

# PATRICIA SWEETOW GALLERY

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## San Francisco Chronicle

### **Berkeley Artist Helps Create 'Museum of Lesbian Memory' 2-site exhibition uses art, artifacts to illuminate past**

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Attempting to meld art and history to chronicle a community's progress cohesively would seem, on the face of it, a fruitless quest; they seem to be countervailing disciplines. History seems linear, art spatial. History collects; art shatters. History records the past; art presents the present and suggests possibilities for the future.

But it was the challenge of resolving those contradictions that pushed San Francisco artist E.G. Crichton and Berkeley artist **Kim Anno** to collaborate on "Lost and Found: A Museum of Lesbian Memory, Part 1," which runs through Dec. 1 at two San Francisco locations.

The installation at the offices of the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Historical Society of Northern California, at 973 Market St., includes a map detailing the sites of long-gone lesbian bars, a collection of locks of women's hair and a low-tech, interactive commentary site.

A few blocks away, on the third floor of the San Francisco Public Library's main branch at 100 Larkin St., the artists present photographs, writings and clothing artifacts.

"We're trying to make a bridge between art and history," said **Anno**, 40, an associate professor of painting at both the San Francisco and Oakland campuses of the California College of Arts and Crafts. "Art can reveal the complexities of the individual, both visually and conceptually. One of the things we wanted to show is how complex our history is. People think of the stereotypes of what lesbianism is, but art allows those complexities to emerge."

**Anno** said the exhibition focuses on working-class and minority lesbians -- traditionally a marginalized part of a largely invisible population.

"When people think of lesbians, they often think of white lesbians who go to Dinah Shore golfing events," **Anno** said. "That's not at all what the spectrum is -- especially for women of color in certain communities (who) are in the closet and very hidden. They don't want to bring shame on their families."

Susan Stryker, an Oakland-based writer and filmmaker and the historical society's executive director, says the 15-year-old nonprofit organization warmed to the project because "it helps to show the work we do as archivists and historians.

"Art is what makes history alive for a wider audience," she said. "Most people think of history as something dead. It's in a dusty old museum or an archival box in a vault."

That's an issue of especial tenderness to the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender communities, for which the press for equality often eclipses the necessity of preserving and passing on community culture to emerging generations.

Crichton, an assistant professor of art at the University of California at Santa Cruz, said that any community that ignores or downplays its history risks losing its essence.

"I feel passionate about communicating history," Crichton said. "I feel like, if we don't do it, who will?"

**Anno** said the pair hatched the idea nearly two years ago. After a year of research, she said, they spent six months constructing the components of the exhibition, which they plan eventually to take to libraries and community centers both locally and nationally.

But having an idea and getting it funded are two different things, the artists said. Three groups granted a total of \$40,000 for the two-year project: the San Francisco Arts Commission, the Astraea Foundation in New York, and the Creative Work Fund, which was founded in 1994 to address the decline in funding for individual artists.

The artists fanned out and contacted lesbians of all ages to elicit stories and collect everyday items of historical relevance (which will later be donated to the historical society).

"We interviewed people in their 80s and 90s who were living alone in nursing homes," **Anno** said. "Some of the others lived by themselves, and we were the only ones who visited them. It was really sad."

For Crichton, 53, who arrived in San Francisco from Boston in 1973 ("There were six lesbians in three cars, none of whom were speaking to each other by the time we got here"), and was at ground-zero of the lesbian feminist revolution, collecting the material offered the opportunity to review her own history.

"We were like detectives at times," she said, "trying to unearth a history that hasn't been done this way. And we also participated in (that history), so there's a sense of looking back on a period with both embarrassment and pride."

The library exhibition site includes the oddly compelling "Lost and Found Companion," a large encyclopedia of "manifestos," as the book's subtitle has it.

"They are people's passionate writings about a variety of subjects," **Anno** said.

There is, for instance, the October, 1947, premiere of "Vice Versa, America's Gayest Magazine . . . dedicated, in all seriousness, to those of us who will never quite be able to adapt ourselves to the iron-bound rules of Convention."

Then there is the excerpt from the mid-1960s SCUM Manifesto, penned by Valerie Solanis, the woman who in 1968 shot and wounded Andy Warhol: "Life in this society being, at best, an utter bore and no aspect of society being at all relevant to women, there remains to civic-minded, responsible, thrill-seeking females only to overthrow the government, eliminate the money system, institute complete automation and destroy the male sex." (Tell that to the "Will and Grace" generation.)

The book, which is set on a chest-high, V-shaped bookstand, also includes touching photographs of African-American lesbians, the writings of women in the 1970s and reproductions of programs for such events as the "Conference on Violence Against Women (Dec. 4-5, 1976, San Francisco)" and "Becoming Visible -- The First Black Lesbian Conference (October 17-19, 1980, The Woman's (sic) Building)."

A similar bookstand nearby features video footage of what Crichton described as "sites important to lesbians." The footage is projected onto the "V" where a book would rest, and a visitor assuming it was an empty bookstand might miss the video footage altogether.

A glass case on a nearby wall features a collection of clothing: tank tops, T-shirts, a blue flannel button-up shirt, a leather jacket, a negligee and a pair of sneakers, as well as a large photograph, taken in the 1930s, of two Latina women dressed in suits.

"Clothing items were often signifiers for gender presentation and gender identity" that otherwise societally invisible lesbians used to identify themselves to one another, **Anno** said. "We wanted to make the connection between the '70s and the '80s, which is when most of the items come from, and the '30s."

In the James C. Hormel Gay and Lesbian Center, a small, cozy and highly designed space, three larger-than-life photographs of local lesbians loom over visitors. One is Rhonda (no last name given), a stylish African-American woman in a suit; another is filmmaker Fawn Yacker, and the third is Honey Lee Cottrell, a photographer and banquet waiter. Crichton said she and **Anno** felt the Hormel space lacked lesbian iconography, and appeared to be used mostly by males.

"We wanted to insert something into this area that would fit in but provide contrast," she said. "It's a mild confrontation."

In fact, the notion of transgressing locations appealed to the artists, **Anno** said.

"When we put our stuff in libraries, we're taking the idea of a library or a historical museum and subverting it," she said. "The people in libraries who want to do research are confronted by this stuff right in their face. And then we get the people who like art who go into the library and understand that history is a viable subject."

Also on the walls are a grid map of downtown San Francisco marked with the locations of such '30s-'60s lesbian hot spots as the Paper Doll (524 Union St.), Miss Smith's Tea Room (1353 Grant Ave.) and the Tin Angel (987 Embarcadero), among many others. Bars provided a much-needed place for otherwise isolated lesbians to gather and socialize, **Anno** said, and now have more or less disappeared due to the social nature of political and networking groups.

"I also think people got sick of sitting in bars and becoming alcoholics," she said with a laugh.

A large area painted to look like the inside of a closet -- replete with "archival materials" boxes on the top shelf -- features slogans and notions contributed by members of the public, including "Dykes Rule," "Women Born Womyn" and a seven-letter word for a well-known sex act, beginning with "F" and the kind of thing every child knows but you can't say on TV.

Crichton said the team is "not bound by the rules of history, so we can investigate it creatively in a nonlinear way." She said that in interviewing subjects, the artists-cum-historians would hear five different representations of the same event, something that led them to understand the mediums' built-in fluidities -- and flaws.

"It really brings home the fact that history involves memory," she said, "and memory is shifting and imperfect."