For example, The ArQuives, where I started my research for this book, has a vast collection of ephemera, including promotional flyers, clothing, mugs, keychains, greeting cards, magnets, and buttons. As feminist studies professor Anjali Arondekar has noted, “queer archives are all about the soiled and untidy—about leaving your dirty *chonies* [underwear] on the kitchen table.”⁵ Creating and maintaining a queer archive is an important strategy in the battle to share lesbian and sapphic experiences. It allows future generations to learn about, and remember, the lives of lesbian elders, and how they fought for the rights we have and are still struggling to maintain.

THE LEGACY OF KISS & TELL

One thread that connects Kiss & Tell’s works is a kind of interrupted and disrupted storytelling, where competing fragments live side by side, ringing dissonant chords rather than being tidied away in a singular resolution. In *Drawing the Line*, 1988–90, each photograph recounted a moment from a fabricated sexual encounter captured by the camera. In one photograph, a woman was clad in a garter belt with stockings and tight black underwear that showed off her ass cheeks. Through the inverted V of her legs, we see another woman lying on the floor, handcuffed to the wall. It is easy to discern who is in control in this encounter, but what negotiations took place to determine the boundaries of this power play? What will happen next? Will the women maintain the roles of dominant and submissive, or will they switch? This is the magic of the photograph. It captures a singular moment and leaves us to imagine the rest.

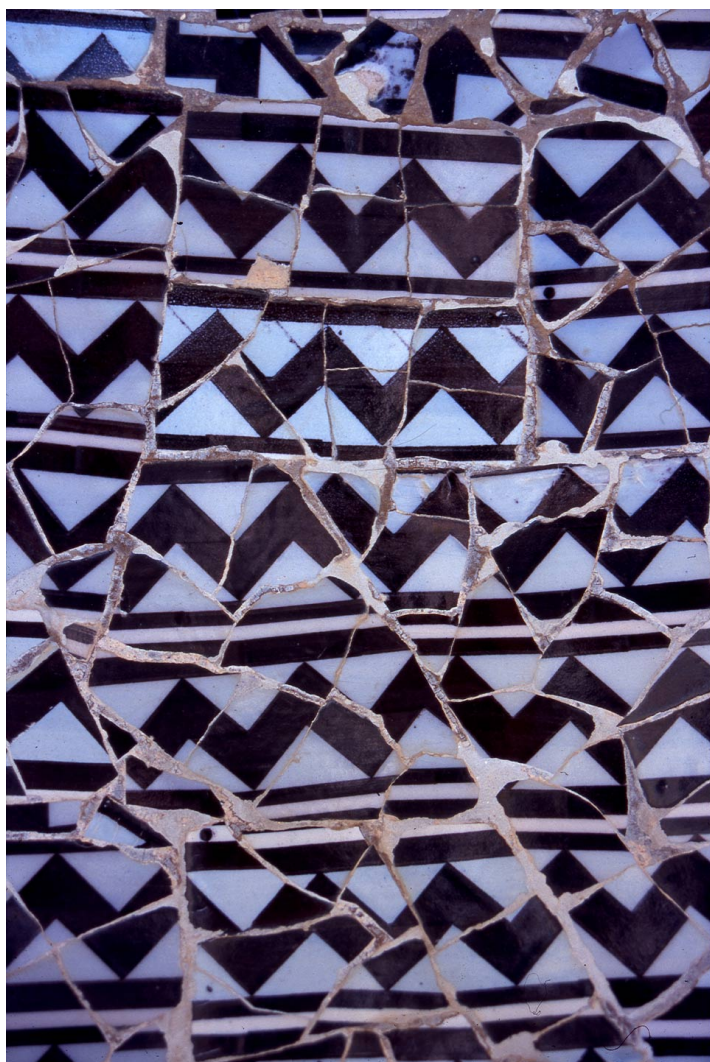
Kiss & Tell’s performances were full of stories: monologues and narratives that bounce back and forth between all three members of the collective, and visual accounts told through projections of video and photographs, text, and paper puppets. While sexuality was threaded throughout Kiss & Tell’s work, it wasn’t the only throughline. The performance *That Long Distance Feeling: Perverts, Politics and Prozac*, 1997, for example, contained anecdotes about class and the economic realities facing many contemporary artists.



LEFT: Kiss & Tell, *Drawing the Line*, 1988-90, photographic print, 35.5 x 27.9 cm, Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby. RIGHT: Kiss & Tell, *That Long Distance Feeling: Perverts, Politics & Prozac*, 1997, multimedia performance at Video In, Vancouver, still from video documentation, Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby.

In one section of the *That Long Distance Feeling* performance, against a backdrop of heavy bass electronic music and images of buildings zipping by on a projection behind her, Susan explored the haves and have-nots from the perspective of an artist and a single mother. She hypothesized about how to live without buying from corporations run by people like Bill Gates: "Single mothers could be the role models. They are expert at living without.... No savings, no assets, no mutual funds, no Old Age Security. No money, no money, no money. Running on empty." In another monologue, Persimmon talked about the monotony of her cleaning job. Thankfully, the boring every day was fractured one day when a "butch university professor" (and her cleaning client's ex) stopped by and they had sex. "I've never been fucked as someone's cleaning lady before. Mostly I got fucked as a semi-famous artist. After twenty years of cleaning houses, it was about time." Some of Persimmon's and Lizard Jones's monologues in *That Long Distance Feeling* were taken from their 1997 novels *Prozac Highway* (Persimmon) and *Two Ends of Sleep* (Lizard).

The artworks of Kiss & Tell were an antidote to the misunderstanding, stereotyping, misinformation, and vilification of queer people. They asked questions without providing answers so that audiences were compelled to reflect on what was happening around them. The legacy of Kiss & Tell is a call for freedom of representation, sexuality, and gender fuckery. The collective is an important reminder of why we need to remember our queer roots—especially considering recent increased transphobia and the backlash against lesbian and queer identities in Canada.



Kiss & Tell, photographic projections from *That Long Distance Feeling: Perverts, Politics & Prozac*, 1997, multimedia performance, Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby.

While lesbian visibility has increased significantly in art and popular culture since the 1990s, there is still much work to be done. According to a recent study from the University of Ottawa, suicide rates among transgender and nonbinary teens are at crisis levels.⁶ Transgender youth are five times more likely to think about suicide and 7.6 times more likely to have attempted suicide than cisgender youth. LGBTQ2S+ people are five to ten times more likely to attempt suicide than cisgender and heterosexual individuals. Given these statistics, it is clear that seeing queer stories in history, art, and popular culture still matters today. Queer youth need to witness diverse representations of queerness by queer artists and storytellers to know they are not alone. A 2024 Ipsos survey of Canadians found that support for queer people being open and visible had dropped twelve per cent from 2021.⁷ Over the past few years, the Human Rights Campaign has been tracking increased numbers of murders of trans and gender-nonconforming people.⁸ In 2021, there were 375 reports of trans people being killed around the world (and many more deaths that go unreported).⁹ In the U.S. in 2024, states put forward or passed 530 bills that negatively affected queer health, education, civil rights, and trans rights. In January 2024, the Alberta government announced policies that would limit gender-affirming health care for young people, make it impossible for them to alter their names or pronouns in school without parental consent, and require parental consent and the ministry of education's approval for any discussion of gender identity, sexual orientation, or sexuality in schools.



Protest organized by ACT UP Montreal in response to police raids of Sex Garage, a warehouse party popular with Montreal's LGBTQ2S+ community, July 29, 1990, photograph by René LeBoeuf, Michael Hendricks/René LeBoeuf Fonds, Archives gaies du Québec (Quebec Gay Archives), Montreal.

Queer people and allies continue to stand up against injustice. For example, in May 2023, the Brandon School Division in Manitoba rejected a call to remove books about sexuality and gender identity from its school libraries. On April 29, 2023, a group of lesbian motorcyclists formed a human chain around the library in Parkhill, Ontario, for a drag queen storytime event. Patricia Ginn, one of the bikers determined to protect the drag queens and the families in attendance, said of the anti-LGBTQ2S+ protesters, "They were in our face, pushing and shoving, screaming, calling us everything they could think of. They actually went up to several members who were walking in with their children and called them pedophiles."¹⁰

Given the violent backlash against queer people in North America and the rise in anti-LGBTQ2S+ legislation, we need to learn from artists and activists who have stood up against censorship and limitations placed on queer people. When our rights are under threat, we need to advocate for ourselves. Kiss & Tell has shown that art can be a potent medium for protest, dialogue, self-discovery, and self-expression—and for speaking truth to power. Art can be a venue for pleasure activism,¹¹ by exploring joy, laughter, healing from trauma, sex, body positivity, and increased understanding. We need to continue to fight against the erosion of our equal rights and the hatred and misinformation that is being fomented against us.

AN AFTERWORD BY KISS & TELL

We were activist artists working outside the academy, art institutions, and conventional norms. We critiqued these systems while borrowing from them and maintaining some ties to them. We put ourselves in a critical position and occasionally held up mirrors to current cultural and art theories. We were also angry. We wanted social change and justice. We spoke out from the margins, unwilling to accept our status as oppressed outsiders. We took up representational space, loudly, even though we weren't invited to the party.

Our work wasn't just about sex; it was multi-levelled and very complex. Our sex work got attention, and once we had that attention, we deepened and complicated the narrative to include class analysis, trauma, ableism, sexism, oppressive political systems and laws, and love. We were successful outside the system because our community and audience adored us and supported us. Our work was a fourteen-year dialogue with our community of lesbians/queers, feminists, political activists of many stripes, some cultural theorists and academics, usually queer, and the mainstream curious. This community was spread around the globe, although our local community was our lifeblood.

The images in *Drawing the Line*, 1988-90, have depths beyond the obvious binary of like, don't like, etc. The images grouped as narrative fragments pointed to complex relationships involving desire, sex, transgression, rage, and freedom. They were glimpses into bigger truths and stories. The formal aspects of the work that relate to art/photography tropes are largely missed. Philosophical, political, art historical, critical theory (the frame, gaze, etc.) were all in the mix. The sex distracted from this, but we didn't mind. The point is that we were intellectually rigorous in our approach and spent hours and hours in the studio. Our work reflects this; it stood up and it stood out (pun intended). It was the only way we would get any traction at all, since the art world steadfastly ignored us.

None of this was easy because we did not have institutional support. We all hustled side gigs throughout our tenure, including cleaning houses, subsisting on student loans, working in non-profits on short-term funds, living as cheaply as we could in co-ops and substandard housing, etc. We ended up exhausted. Who wouldn't?



Kiss & Tell, behind the scenes video for *Corpus Fugit*, 2002, multimedia performance, Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby.

The performance space was where we met our audiences face to face. The energy at our shows was incredible—the anticipation, the excitement, the longing, and the edge. It was an energy exchange; it was transformative, a direct experience for everyone there. But at the very root was trauma. We stood up there and ripped the Band-Aids off our own trauma, and we used humour, affection, a lot of interesting imagery, etc., to soothe the pain and triggering that occurred. As performers during some of the more intense monologues, you could have heard a pin drop in that room, as if everyone was just holding their breath. The queer community was, and still is, an extremely traumatized community. In the 1992 *True Inversions* video, it is front and centre for anyone to see—as it was in all our shows. That woman who ran running from the room during a performance of *Corpus Fugit*, 2002, was triggered and acted out what a lot of others were feeling. We pushed into edges of collective trauma by exposing our own and allowing for a little release. Dressing this up in sexiness, flirtation, laughter, and fun is what made it healing in a way. Only in retrospect can this even be articulated. At the time, it was too raw, too painful, too dangerous, and we didn't have a language for healing.



Kiss & Tell, photographic projections from *Corpus Fugit*, 2002, multimedia performance
Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby.



KISS & TELL

Lesbian Art & Activism by Kristen Hutchinson



Portrait of Kiss & Tell (*left to right*: Lizard Jones, Persimmon Blackbridge, and Susan Stewart), date unknown, photographer unknown, Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby.



WHERE TO SEE

Kiss & Tell's extensive collection of artworks, audio and video recordings, reviews, articles, scripts, and ephemera are part of the holdings of the Simon Fraser University Special Collections and Rare Books library. The following is only a partial list of the artworks that can be found in this collection.

SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY LIBRARY, KISS & TELL FONDS

W.A.C. Bennett Library
8888 University Drive East
Burnaby, British Columbia, Canada
778-782-3869
lib.sfu.ca



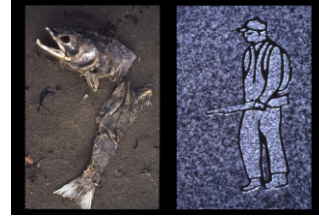
Kiss & Tell, *Borderline Disorderly* (detail), 1999

Image projection from
multimedia
performance
Variable dimensions



Kiss & Tell, *Borderline Disorderly* (detail), 1999

Image projection from
multimedia
performance
Variable dimensions



Kiss & Tell, *Corpus Fugit* (detail), 2002

Image projection from
multimedia
performance
Variable dimensions



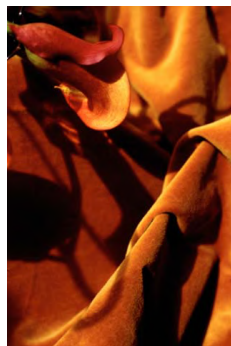
Kiss & Tell, *Corpus Fugit* (detail), 2002

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multimedia
performance
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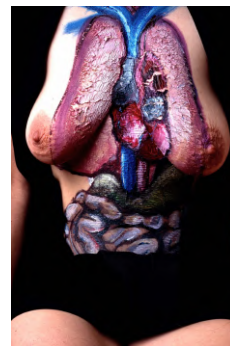
Kiss & Tell, *Corpus Fugit* (detail), 2002

Image projection from
multimedia
performance
Variable dimensions



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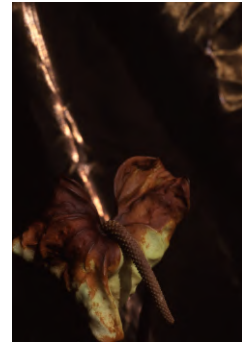
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performance
Variable dimensions



Kiss & Tell, *Corpus Fugit* (detail), 2002

Image projection from
multimedia
performance
Variable dimensions



Kiss & Tell, *Drawing the Line*, 1988-90

Photographic print
27.9 x 35.5 cm



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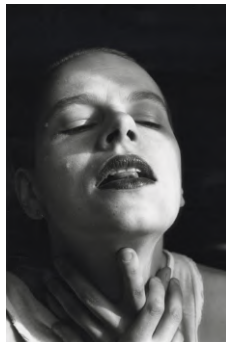
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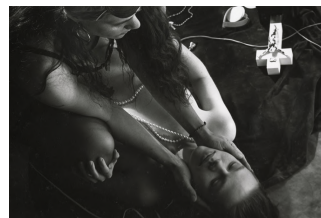
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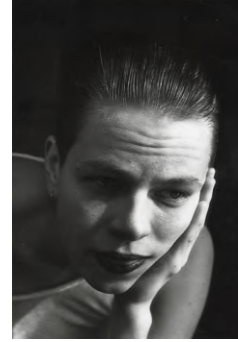
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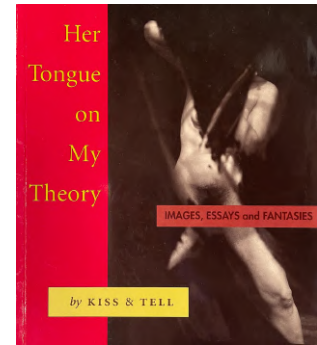
Kiss & Tell, *Drawing the Line*, 1988-90

Photographic print
35.5 x 27.9 cm



Kiss & Tell, *Drawing the Line*, 1988-90

Postcard book



Kiss & Tell, *Her Tongue on My Theory: Images, Essays and Fantasies*, 1994

Book
Vancouver: Press Gang Publishers



Kiss & Tell, *Her Tongue on My Theory: Images, Essays and Fantasies*, 1994

Direct positive
transparency
3.6 x 2.4 cm



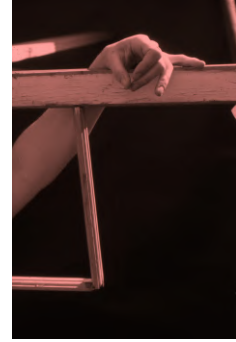
Kiss & Tell, *Her Tongue on My Theory: Images, Essays and Fantasies* (detail), 1994

Direct positive
transparency
3.6 x 2.4 cm



Kiss & Tell, *Her Tongue on My Theory: Images, Essays and Fantasies* (detail), 1994

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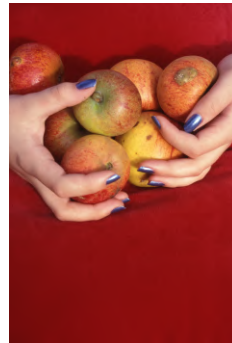
Kiss & Tell, *That Long Distance Feeling: Perverts, Politics & Prozac* (detail), 1997

Photographic projection
from multimedia
performance Variable
dimensions



Kiss & Tell, *That Long Distance Feeling: Perverts, Politics & Prozac* (detail), 1997

Photographic projection
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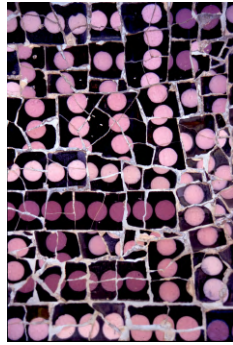
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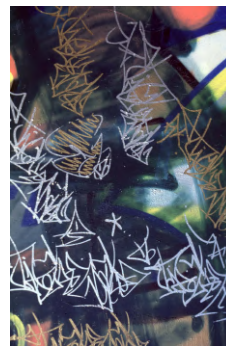
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performance Variable
dimensions



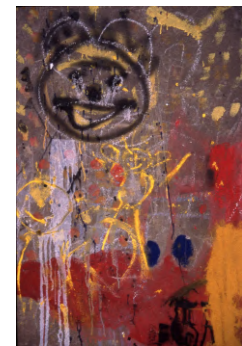
Kiss & Tell, *That Long Distance Feeling: Perverts, Politics & Prozac* (detail), 1997

Photographic projection
from multimedia
performance Variable
dimensions



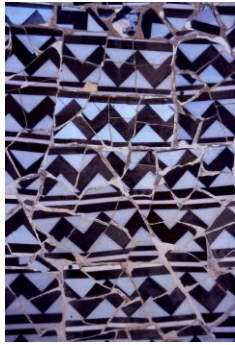
Kiss & Tell, *That Long Distance Feeling: Perverts, Politics & Prozac* (detail), 1997

Photographic projection
from multimedia
performance Variable
dimensions



Kiss & Tell, *That Long Distance Feeling: Perverts, Politics & Prozac* (detail), 1997

Photographic projection
from multimedia
performance Variable
dimensions



Kiss & Tell, *That Long Distance Feeling: Perverts, Politics & Prozac* (detail), 1997

Photographic projection from
multimedia performance Variable
dimensions



Kiss & Tell, *That Long Distance Feeling: Perverts, Politics & Prozac* (detail), 1997

Photographic projection from
multimedia performance Variable
dimensions



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OVERVIEW

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43. Lauren O'Neill-Butler, "Labor of Love: Lauren O'Neill-Butler on the Art of fierce pussy," *Artforum* 57, no. 6 (February 2019), <https://www.artforum.com/print/201902/lauren-o-neill-butler-on-the-art-of-fierce-pussy-78383>.
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1. "Trigger: Drawing the Line in 2015," Queer Arts Festival, <https://queerartsfestival.com/trigger-drawing-the-line-in-2015-2/>.
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KEY WORKS: DRAWING THE LINE: LESBIAN SEXUAL POLITICS ON THE WALL POSTCARD BOOK

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2. Canyon, *Live at the End of the Century*, 18.
3. Melanie A. Taylor, "The Masculine Soul Heaving in the Female Bosom: Theories of Inversion and *The Well of Loneliness*," *Journal of Gender Studies* 7, no. 3 (November 1998): 287, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.1998.9960722>.
4. For more about this exhibition, see Sylvie Gilbert, ed., *Arousing Sensation: A Case Study of Controversy Surrounding Art and the Erotic* (Banff: Banff Centre Press, 1999).
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6. Now called the Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity.
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KEY WORKS: HER TONGUE ON MY THEORY: IMAGES, ESSAYS AND FANTASIES

1. Kiss & Tell, *Her Tongue on My Theory: Images, Essays and Fantasies* (Vancouver: Press Gang Publishers, 1994), 80.
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3. See Peter Eleey, et. al., *Barbara Kruger: Thinking of You. I Mean Me. I Mean You* (New York: DelMonico Books, 2021).
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5. Kiss & Tell, *Her Tongue on My Theory*, 59.
6. Round-table interview via Zoom with Susan Stewart, Persimmon Blackbridge, and Lizard Jones, November 14, 2022.
7. Kiss & Tell, *Her Tongue on My Theory*, 6.

KEY WORKS: THAT LONG DISTANCE FEELING: PERVERTS, POLITICS & PROZAC

1. Caterina Pizanias, "That Long Distance Feeling: Perverts, Politics and Prozac," *Canadian Theatre Review* 95 (Summer 1998): 93.
2. See Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), and Jack Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998).

KEY WORKS: BORDERLINE DISORDERLY

1. The DSM manual, used by mental health practitioners in Canada and the U.S., defines borderline personality disorder as "a pattern of unstable and intense interpersonal relationships characterized by alternating between extremes of idealization and devaluation." See <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK430883/>.
2. Round-table interview, November 14, 2022.
3. The story, titled "Daddy's Little Girl," is included in the anthology *Forbidden Passages: Writings Banned in Canada* by Pat Califia and Janine Fuller (Pittsburgh: Cleis Press, 1995).

KEY WORKS: CORPUS FUGIT

1. Email correspondence with Lizard Jones, May 19, 2023.
2. Round-table interview, November 14, 2022.
3. Round-table interview, November 14, 2022.



CRITICAL ISSUES

1. In the anti-pornography camp, Andrea Dworkin claimed, "Pornography is the essential sexuality of male power: of hate, of ownership, of hierarchy, of sadism, of dominance.... Violation is a synonym for penetration [and] intercourse often expresses hostility or anger as well as dominance." See Andrea Dworkin, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1979), xxxix.
2. Ann Ferguson, "Sex War: The Debate Between Radical and Libertarian Feminists," *Signs* 10, no. 1 (Autumn 1984): 109.
3. Gayle S. Rubin, "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality," in *Social Perspectives in Lesbian and Gay Studies*, eds. Peter M. Nardi and Beth E. Schneider (New York: Routledge, 1998), 166-67.
4. Kiss & Tell, *Her Tongue on My Theory: Images, Essays and Fantasies* (Vancouver: Press Gang Publishers, 1994), 1.
5. Round-table interview with Susan Stewart, Persimmon Blackbridge, and Lizard Jones, November 14, 2022.
6. Kiss & Tell, *Her Tongue on My Theory*, 46.
7. Round-table interview, November 14, 2022.
8. The defendant in the case was Donald Butler, a video store owner charged with selling obscene materials. After a trial and appeal in Manitoba, Butler took his case to the Supreme Court of Canada. See https://www.leaf.ca/case_summary/r-v-butler-1992/.
9. See James R. Robertson, "Obscenity: The Decision of the Supreme Court of Canada in *R. v. Butler*," Law and Government Division, Library of Parliament, March 1992, <https://publications.gc.ca/Collection-R/LoPBdP/BP/bp289-e.htm>: "Mr. Justice Sopinka, writing on behalf of the Court, said that, while a direct link between obscenity and harm to society may not be conclusively established, there was nevertheless sufficient evidence that depictions of degrading and dehumanizing sex do harm society, and in particular, adversely affect attitudes towards women."
10. Kiss & Tell, *Her Tongue on My Theory*, 77.
11. Kiss & Tell, *Her Tongue on My Theory*, 77.
12. In the book *Coming to Power*, Samois, the first lesbian feminist BDSM organization in the U.S., discussed how S&M lesbians were vilified: "Lines are drawn and we find ourselves, quite unexpectedly, on the 'other' side. We are being cast out, denied. WE become heretics. It doesn't have to be this way—but the alternative is a much longer, more difficult road. We must re-examine our politics of sex and power." Members of Samois, eds., *Coming to Power: Writing and Graphics on Lesbian S/M* (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1981), 8.



13. Kiss & Tell, *Her Tongue on My Theory*, 69.
14. For more on G.B. Jones and the queercore movement, see Roxy Moon, "Delinquency and Debauchery: G.B. Jones and the Queercore Movement," The ArQuives, September 19, 2024, <https://arquives.ca/delinquency-and-debauchery-g-b-jones-and-the-queercore-movement/>.
15. In-person interview with Susan Stewart, Vancouver, September 19, 2022.
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17. Gilbert, *Arousing Sensation*, 36.
18. Gilbert, *Arousing Sensation*, 35.
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20. Eric Pianin, "Helms Wins Senate Vote to Restrict NEA Funds," *Washington Post*, September 20, 1991.
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25. Fuller, *Forbidden Passages*, 46.
26. Fuller, *Forbidden Passages*, 72.
27. Fuller, *Forbidden Passages*, 66-67.
28. The full text of the Supreme Court decision is available at: <https://scc-csc.lexum.com/scc-csc/scc-csc/en/item/1835/index.do>.
29. Kiss & Tell, *Her Tongue on My Theory*, 32.
30. Kiss & Tell, *Her Tongue on My Theory*, 14.
31. Round-table interview via Zoom with Susan Stewart, Persimmon Blackbridge, and Lizard Jones, March 22, 2023.
32. Round-table interview, March 22, 2023.



33. Round-table interview, March 22, 2023.

34. "Lesbian National Parks and Services," Shawna Dempsey & Lorri Millan website, <http://www.shawnadempseyandlorrimillan.net/#/alps/>.

35. Margot Francis, "Lesbian National Parks and Services: Sex, Race and the Nation in Artistic Performance," *Canadian Woman Studies* 20, no. 2 (2000): 134, <https://cws.journals.yorku.ca/index.php/cws/article/view/7619/6750>.

36. Round-table interview, March 22, 2023.

37. Son-di Bruner, "Queer Disability Arts Showcased at Vancouver's Kickstart Festival," *Xtra*, September 1, 2013, <https://xtramagazine.com/culture/queer-disability-art-showcased-at-vancouvers-kickstart-festival-52806>.

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39. Blackbridge, *Prozac Highway*, 1.

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2. Email correspondence with Susan Stewart, May 19, 2023.

3. Lizeth Zepeda, "Queering the Archive: Transforming the Archival Process," *disClosure: A Journal of Social Theory* 27 (July 2018): 94 and 99.

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6. Paul Logothetis, "Transgender or Gender Diverse Populations in Canada Suffer from Higher Rate of Mental Disorders and Suicide: uOttawa Study," Faculty of Medicine, University of Ottawa, October 9, 2024, <https://www.uottawa.ca/en/news-all/transgender-gender-diverse-populations-canada-suffer-higher-rate-mental-disorders-suicide>.

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GLOSSARY

Aguilar, Laura (Mexican American, 1959–2018)

A largely self-taught photographer whose work explores her identity as a lesbian Chicana woman. In the late 1980s and 1990s, Aguilar made powerful portraits of herself nude in various settings, from natural landscapes to interior domestic spaces. During this period, she also began taking portraits of other queer Chicana women in her community of East Los Angeles. Aguilar's best-known work is *Three Eagles Flying*, 1990, a self-portrait articulating the complexities of her bicultural identity.

Artforum

A monthly magazine founded in San Francisco in 1962. It features essays, reviews, and discussions of contemporary art. Providing a platform for critical engagement with the art of the time, it seeks to bridge the gap between artists, critics, and the public. It is highly regarded for its scholarly texts, with notable contributors like Douglas Crimp, Hal Foster, and Rosalind Krauss.

Blackbridge, Persimmon (American/Canadian, b.1951)

A multidisciplinary artist and writer whose work examines disability, queerness, and social justice. As part of the Vancouver-based lesbian art collective Kiss & Tell, she championed pro-sexual, anti-censorship messages around queer visibility and identity. Known for merging personal narratives with political critique, she uses her work to challenge norms, amplify marginalized voices, and initiate dialogue on accessibility and inclusion.

Cabaret Voltaire

Cabaret Voltaire is an artists' cabaret in Zurich that is regarded as the birthplace of the European Dada movement in 1916, amid the First World War. The home of early absurdist and rebellious performances and exhibitions, participants included co-founders Hugo Ball and Emmy Hennings as well as Jean Arp, Sophie Taeuber-Arp, and Tristan Tzara.

decisive moment

A photographic concept developed by French artist Henri Cartier-Bresson describing the precise instant when compositional elements, human movement, and visual dynamics converge. Photographers identify and capture a split-second moment when spatial relationships and time meet to create a comprehensive visual statement.

Dempsey, Shawna (Canadian, b.1963)

A Winnipeg-based interdisciplinary artist and activist known for her collaboration with Lorri Millan. Their performances, videos, and installations address themes of gender, sexuality, and queer culture. Their works, such as *Lesbian National Parks and Services*, 1997–2015, challenge societal norms and explore the complexities of identity, using humour and satire to provoke critical thought and social change.

Diamond, Sara (American/Canadian, b.1954)

An artist, scholar, and educator known for her work in media arts, digital art, video, and interactive installations. Her artistic practice explores the intersection

of culture, digital media, and storytelling to reflect on the impact of technology on society. A former president of OCAD University, she was the only openly lesbian university and college president in Canada until 2019.

Finley, Karen (American, b.1956)

A performance artist, activist, writer, and poet known for her work addressing social issues, gender politics, and sexuality. Her performances often include graphic depictions of sexuality, violence, and social taboos. Finley gained prominence as one of the NEA Four in *National Endowment for the Arts v. Finley* (1998), a landmark case on government arts funding and artistic expression.

Hammond, Harmony (American, b.1944)

An artist, activist, writer, curator, and educator known as a feminist artist. She co-founded A.I.R. (1972), the first women's cooperative gallery in New York, and as a member of the Heresies Collective, she co-founded the journal *Heresies: A Feminist Publication of Art and Politics* (1977). Her work typically uses found materials and explores gender, sexuality, and identity.

Jones, G.B. (Canadian, b.1965)

A multimedia artist, filmmaker, musician, and author known for her exploration of identity, sexuality, and punk culture. Her work uses humour and exaggerated forms of expression to explore queer desire and the construction of female sexuality. Jones was a member of the post-punk band Fifth Column (1980-95) and a co-founder, with Bruce LaBruce, of *J.D.* (1985-91), a queer punk zine that coined the term "queercore."

Jones, Lizard (a.k.a. Emma Kivisild) (Canadian, b.1961)

A multidisciplinary artist, writer, activist, and member of the Vancouver-based lesbian art collective Kiss & Tell. Her work addresses themes of gender, sexuality, and social change, blending storytelling, visual art, and community engagement. Jones's creative practice aims to amplify under-represented voices and explore intersectional identities to promote inclusivity.

Kruger, Barbara (American, b.1945)

An American Conceptual artist and collagist. Kruger is best known for appropriating black and white magazine images and overlaying them with concise phrases in white Futura Bold text on a red background. First begun in 1979, these political works provide social commentary on mass consumerism, gender roles, religion, sexuality, politics, and other facets of contemporary culture.

Laiwan (Canadian, b.1961)

Born in Zimbabwe to Chinese parents, Laiwan is a Vancouver-based interdisciplinary artist, writer, educator, and cultural activist who investigates colonialism and works towards decoloniality in her practice. She explores issues of embodiment, urban development, and questions of environment in Vancouver across a variety of media. Laiwan founded the city's Or Gallery, an artist-run centre, in 1983.

Mapplethorpe, Robert (American, 1946–1989)

A photographer best known for his provocative black-and-white portraits, self-portraits, nude studies, and still lifes. His work often explored sexuality and identity, with notable controversial images juxtaposing representations of eroticism, beauty, and pornography. Mapplethorpe's photographs sparked debates on censorship and artistic freedom, particularly after his 1989 exhibition at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.

memento mori

A Latin phrase meaning "remember you will die," in art a *memento mori* is a work, often a painting, that contains a reference to death. This may be a skull, hourglass, rotten fruit, or other symbol of decay or the passage of time. Along with the related genre of the *vanitas* still life, the *memento mori* became popular in Western art in the seventeenth century, when it often carried religious overtones. More recent artists have used the form to explore the relationship between life and death in various contexts.

Millan, Lorri (Canadian, b.1965)

A Winnipeg-based interdisciplinary artist and activist known for her collaboration with Shawna Dempsey. They explore queer identities, feminism, and societal conventions through performances, videos, and installations. Their works, such as *Lesbian National Parks and Services, 1997–2015*, engage audiences in critical dialogues about social justice, using humour and narrative to challenge stereotypes and amplify underrepresented voices within the LGBTQ2S+ community.

Opie, Catherine (American, b.1961)

A photographer and educator known for exploring ideas of American identity, the American dream, and LGBTQ2S+ subcultures. Her work includes intimate portraits of queer and trans individuals and blends traditional Western portrait conventions with contemporary themes. She uses her photography to challenge societal conventions, offering a critical perspective on gender, sexuality, and identity.

performance art

A visual art form in which artworks are created through actions or gestures by the artist or other participants, and presented live or through recorded documentation. Performance art originated in the early twentieth century with movements like Dada and Futurism and found a wider audience in the 1960s and 1970s after the decline of modernism. Common themes of performance art concern life experiences, the human body, and social criticism. Leading proponents include artists Carolee Schneeman, Marina Abramović, Ana Mendieta, and Chris Burden.

Serrano, Andres (American, b.1950)

A photographer known for his provocative and controversial work exploring themes of religion, death, and identity. His piece *Piss Christ, 1987*, a photograph of a crucifix submerged in urine, sparked outrage and debates about freedom of artistic expression and government funding. Serrano's work often challenges societal taboos, blending shock with cultural commentary.



Stewart, Susan (Canadian, b.1952)

A photographer, mixed-media performer, educator, and member of the Vancouver-based lesbian art collective Kiss & Tell. Her work explores themes of gender, queer identity, and the politics of representation, blending art and activism to challenge societal norms and provoke dialogue around visibility, censorship, and inclusivity in contemporary art.

Western Front, Vancouver

A Vancouver artist-run centre founded by eight artists in 1973. A locus of innovative artistic activity throughout the 1970s and 1980s, it played a key role in the development of interdisciplinary, ephemeral, media-based, performance, and electronic art. It remains an important centre for contemporary art and music.

Women in Focus Gallery

A Vancouver-based feminist film and video distribution centre and gallery, in operation from 1974 to 1992. The organization provided equipment rentals, workshops, screenings, and training while influencing national and regional media policy. Key members included Marion Barling, Susan Moore, and Zainub Verjee.

zines

Originating in the 1930s as science fiction fan magazines, zines more broadly are self-published pamphlet-like works. They are typically photocopies and limited in circulation, and they amplify marginalized voices through DIY design, affordable production, and grassroots distribution. Heavily adopted by punk and feminist subcultures, they prioritize artistic expression and radical communication over commercial interests.

Drawing the Line—lesbian sexual politics on the wall

Comment on *Drawing the Line*!

We want to hear from you. Use this card to let us know what you think. KISS & TELL

Great, fabulous,
unique, moving,
passionate, truly
wonderful,
hope for a new series
soon, if so, please do
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c/o Press Gang Publish
603 Powell Street
Vancouver, B.C. V6A
Canada

PRE603-V5K-P1-402110-1--0907---9
PRESS GANG PRINT/PUBLISH.
#101 225 EAST 17TH AVE
VANCOUVER BC V5V 1A6

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Kiss & Tell told stories about lesbian lived experiences through a variety of media, including photography, video, sound, music, and performances. Writing, reading, and publishing were central aspects of their oeuvre as they were greatly inspired by feminist and queer critics and writers. The collective produced a 1991 postcard book that included selected photographs and viewer comments from their *Drawing the Line* project, as well as a 1994 book of essays, fictional sexy stories, and photographs. In what they describe as a “writers’ group of two,” Persimmon Blackbridge and Lizard Jones each wrote novels that were fictionalized accounts of their experiences with disabilities.



Poster for Kiss & Tell's performance of *True Inversions* at the Vancouver East Cultural Centre, October 9 and 10, 1992, City of Vancouver Archives.

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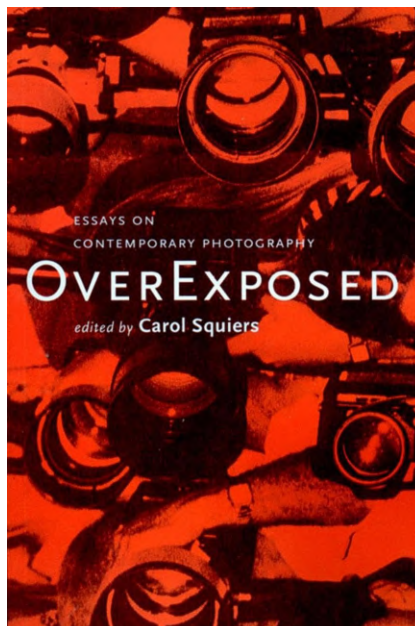
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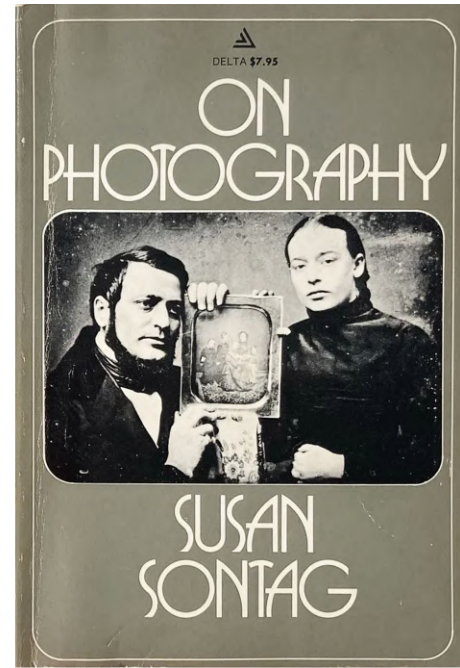
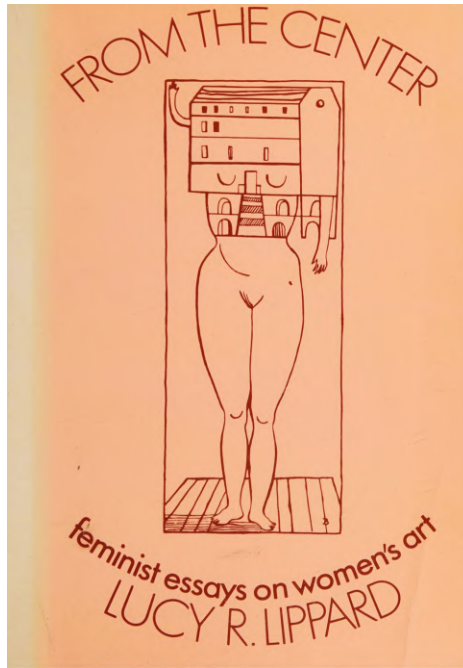
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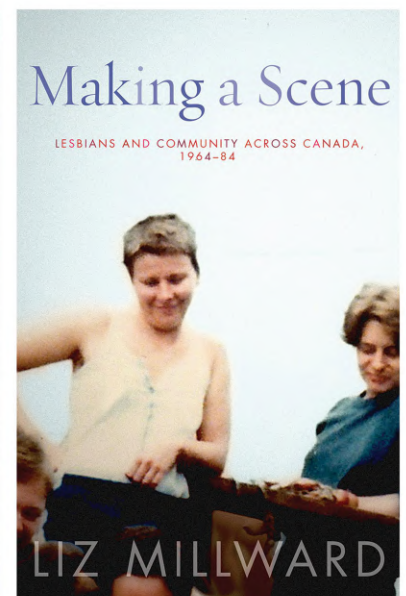
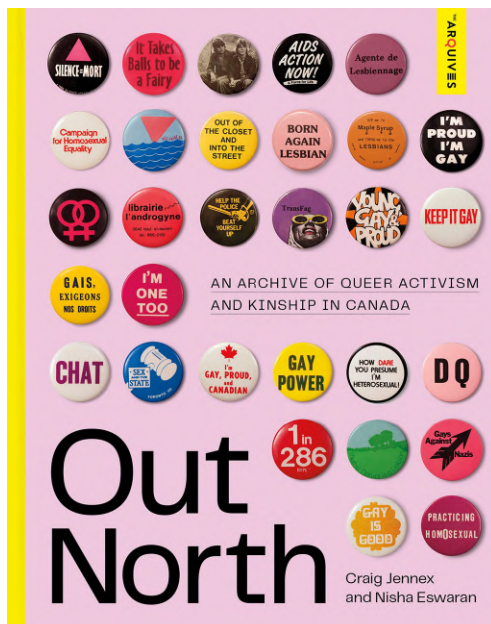
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Archives lesbiennes du Québec, Montreal

The ArQuives: Canada's LGBTQ2+ Archives, Toronto



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Sexual Representation Collection, Mark S. Bonham Centre for Sexual Diversity
Studies, University of Toronto

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Kristen Hutchinson is a queer and gender-fluid (they/she) visual artist, cultural critic, curator, writer, editor, and adjunct professor of art history, feminism, media studies, and popular culture. She received her PhD in the History of Art from University College London in 2007 and has taught at numerous universities and colleges in Canada, the U.S., and the U.K. She also teaches independent seminars in person and online. Hutchinson is the author of two other books: *Monsters No More: How We Came to Love the Denizens of the Dark* (2025) and *Prairie Tales: A History* (2017). They have been a nationally syndicated art and popular culture columnist at CBC Radio and the editor-in-chief of *Luma Quarterly*. Hutchinson is the co-founder of fast & dirty, a Montreal- and Edmonton-based curatorial and artist collective that creates projects challenging curatorial methods, as well as exhibitions and art events for short durations in unusual environments. They recently participated in a research residency focusing on Canadian lesboqueer artists and curated an exhibition titled *We're Here. We're Lesboqueer. We're Still Fabulous* at Artexte in Montreal.



"I first wrote about Kiss & Tell's *Drawing the Line* project in the 'Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual Special Issue' of the *McGill Daily* in 1993 and have taught and been enamoured with their inspiring and radical work ever since."



KISS & TELL

Lesbian Art & Activism by Kristen Hutchinson



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ISBN 978-1-4871-0361-3

Published in Canada

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Massey College, University of Toronto
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From the Author

I would like to extend a huge thanks to the members of Kiss & Tell, Persimmon

Blackbridge, Emma Kivisild, and Susan Stewart, for their generous help with this project, and to Lorna Boschman for keeping, sharing, and digitizing all the videos. Thanks to David Kloepper and Simon Fraser University Special Collections and Rare Books, Daniel Payne and The ArQuives, the BC Gay and Lesbian Archives, Artexte, and the Queer Arts Festival for allowing me to find so many gems within your collections. Thanks to Jenn Jackson and Or Gallery for your assistance and for providing such a welcoming space for my community lecture, to the Queer Arts Festival for including my talk in your programming, and to everyone who attended. It was a great pleasure to be an inaugural fellow in the Redefining Canadian Art History Program at the Art Canada Institute (ACI). I would not have been able to complete this project without the support and hard work of Jocelyn Anderson, Monique Johnson, Asna Adhami, Erin Silver, Emma Doubt, Sara Angel, and Victoria Nolte at ACI. I am especially grateful to my incredible fellow fellows, Alison Arris, Jennifer Bowen, and Sandrena Raymond, for getting over the bumps in the road together, and for all the laughs and friendship we have shared. I am so fortunate to have you three wonderful women in my life. A special thank you to Violet for all your encouragement and companionship, and for continually reassuring me that I could get this book written.

IMAGE SOURCES

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The Art Canada Institute would like to thank the following for their assistance: Archives gaies du Québec (Simone Beaudry-Pilotte); The ArQuives: Canada's LGBTQ2+ Archives (Daniel Payne, Jordan Saroya and Raegan Swanson); Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity (Megan Feniak); The Broad Art Foundation; Buddies in Bad Times (Kristina Lemieux); Canada Council for the Arts (Martha Young); Carolee Schneemann Foundation (Rachel Helm); City of Vancouver Archives; Galerie Nathalie Obadia (Marie Chappaz); Laura Aguilar Trust (Christopher Velasco); Lehmann Maupin (Jacob Daugherty); Münchner Stadtmuseum; Simon Fraser University Library (David Kloepper); Sprüth Magers (Monika Simm); University of Ottawa Library (Marie Noël); VINCE fine arts / ephemera (Vincent Hemphill); Walter Phillips Gallery (Megan Feniak); Western Front (Anna Tidlund); and Richard Banner; Persimmon Blackbridge; Lorna Boschman; Shawna Dempsey and Lorri Millan; Dyke Action Machine! (DAM!) (Carrie Moyer and Sue Schaffner); Karen Finley; Cheri Gaulke and Sue Maberry; Guerrilla Girls; Kristen Hutchinson; Barbara Kruger; Laiwan; Dona Ann McAdams; Jearld Frederick Moldenhauer; Catherine Opie; Andres Serrano; and Susan Stewart.

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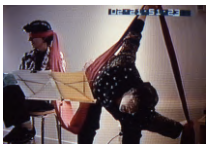
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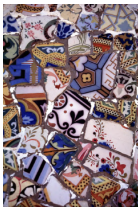
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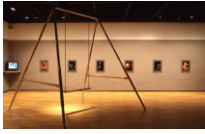
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Where to See: Installation view of *Much Sense: Erotics and Life* at Walter Phillips Gallery, Banff Centre for the Arts and Creativity, 1992. (See below for details.)



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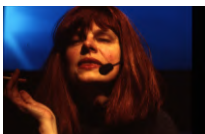
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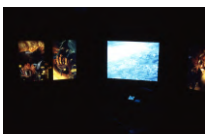
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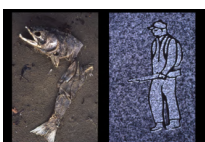


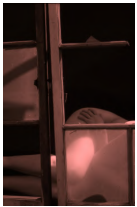
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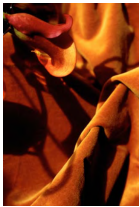
Layout sheet for *Drawing the Line*, 1988-90. Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby (MsC-165). Courtesy of Simon Fraser University Library. © Kiss & Tell.



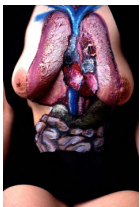
Photographic projection from *Corpus Fugit*, 2002. Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby (MsC-165). Courtesy of Simon Fraser University Library. © Kiss & Tell. Photo credit: Susan Stewart.



Photographic projection from *Corpus Fugit*, 2002. Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby (MsC-165). Courtesy of Simon Fraser University Library. © Kiss & Tell. Photo credit: Susan Stewart.



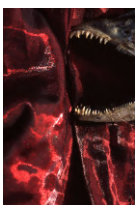
Photographic projection from *Corpus Fugit*, 2002. Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby (MsC-165). Courtesy of Simon Fraser University Library. © Kiss & Tell. Photo credit: Susan Stewart.



Photographic projection from *Corpus Fugit*, 2002. Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby (MsC-165). Courtesy of Simon Fraser University Library. © Kiss & Tell. Photo credit: Susan Stewart.



Photographic projection from *Corpus Fugit*, 2002. Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby (MsC-165). Courtesy of Simon Fraser University Library. © Kiss & Tell. Photo credit: Susan Stewart.



Photographic projection from *Corpus Fugit*, 2002. Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby (MsC-165). Courtesy of Simon Fraser University Library. © Kiss & Tell. Photo credit: Susan Stewart.



Photographic projection from *Corpus Fugit*, 2002. Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby (MsC-165). Courtesy of Simon Fraser University Library. © Kiss & Tell. Photo credit: Susan Stewart.



Photographic projection from *Corpus Fugit*, 2002. Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby (MsC-165). Courtesy of Simon Fraser University Library. © Kiss & Tell. Photo credit: Susan Stewart.



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Photographic projection from *Corpus Fugit*, 2002. Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby (MsC-165). Courtesy of Simon Fraser University Library. © Kiss & Tell. Photo credit: Susan Stewart.



Photographic projection from *Corpus Fugit*, 2002. Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby (MsC-165). Courtesy of Simon Fraser University Library. © Kiss & Tell. Photo credit: Susan Stewart.



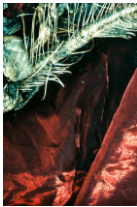
Photographic projection from *Corpus Fugit*, 2002. Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby (MsC-165). Courtesy of Simon Fraser University Library. © Kiss & Tell. Photo credit: Susan Stewart.



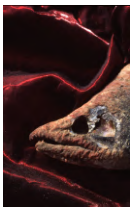
Photographic projection from *Corpus Fugit*, 2002. Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby (MsC-165). Courtesy of Simon Fraser University Library. © Kiss & Tell. Photo credit: Susan Stewart.



Photographic projection from *Corpus Fugit*, 2002. Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby (MsC-165). Courtesy of Simon Fraser University Library. © Kiss & Tell. Photo credit: Susan Stewart.



Photographic projection from *Corpus Fugit*, 2002. Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby (MsC-165). Courtesy of Simon Fraser University Library. © Kiss & Tell. Photo credit: Susan Stewart.



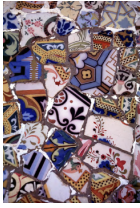
Photographic projection from *Corpus Fugit*, 2002. Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby (MsC-165). Courtesy of Simon Fraser University Library. © Kiss & Tell. Photo credit: Susan Stewart.



Photographic projection from *Corpus Fugit*, 2002. Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby (MsC-165). Courtesy of Simon Fraser University Library. © Kiss & Tell. Photo credit: Susan Stewart.



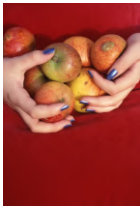
Photographic projection from *Corpus Fugit*, 2002. Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby (MsC-165). Courtesy of Simon Fraser University Library. © Kiss & Tell. Photo credit: Susan Stewart.



Photographic projection from *That Long Distance Feeling: Perverts, Politics & Prozac*, 1997. Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby (MsC-165). Courtesy of Simon Fraser University Library. © Kiss & Tell. Photo credit: Susan Stewart.



Photographic projection from *That Long Distance Feeling: Perverts, Politics & Prozac*, 1997. Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby (MsC-165). Courtesy of Simon Fraser University Library. © Kiss & Tell. Photo credit: Susan Stewart.



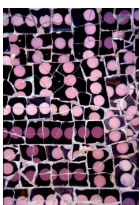
Photographic projection from *That Long Distance Feeling: Perverts, Politics & Prozac*, 1997. Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby (MsC-165). Courtesy of Simon Fraser University Library. © Kiss & Tell. Photo credit: Susan Stewart.



Photographic projection from *That Long Distance Feeling: Perverts, Politics & Prozac*, 1997. Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby (MsC-165). Courtesy of Simon Fraser University Library. © Kiss & Tell. Photo credit: Susan Stewart.



Photographic projection from *That Long Distance Feeling: Perverts, Politics & Prozac*, 1997. Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby (MsC-165). Courtesy of Simon Fraser University Library. © Kiss & Tell. Photo credit: Susan Stewart.



Photographic projection from *That Long Distance Feeling: Perverts, Politics & Prozac*, 1997. Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby (MsC-165). Courtesy of Simon Fraser University Library. © Kiss & Tell. Photo credit: Susan Stewart.



Photographic projection from *That Long Distance Feeling: Perverts, Politics & Prozac*, 1997. Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby (MsC-165). Courtesy of Simon Fraser University Library. © Kiss & Tell. Photo credit: Susan Stewart.



Photographic projection from *That Long Distance Feeling: Perverts, Politics & Prozac*, 1997. Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby (MsC-165). Courtesy of Simon Fraser University Library. © Kiss & Tell. Photo credit: Susan Stewart.



Photographic projection from *That Long Distance Feeling: Perverts, Politics & Prozac*, 1997. Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby (MsC-165). Courtesy of Simon Fraser University Library. © Kiss & Tell. Photo credit: Susan Stewart.



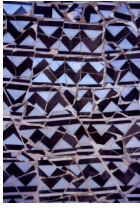
Photographic projection from *That Long Distance Feeling: Perverts, Politics & Prozac*, 1997. Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby (MsC-165). Courtesy of Simon Fraser University Library. © Kiss & Tell. Photo credit: Susan Stewart.



Photographic projection from *That Long Distance Feeling: Perverts, Politics & Prozac*, 1997. Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby (MsC-165). Courtesy of Simon Fraser University Library. © Kiss & Tell. Photo credit: Susan Stewart.



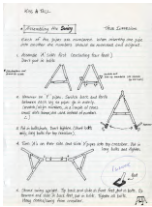
Photographic projection from *That Long Distance Feeling: Perverts, Politics & Prozac*, 1997. Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby (MsC-165). Courtesy of Simon Fraser University Library. © Kiss & Tell. Photo credit: Susan Stewart.



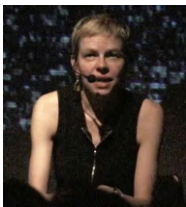
Photographic projection from *That Long Distance Feeling: Perverts, Politics & Prozac*, 1997. Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby (MsC-165). Courtesy of Simon Fraser University Library. © Kiss & Tell. Photo credit: Susan Stewart.



Photographic projection from *That Long Distance Feeling: Perverts, Politics & Prozac*, 1997. Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby (MsC-165). Courtesy of Simon Fraser University Library. © Kiss & Tell. Photo credit: Susan Stewart.



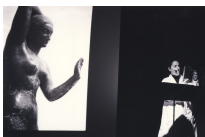
Planning sheet for *True Inversions*, date unknown. Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby (MsC-165). Courtesy of Simon Fraser University Library. © Kiss & Tell.



That Long Distance Feeling: Perverts, Politics & Prozac, 1997, performance documentation at Roundhouse Community Theatre, Vancouver, November 1997. Courtesy of Lorna Boschman. © Kiss & Tell.



That Long Distance Feeling: Perverts, Politics & Prozac, 1997, performance documentation at Roundhouse Community Theatre, Vancouver, November 1997. Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby (MsC-165). Courtesy of Simon Fraser University Library. © Kiss & Tell.



That Long Distance Feeling: Perverts, Politics & Prozac, 1997, performance documentation at Roundhouse Community Theatre, Vancouver, November 1997. Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby (MsC-165). Courtesy of Simon Fraser University Library. © Kiss & Tell.



That Long Distance Feeling: Perverts, Politics & Prozac, 1997, performance documentation at Roundhouse Community Theatre, Vancouver, November 1997. Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby (MsC-165). Courtesy of Simon Fraser University Library. © Kiss & Tell.



That Long Distance Feeling: Perverts, Politics & Prozac, 1997, performance documentation at Roundhouse Community Theatre, Vancouver, November 1997. Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby (MsC-165). Courtesy of Simon Fraser University Library. © Kiss & Tell.



That Long Distance Feeling: Perverts, Politics & Prozac, 1997, performance documentation at Roundhouse Community Theatre, Vancouver, November 1997. Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby (MsC-165). Courtesy of Simon Fraser University Library. © Kiss & Tell.



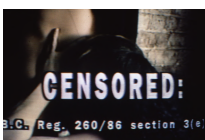
Video projection from *True Inversions*, 1992. Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby (MsC-165). Courtesy of Simon Fraser University Library. © Kiss & Tell.



True Inversions, 1992, performance documentation at the East Vancouver Cultural Centre, 1992. Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby (MsC-165). Courtesy of Simon Fraser University Library. © Kiss & Tell.



True Inversions, 1992, performance documentation at the East Vancouver Cultural Centre, 1992. Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby (MsC-165). Courtesy of Simon Fraser University Library. © Kiss & Tell.



True Inversions, 1992, performance documentation at the East Vancouver Cultural Centre, 1992. Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby (MsC-165). Courtesy of Simon Fraser University Library. © Kiss & Tell.



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True Inversions, 1992, performance documentation at the East Vancouver Cultural Centre, 1992. Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby (MsC-165). Courtesy of Simon Fraser University Library. © Kiss & Tell.



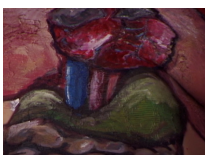
True Inversions, 1992, performance documentation at the East Vancouver Cultural Centre, 1992. Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby (MsC-165). Courtesy of Simon Fraser University Library. © Kiss & Tell.



True Inversions, 1992, performance documentation at the East Vancouver Cultural Centre, 1992. Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby (MsC-165). Courtesy of Simon Fraser University Library. © Kiss & Tell.



True Inversions, 1992, performance documentation at the East Vancouver Cultural Centre, 1992. Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby (MsC-165). Courtesy of Simon Fraser University Library. © Kiss & Tell.



Video projection from *Corpus Fugit*, 2002. Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby (MsC-165). Courtesy of Simon Fraser University Library. © Kiss & Tell.

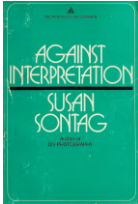
Credits for Photographs and Works by Other Artists



ACT UP rally, Vancouver, c.1989. Photographer unknown. Fonds AM1675 - BC Gay and Lesbian Archives, City of Vancouver Archives (AM1675-2018-020.4168). Courtesy of the City of Vancouver Archives.



Clothed/Uncloded #30, 1994, by Laura Aguilar. Collection of Cheri Gaulke and Sue Maberry. © Laura Aguilar Trust of 2016.



Cover of *Against Interpretation*, by Susan Sontag (New York: Delta Publishing, 1979).



Cover of *Bad Attitude: A Lesbian Sex Magazine* 8, no. 1 (1992). LGBTQ Serials Collection, The ArQuives: Canada's LGBTQ2+ Archives, Toronto (2009-038). Courtesy of The ArQuives.



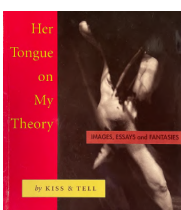
Cover of *Caught in the Act: An Anthology of Performance Art by Canadian Women*, edited by Johanna Householder and Tanya Mars (Toronto: YYZ Books, 2004). Courtesy of Google Books.



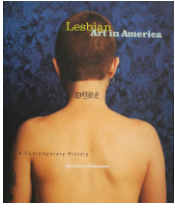
Cover of *Deneuve: The Lesbian Magazine* 1, no. 1 (May-June 1991). LGBTQ Serials Collection, The ArQuives: Canada's LGBTQ2+ Archives, Toronto (2011-080). Courtesy of The ArQuives.



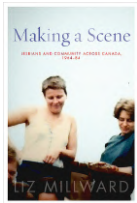
Cover of *From the Center: Feminist Essays on Women's Art*, by Lucy Lippard (New York: Dutton, 1976). Courtesy of station32.cebu on archive.org.



Cover of *Her Tongue on My Theory: Images, Essays and Fantasies*, by Kiss & Tell (Vancouver: Press Gang Publishers, 1994).



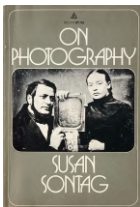
Cover of *Lesbian Art in America: A Contemporary History*, by Harmony Hammond (New York: Rizzoli, 2000). Courtesy of Modlitbooks through AbeBooks.



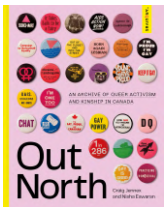
Cover of *Making a Scene: Lesbians and Community Across Canada, 1964-84*, by Liz Millward (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2015). Courtesy of Google Books.



Cover of *On Our Backs: Entertainment for the Adventurous Lesbian* 9, no. 6 (July-August 1993). LGBTQ Serials Collection, The ArQuives: Canada's LGBTQ2+ Archives, Toronto (2011-57). Courtesy of The ArQuives.



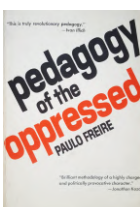
Cover of *On Photography*, by Susan Sontag (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977).



Cover of *Out North: An Archive of Queer Activism and Kinship in Canada*, by Craig Jennex and Nisha Eswaran (Toronto: The ArQuives, 2020). Courtesy of The ArQuives: Canada's LGBTQ2+ Archives, Toronto.



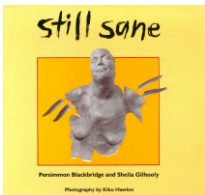
Cover of *Over Exposed: Essays on Contemporary Photography*, edited by Carol Squiers (New York: The New Press, 1999). Courtesy of amazon.ca.



Cover of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, by Paulo Freire (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970). Courtesy of Homeless Books on AbeBooks.com.



Cover of *Rites: For Lesbian and Gay Liberation* 5, no. 8 (February 1989). Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby (MsC-165 6-7).



Cover of *Still Sane*, by Persimmon Blackbridge and Sheila Gilhooly (Vancouver: Press Gang Publishers, 1985). Courtesy of Madness Canada.



Cover of *Two Ends of Sleep*, by Lizard Jones (Vancouver: Press Gang Publishers, 1997).



"Dip me in Maple Syrup and THROW me to the LESBIANS," metal button, c.1990-99. Collection of The ArQuives: Canada's LGBTQ2+ Archives, Toronto (CB507). Courtesy of The ArQuives.



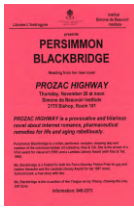
"don't be a wussy love yer pussy," metal button, n.d., manufactured by Bendy Buttons. Collection of The ArQuives: Canada's LGBTQ2+ Archives, Toronto (CB1914). Courtesy of The ArQuives.



Entrance of Glad Day Bookshop, Toronto, c.1980. Photograph by Jearld Frederick Moldenhauer. Courtesy of Jearld Frederick Moldenhauer. © Jearld Frederick Moldenhauer.



Eye Body #11 from *Eye Body: 36 Transformative Actions for Camera*, 1963, by Carolee Schneemann. Photograph of Schneemann by Erró. Various collections. Courtesy of Lisson Gallery and PPOW, New York. © Carolee Schneemann Foundation / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / CARCC Ottawa 2025.



Flyer for an author reading of *Prozac Highway* with Persimmon Blackbridge, at Concordia University, Montreal, November 20, 1998. Simone de Beauvoir Institute Fonds, Concordia University Archives. Courtesy of Simone de Beauvoir Institute, Concordia University.



Flyer for the event *Queer Culture*, at Buddies in Bad Times, Toronto, April 3-22, 1990. Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby (MsC 165). Courtesy of Simon Fraser University Library. © Buddies in Bad Times.



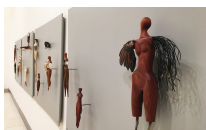
The GAP Campaign, 1991, by Dyke Action Machine! (DAM!). Courtesy of Dyke Action Machine! (DAM!). © Dyke Action Machine! (DAM!).



Gina & April, Minneapolis, Minnesota, 1998, by Catherine Opie. Courtesy of Regen Projects, Los Angeles, and Lehmann Maupin, New York, Seoul, and London. © Catherine Opie.



Guerrilla Girls, date unknown. Photographer unknown. © Guerrilla Girls.



Installation view of *Constructed Identities* by Persimmon Blackbridge, at Âjagemô, Canada Council for the Arts, Ottawa, January 23-June 3, 2018. Courtesy of the Canada Council for the Arts. © Persimmon Blackbridge. Photo credit: Della McCreary.



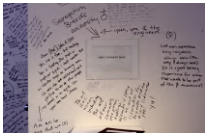
Installation view of the exhibition *Drawing the Line* at Cameraworks, San Francisco, 1991. Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby (MsC-165). Courtesy of Simon Fraser University Library. © Kiss & Tell.



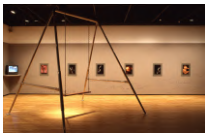
Installation view of the exhibition *Drawing the Line* at the Western Front, Vancouver, August 3-18, 1990. Courtesy of Western Front. © Kiss & Tell. Photo credit: Eric Metcalfe.



Installation view of *Pilgrimage Boudhanath Stupa (Kathmandu, Nepal) Moraine Lake (Alberta, Canada)*, 2019, by Susan Stewart, in *In the Present Moment: Buddhism, Contemporary Art, and Social Practice* at Walter Phillips Gallery, Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity, 2023. Courtesy of the Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity. © Susan Stewart. Photo credit: Rita Taylor.



Installation view of the men's comment book in *Drawing the Line* at Women in Focus Gallery, Vancouver, 1988. Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby (MsC-165). Courtesy of Simon Fraser University Library. © Kiss & Tell. Photo credit: Susan Stewart.



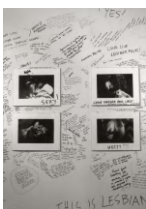
Installation view of *Much Sense: Erotics and Life* at Walter Phillips Gallery, Banff Centre for the Arts and Creativity, 1992. Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby (MsC-165). Courtesy of Simon Fraser University Library.



Installation view of visitor engagement with *Drawing the Line* at Cameraworks, San Francisco, 1991. Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby (MsC-165). Courtesy of Simon Fraser University Library. © Kiss & Tell. Photo credit: Isa Massu.



Installation view of women's comments written on the wall of the *Drawing the Line* exhibition at Western Front, Vancouver, 1990. Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby (MsC-165). Courtesy of Simon Fraser University Library. © Kiss & Tell. Photo credit: Susan Stewart.



Installation view of women's comments written on the wall of the *Drawing the Line* exhibition at Western Front, Vancouver, 1990. Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby (MsC-165). Courtesy of Simon Fraser University Library. © Kiss & Tell. Photo credit: Susan Stewart.



International Lesbian Week, September 1987, by Li Yuen (Laiwan). Courtesy of the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, Vancouver. © Laiwan.



Jim Deva at Little Sister's rally in Vancouver, December 1986. Photograph by Richard Banner. Fonds AM1675 - BC Gay and Lesbian Archives, City of Vancouver Archives (AM1675-S4-F22-: 2018-020.4469). Courtesy of the City of Vancouver Archives. © Richard Banner.



Karen Finley performing at Cat Club, New York City, 1987. Photograph by Dona Ann McAdams. Courtesy of Dona Ann McAdams. © Karen Finley and Dona Ann McAdams.



Lesbian National Parks and Services, 1997-ongoing, by Shawna Dempsey and Lorri Millan. Courtesy of Shawna Dempsey and Lorri Millan. © Shawna Dempsey and Lorri Millan.



Participants at an International Women's Day demonstration in Toronto, 1987. Photograph by Johanne Pelletier. Canadian Women's Movement Archives collection, University of Ottawa Library (CA ON0034 10-001-S3-I323). Courtesy of the University of Ottawa Library. © Johanne Pelletier.



Piss Christ, 1987, by Andres Serrano. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Nathalie Obadia Paris/Brussels. © Andres Serrano.



Portrait of Emma Kivisild, 2018, photograph by Suzo Hickey. Courtesy of Emma Kivisild.



Portrait of Persimmon Blackbridge, 2015. Photograph by SD Holman. Courtesy of Persimmon Blackbridge.



Portrait of Susan Stewart, 2024, photograph by Rhea Borkowicz-Stewart. Courtesy of Susan Stewart.



Portrait of Kiss & Tell (*left to right*: Persimmon Blackbridge, Lizard Jones, and Susan Stewart), 1998. Photograph by Della McCreary. Courtesy of grunt gallery, Vancouver.



Portrait of Kiss & Tell, 1994, photograph by Ali McIlwaine. Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby (MsC-165). Courtesy of Simon Fraser University Library.



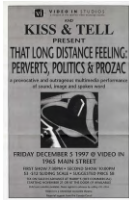
Portrait of Kiss & Tell, date unknown. Photographer unknown. Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby (MsC-165). Courtesy of Simon Fraser University Library.



Poster for the exhibition *A Lesbian Show* at 112 Workshop Inc., New York City, January 21-February 11, 1978. Courtesy of VINCE fine arts/ephemera, Miami.



Poster for Kiss & Tell's performance of *Corpus Fugit* at Festival House, Vancouver, March 28-30, 2002. Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby (MsC-165). Courtesy of Simon Fraser University Library.



Poster for Kiss & Tell's performance of *That Long Distance Feeling: Perverts, Politics & Prozac* at Video In, Vancouver, December 5, 1997. Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby (MsC-165 6-7). Courtesy of Simon Fraser University Library.



Poster for Kiss & Tell's performance of *True Inversions* at the Vancouver East Cultural Centre, October 9 and 10, 1992. Fonds AM1675 - BC Gay and Lesbian Archives, City of Vancouver Archives (AM1675-S3-: 2018-020.1685). Courtesy of the City of Vancouver Archives.



Poster for Kiss & Tell's performance of *True Inversions* at York Theatre, Vancouver, April 11, 1992. Fonds AM1675 - BC Gay and Lesbian Archives, City of Vancouver Archives (AM1675-S3-: 2018-020.1358). Courtesy of the City of Vancouver Archives.



Poster for an LGBTQ+ rally in Winnipeg, April 30, 1978. Canadian Women's Movement Archives collection, University of Ottawa Library (CA ON0034 10-001-S5-l67). Courtesy of the University of Ottawa Library.



Poster for *Lovers and Warriors: aural/photographic collaborations with Susan Stewart* at Or Gallery, Vancouver, October 2-30, 1993, City of Vancouver Archives. Fonds AM1675 - BC Gay and Lesbian Archives, City of Vancouver Archives (AM1675-2018-020.1265). Courtesy of the City of Vancouver Archives.



Poster for *Trigger: Drawing the Line in 2015* at the Queer Arts Festival, Vancouver, July 23, 2015. Fonds AM1675 - BC Gay and Lesbian Archives, City of Vancouver Archives (M1675-S3-: 2018-020.0257). Courtesy of the City of Vancouver Archives.



Protest organized by ACT UP Montreal in response to police raids of Sex Garage, a warehouse party popular with Montreal's LGBTQ+ community, July 29, 1990. Photograph by René LeBoeuf. Michael Hendricks / René LeBoeuf Fonds, Archives gaies du Québec (Quebec Gay Archives), Montreal (AGQ-F0107/S05). Courtesy of Archives gaies du Québec. © René LeBoeuf.



Protestors at *Drawing the Line* exhibition in Northampton, Massachusetts, 1992. Photographer unknown. Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby (MsC-165). Courtesy of Simon Fraser University Library.



"Protestors Put Heat on Red Hots," newspaper clipping from *The Province* (Vancouver, BC), December 12, 1982, page 4.



Recordings of Kiss & Tell's live performances by Lorna Boschman, 2022. Photograph by Kristen Hutchinson. © Kristen Hutchinson.



Review of *Drawing the Line*, "Photo Exhibit Succeeds by Letting Its Audience Talk Back" by Lou Cove, *The Valley Optimist*, May 11, 1992, page 40. Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby (MsC-165 6-7). Courtesy of Simon Fraser University Library.



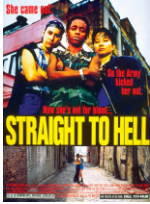
Spread from *Suggestive Poses: Artists and Critics Respond to Censorship*, edited by Lorraine Johnson (Toronto: Toronto Photographers Workshop, 1997), pages 82-83.



Still from *Sunnybrook*, 1995, by Persimmon Blackbridge and Lorna Boschman. Collection of Vtape, Toronto (098.09). Courtesy of Lorna Boschman. © Persimmon Blackbridge and Lorna Boschman.



Still from video documentation, *Before the New Millennium*, 2007, by Lorna Boschman. Courtesy of Lorna Boschman. © Lorna Boschman.



Straight to Hell, 1994, by Dyke Action Machine! (DAM!). Courtesy of Dyke Action Machine! (DAM!). © Dyke Action Machine! (DAM!).



Untitled (Your body is a battleground), 1989, by Barbara Kruger. Collection of The Broad, Los Angeles (F-KRUG-1F89.17). Courtesy the artist, The Broad Art Foundation, and Sprüth Magers.



Viewer response to *Drawing the Line* exhibition, c.1991-94. Kiss & Tell Fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, Simon Fraser University Library, Burnaby (MsC-165). Courtesy of Simon Fraser University Library.



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"WOMEN'S BATHHOUSE DEFENSE FUND: PUSSIES BITE BACK," metal button, c.2000. The ArQuives: Canada's LGBTQ2+ Archives, Toronto (CB1915). Courtesy of The ArQuives.



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KISS & TELL

Lesbian Art & Activism by Kristen Hutchinson

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Massey College, University of Toronto
4 Devonshire Place
Toronto, ON M5S 2E1

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Title: Kiss & Tell : lesbian art & activism / by Kristen Hutchinson.

Other titles: Kiss and Tell

Names: Hutchinson, Kristen, author. | Container of (work) : Kiss & Tell (Group of artists). Works.

Selections. | Art Canada Institute, publisher.

Identifiers: Canadiana 20240527143 | ISBN 9781487103606 (HTML) | ISBN 9781487103613 (PDF)

Subjects: LCSH: Kiss & Tell (Group of artists) | LCSH: Kiss & Tell (Group of artists) –Criticism and

interpretation. | LCSH: Lesbianism in art. | LCSH: LGBT activism.

Classification: LCC NX513.K46 H88 2025 | DDC 700.92–dc23