

BOOKS AND THE DISAPPEARING BODY

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Abstract

Through a questioning queer lens, the *Books and the Disappearing Body* project will explore the impact of the authoritative archive and surveillance on the queer body through performance and elements of VR technology. The thesis support paper will emphasize aspects of physical contact including the fear of touch during the current COVID 19 pandemic and the HIV/AIDS epidemic.

Throughout the paper I advocate for the preservation of human touch, emphasizing the significance of the body in relation to technology. The fear is that as the COVID 19 global pandemic continues and the loss of the sensorial body becomes more prevalent, accelerated technology will replace the need to touch.

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Introduction

In this thesis support paper, I will introduce my art practice and themes of past bodies of work by referencing artistic and theoretical influences. The description of the installation will provide a synopsis of what to expect in the Special Projects Gallery installation.¹

The four themes of the paper will include *Queer Archive*, *Touch*, *Surveillance and Control* and *Dominance of Digital Technology*. The term “queer archive” often refers to grass-roots organizations that focus on preserving and sharing physical objects, ephemera and histories pertaining to LGBTQ2S+ communities. For me the term also implies a shared knowledge of oral histories and sexual cultures that extend beyond a bricks and mortar space. This type of knowledge is passed from generation to generation and includes practices such as safe-sex that originated in the early days of the HIV/AIDS crisis to protect the sexual body from a virulent, unrelenting virus. *Queer Archive* will reference the challenges queer archives face through the types of ephemera they preserve. The section will convey how the book structure in the gallery installation comes to represent an omnipotent political force through the union of an authoritative archive and a tower of surveillance.

¹ The installation will be featured in the SPG Gallery at York University June 21 – June 25, 2021

The term “touch” for me represents the full range of person-to-person physical and energetic contacts including intimate sexual touch of the skin, the touch of the eye or the touch of breath that caresses ears with sound. *Touch* will reference the *Reading* performance in the SPG Gallery authoritative installation and the fear of touch that gripped the HIV/AIDS epidemic and continues to consume the current COVID-19 pandemic. *Touch* will also introduce components of VR technology through terms such as a *Guardian Boundary* cage and *Touch Controllers*. The theme of *Surveillance and Control* will question VR depictions of cell-like cages and suggest how the authoritative archive has partnered with forms of surveillance to monitor, shame and control the physical body. Details of the *Reading* performance will reference the VR headset and the sensorial control of the VR platform. The accelerated use of technology during COVID-19 will be explored through *Dominance of Digital Technology* as well as the pros and cons of VR technology.

The thesis paper will argue that the body and touch continue to be vital in spite of the prohibitions of personal contact and the increasing reliance on technology due to the global pandemic. One of the core questions posed is; can touch survive a global pandemic that requires the prohibition of touch and the onslaught of technology such as VR platforms that are poised to take its place? I describe the gallery installation and accompanying performance below to help illustrate the direction of the thesis.

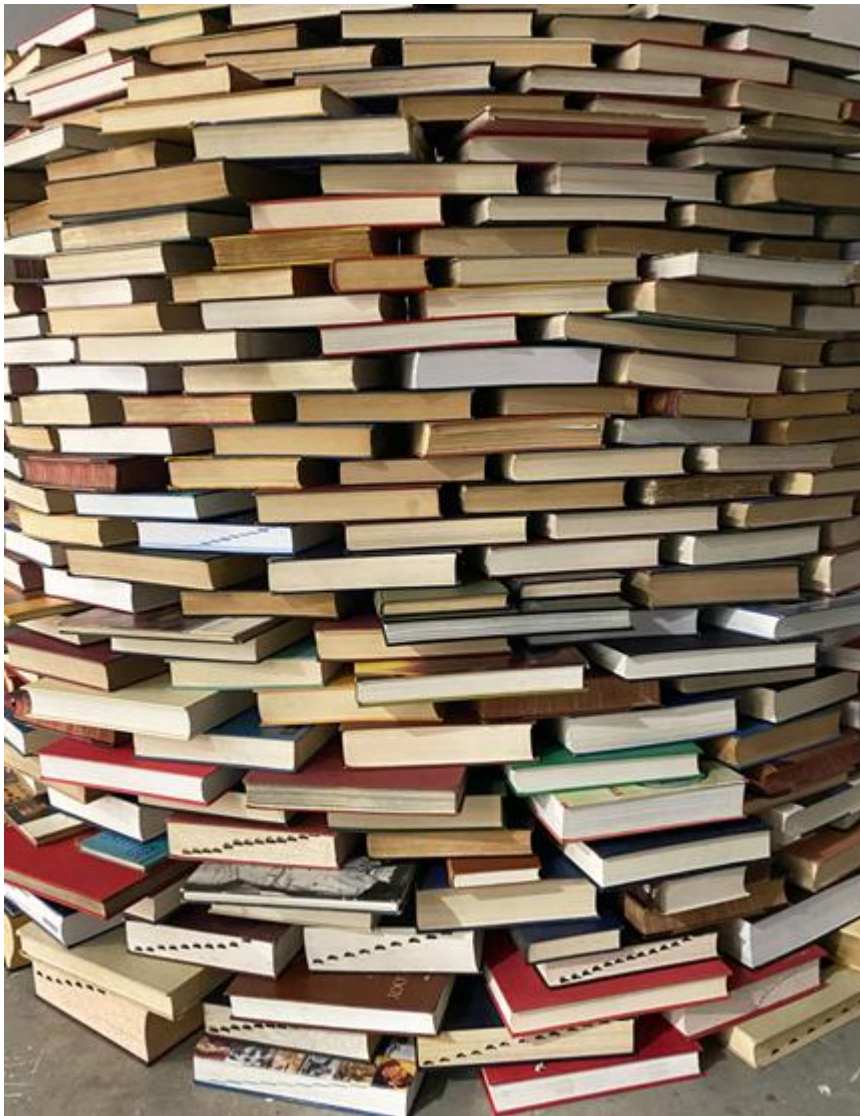
Description of *Books and the Disappearing Body* installation

My past bodies of photo-based work and videos have usually been two-dimensional or screen-based. The *Books and the Disappearing Body* gallery component will feature a large-scale sculpture installation constructed from a tower of books and adjoining video projections.

From the gallery entrance, the viewer will see a tower of stacked books with the outer vertical edge of the pages facing outward. This exterior wall of the column references a Bentham-like panoptic surveillance tower that Foucault discusses in his *Discipline and Punish*. Bentham devised the *Plan of the Panopticon* in 1791, an all-seeing, all-knowing circular eye of surveillance that secured and monitored numerous prison cells at once. (*Foucault, p 171, image 6*). [I have included this image in the Artistic and Theoretical Influences chapter, p. 29]

Figure 1

Surveillance Tower



Ceiling-high *Surveillance Tower* constructed of used books

Figure 2

Surveillance Tower detail



The *Surveillance Tower* is the exterior wall of the book column.

My book tower will reach the ceiling of the gallery where books will wedge the top of the structure to the layers of books below. The back side of the tower reveals an entrance that opens into a hearth-like, circular area surrounded by the spines of the same books used for The surveillance tower. It represents an authoritative archive of established knowledge. The surveillance tower and the archive share the same book building blocks and are unified through the singular tower.

This archive built into the centre of the tower will be diametrically opposed to the materials and contents of a queer archive. Much of the ephemera shared in a queer archive would have either been censored or omitted from this authoritative archive. Its circular, welcoming form could be either a retreat for contemplation or a cell for confinement.

Figure 3

Authoritative Archive & Encyclopedia Seat

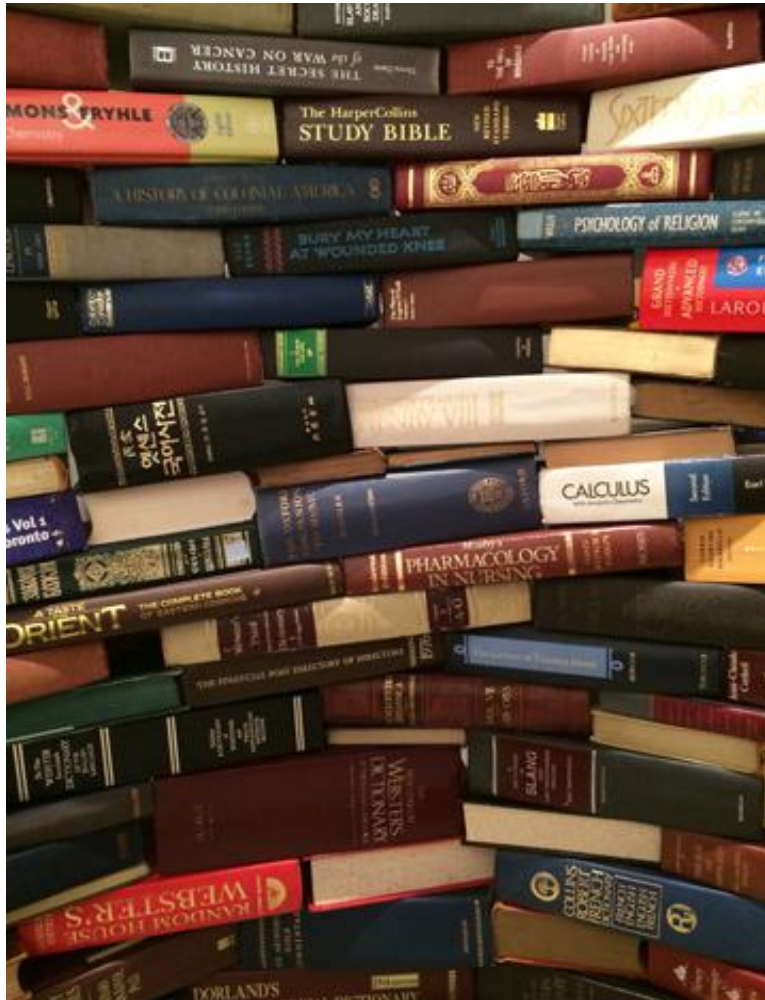


The *Archive* is constructed from the book spines of the *Surveillance Tower*.

The stack of Encyclopedias is the seat for the *Reading* performance.

Figure 4

Authoritative Archive detail



The *Authoritative Archive* and *Surveillance Tower* share the same books

The surveillance/archive book tower will be constructed on site at the SPG gallery. There will be a stack of encyclopedias in the centre of the archive circle. The encyclopedia stack will be used as the seat structure by the male performer in the *Reading* performance described below.

Reading Performance

In the performance, a nude male is wearing a VR Headset that covers his eyes and top half of his face indicating that he is either in the VR realm, or that sight of his physical surroundings has been compromised or altogether missing. The headset will not be functional during the performance, however the performer will be acting as if the headset is on and that he can still see whatever is going on in his VR immersive world.

The performer feels his way to the entrance of the archive and finds the top of the encyclopedia seat within. His refusal to remove his headset forces the performer to find his bearings through the touch of his hands. He is not confident on how to use his hands as they had previously been taken over by his avatar hands in the VR world. The performer feels with his hands to locate the top book from the encyclopedia stack. While sitting on the stacked seat, he lifts and opens the encyclopedia. He then starts to read

through the headset, feeling the text of the page as if reading embossed, Braille-like letters. Upon finishing a page, the performer gently rips the page and places it on the ground or lets it float to the floor. The page ripping is repeated after each page is read and dropped to the ground. This will be a durational performance. As one encyclopedia is completely read, the empty spine and cover will be dropped to the floor and the next book will be lifted from the seat and the same reading and ripping actions will occur. There are fifteen encyclopedias in the stack. As a book is lifted off the stack the seat height decreases.

Throughout the course of the performance, the figure is lowered as the page debris builds. The performance ends with the performer sitting on the ground, buried in book debris to the point where only the top of his head and the VR glasses are visible. The duration of the performance will be time-lapsed to reduce the amount of viewing time for audiences watching the video.

The nude figure in the *Reading* performance represents the body and its senses that are being consumed by technology. In the performance, the body slowly descends to the ground like the encyclopedia pages. *Reading* raises questions about the impending domination of VR, poised to numb and capture the physical senses of the body. The performance questions the ferocious ease with which technology can network the body into an all-consuming platform that refuses to relinquish control. The gallery space to the right of the book column will feature the *Reading* performance video and footage “taken” from the performer’s VR headset.

Figure 5

Reading Performance - Ripping



Performer wearing the VR headset is ripping the pages from the encyclopedias

Figure 6

Reading performance - Throwing



Performer wearing the VR headset is throwing the pages to the ground.

Figure 7

Reading performance - Descent



Performer is distracted by VR headset as he descends into the ground

Figure 8

Reading performance - Bodiless debris



Performer disappears altogether leaving the VR headset, ripped pages and a couple encyclopedias.

Locating Myself Within My Art Practice

I am a Toronto-based queer cis male visual artist and curator who has been producing work and curating exhibitions for the past thirty-five years. Throughout my career, I have co-curated independent projects through collective activities. Larger exhibitions were curated for site-specific spaces, established galleries and museums. ¹

I approach my artwork through an experimental photo-based practice that often explores the male nude body through the queer gaze. Whether it is my body or that of another, I approach it as a sculptural form intensified by its senses. Subjects have ranged from the barely visible nude body photographed through steam to the transformative nude body when bite marks bruise white skin in my 2001 *Gnawts* video, which specifically references the HIV/AIDS epidemic.

¹ Co-founder, *Artists Protest Projects*, video wall projections featuring protest work of contemporary artists, Nuit Blanche, 2019. Curator, *Under The Sun*, public art group exhibition, First Canadian Place lobby, Toronto, 2018. Co-curator, *Rare and Raw* international group exhibition, Leslie & Lohman Museum, New York, 2013.

When I recall earlier bodies of work, I often experimented with informal, low-tech processes, inviting intuitive, spontaneous methodologies throughout the course of the production. A major body of work from the early 1990's to 2018 is the steam photographs taken in bathhouses throughout Toronto and Hamilton. In earlier years, the images were photographed with disposable cameras while more recent images and videos were captured with a palm-sized waterproof GoPro camera.

Figure 9

Johannes Steam



Johannes photographed through steam with GoPro

Figure 10

Profile



Chris photographed through steam with a disposable camera.

I attempted to capture an ephemeral netherworld of queer steam spaces through their original light source and seat structures using a blind scan process where the weight of the steam or the gleam of skin surface compelled the lens as opposed to the eye. I used similar techniques in my 2003 *Ken Portraits* that I photographed with disposable cameras using existing light sources. I once again favored the scan effect of using the camera to feel my brother's body as opposed to using my eye to look through the camera's viewfinder.

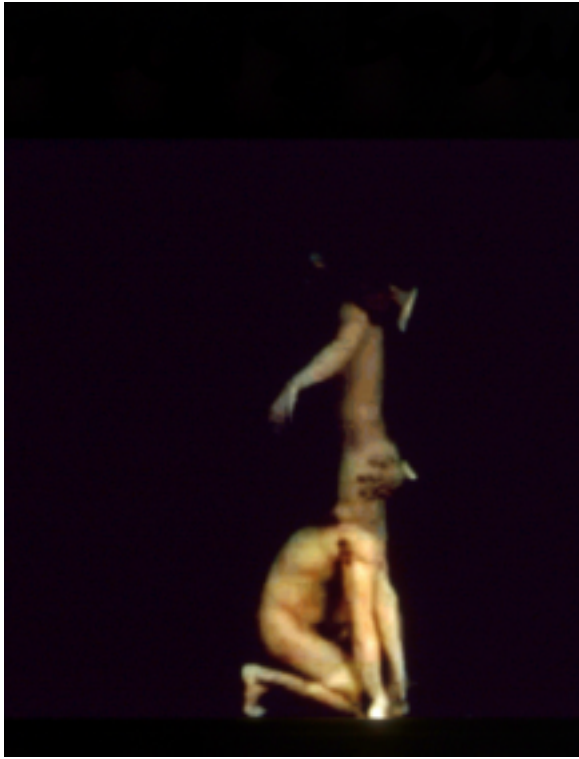
Figure 11
Ken Portrait #9



Experimental processes were often used during the production process. Two of the large-scale images captured from the *Gnawts* video were printed directly on reverse negative film surfaces that evoked both the positive and negative surface of a photograph. The smaller video stills were printed using a giclee process. [Figure 17]

Figure 12

Gnawts Body #1



Giclee print captured from *Gnawts* video

Figure 13

Gnawts Project installation view



Gallery TPW installation view of *Gnawts* project

During the 2020 MFA program, necessary COVID-19 measures were implemented; university studio access was restricted, businesses were forced to close and “Stay-At-Home” measures were enforced. It became apparent that I would not be photographing in steam rooms or presenting artwork in physical galleries. In researching alternative options to physical venues, I experimented with VR through virtual headsets. Here I discovered an intriguing “waiting room” mode referred to as the *Pass Through*, where viewers draw a “boundary” that delineates their object-free physical space on the floor. When drawing the *Guardian Boundary*, the physical world and body are barely visible, muted into a black and white grain background. This *Guardian Boundary* becomes the “safe space” through which one can move during VR interactions. The outline of the floor drawing transforms into a three-dimensional enclosed cage once the drawing is complete. If viewers trespass beyond the simulated cage, bright red bars converge around the offending limb, warning of potential objects that can no longer be seen in the virtual world.

Figure 14

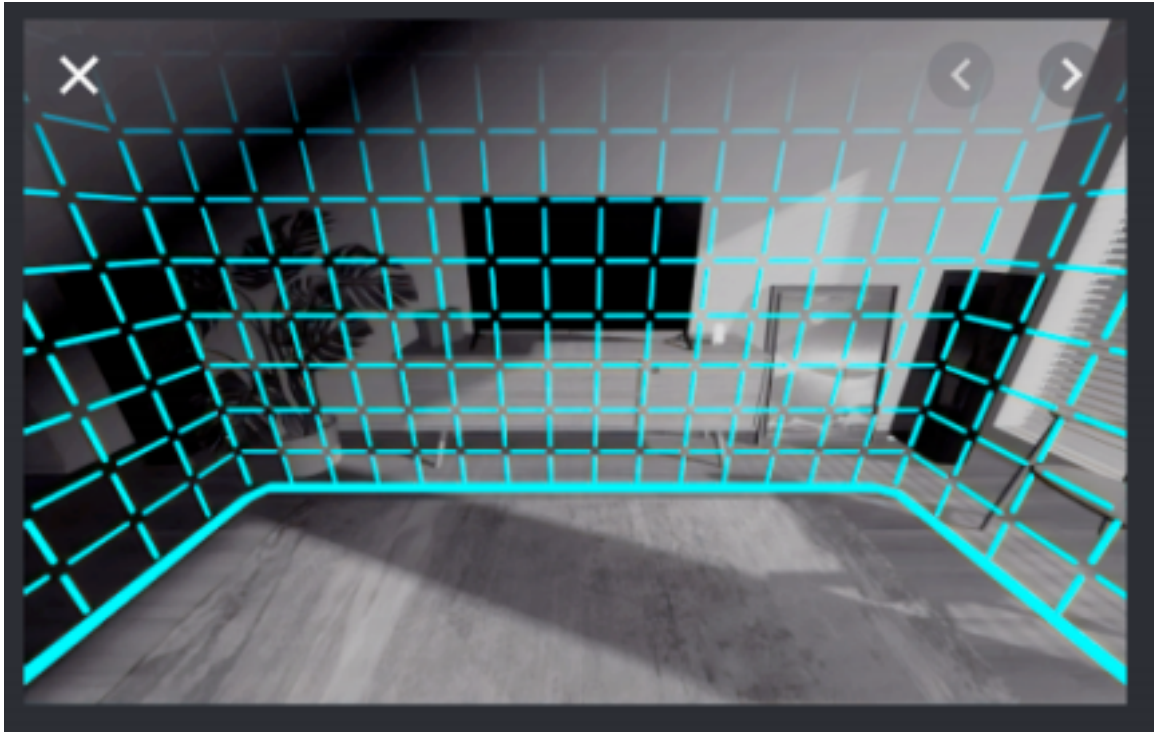
VR Guardian Boundary



VR Guardian Boundary showing cage and muted physical space

Figure 15

Guardian Boundary and Tracking System



VR Guardian Boundary showing cage in physical space

Artistic and Theoretical Influences

Tom of Finland

From the 1980's onwards when embarking on trips to local or international bars, clubs and bathhouses in queer communities, I kept recognizing a familiar artist whose works adorned the walls. His intricate drawings of muscular gay men in leather gear or uniforms cruising or fucking one another with over-exaggerated penises seemed to be the poster boys for the standard gay male fantasies. The images were the epitome of gay male desire and were drawn by Finnish artist Touko Laaksonen, better known as Tom of Finland (1920 – 1991). I was always curious about his drawing career and wondered when his images of confident, unrelenting gay men having unbridled sex started circulating in gay communities and the public domain. In the mid 1990's I was at the Chicago Art Fair where Tom of Finland was featured in a solo exhibition. I thought that a brave Canadian gallery could offer the same opportunity and I subsequently curated a show of his work at YYZ Artists' Outlet in 1999. The following year, the co-founder of the Tom of Finland Foundation (ToF), Durk Dehner asked if I could help jury their annual erotic art fair in LA. I flew down to jury the work and to experience ToF, a "living archive" built on the shoulders of a gay legend that launched his career on sexual desire and muscular male fantasies. For me, the term "living archive" expresses emotional and physical states that resonate through oral traditions, objects and art that continue to function in a current time and beyond. I write about my experience at the foundation in *Queer Archive*, p. 35.

Tom of Finland's prolific public career started in 1957 when one of his drawings was published on the cover of *Physique Pictorial*. By 1960 his work appeared in almost every issue. (Valentine Hooven III, 1993 p.85) At that time, to have sex with another man incited disgust and possible imprisonment. The publication of his iconic drawings released ten years before the Stonewall riots and birth of Pride forged new ground for eager audiences. Fast-forward to 2021, the press release for his solo exhibition at the LA-based David Kordansky Gallery summarizes his career: "Through his body of work, Tom gave legendary form to an imaginative universe that helped fuel real life world liberation movements and enabled gay men to have agency over their sexuality and bodies". (David Kordansky Gallery, 2021) The influence of Tom of Finland's work cannot be underestimated for queer male communities the world over. The Tom of Finland Foundation is housed in a residential home in LA and has a unique position in the canon of queer archives. As the artist's "dirty drawings" (Valentine Hooven III, 1993, p.74) have been rigorously censored, the foundation saw an urgent need to secure the artist's work. The mandate to "protect, preserve and promote erotic art" (newsletter, April 2021) became the core mission of the foundation, protecting Tom's drawings and erotic artwork by other artists from across the globe. The Foundation archive is a tribute to Tom of Finland's artwork and a celebration of the male sexual body. The artists drawings were first published pre-Stonewall and have resonated through the queer archive spanning mid-century body shaming to the HIV/AIDS fear of touch in the 1980's and 1990's to fear of touch with anyone in the 2021 global pandemic. As much as the drawings may have been produced to stimulate self-touch for the artist and audience, (Valentine Hooven III, p. 18) their legacy continues to influence the sexual gratification of generations of men, compelling viewers to pleasurable self – touch, sexual touch with another or fulfilling leather and uniform fetishes.

Figure 16

Tom of Finland



Untitled, Pastel on paper, 1990

Tadashi Kawamata

As the majority of my past bodies of work are two-dimensional wall pieces and videos, sculpture installations in galleries and alternative venues are a new way of working for me. When constructing an eight-foot round book structure consisting of hundreds of second-hand books, it occurred to me that the organic form could appear precarious. As appearances can be deceiving, the structure is quite solid, but has the feel of an earthwork that could fall in upon itself at any time. The structure brings to mind one of Tadashi Kawamata's iconic 1989 public art installations in downtown Toronto, precariously arranged in an alleyway between two prominent buildings. Over a period of six weeks, the artist layered scavenged wood boards in a semi-circular arrangement that seemed to oscillate from within the alley over the top of the historic bank facade. (Mercer Union, 1989) The seemingly perilous nature of the project introduced a large-scale public art installation that integrated wonder, fragility and durability. It is this perilous element of surprise contrasting with strength that I am reaching for when constructing variations of archival book towers out of well-worn, endlessly touched book pages.

Figure 17

Tadashi Kawamata



Kawamata's site-specific, large-scale public art installation, Toronto, 1989

Anselm Kiefer

A German mixed-media artist whose work has resonated with me over the years is Anselm Kiefer. The monumental scale of his work has an immediate impression of raw grandeur. As depicted in the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art YouTube interview, the artist describes his process where immense, immersive painting surfaces have been attacked and hacked with a machete; where manure of the earth exude color and scent to transport viewers beyond museum walls. (YouTube interview) His use of alchemic materials such as lead, straw and manure in colossal installations inspire transformative qualities of staining, aging and rot that I look for in my work.

Of particular interest is his monumental lead book installation, *High Priestess Zweistromland*, depicted in the German YouTube interview. (YouTube interview) where viewers are confronted by a monumental bookshelf of corroding manuscripts and their lead pages. The piece compelled me to ponder the infinite archives of humanity. Can these lead-eroded pages carry the theories, hopes and dreams of humankind? Whose histories lie beneath the weight of the pages and who chronicles the records to be included in the archive of all humanity?

My book structure illustrates a panoptic surveillance tower viewed from the outside and an archive when viewed from its interior hollow at the back of the tower. Through the single book column, I am hoping to illustrate the transformative nature of the archive. On the one hand, it is supported by an historic, oppressive prison guard tower, transmitting omnipotent power as mentioned in *Queer Archive* and on the other hand, conveys an embracing area of contemplation replete with authoritative

knowledge. As with Kiefer's initial *High Priestess* inspiration, I begin to ask, who curated the histories am I touching through these cast-off pages? Have stories or unwritten secrets been held or shared through these books? What becomes of a collection of secrets or shame?

Figure 18

Anselm Kiefer, High Priestess



Monumental books and bookshelf constructed of sheets of lead, 1985 - 1989

Louise Liliefeldt

A local performance artist I have followed for years is Louise Liliefeldt. It is through the conviction of her intense physicality that she is able to “examine the cultural conventions of spectatorship and the links between emotional/psychological states and physical experience” (http://7a11d.ca/festival_artist/liliefeldt-louise).

One of the artist’s early 1990 performances that has lived with me for over thirty years was a durational piece on Queen Street West in Toronto. Liliefeldt was atop a Le Chateau retail store overlooking the bustling pedestrian, bike, car and streetcar traffic below. The whole city was in motion along this popular Queen West strip, ignoring the sky. Upon looking up, the white gown she was wearing disrupted the skyline in an ever so coy manner. On closer observation, blood was streaming from her eyes over her static face. For hours Liliefeldt impersonated the main figure from Stephen King’s popular *Carrie* novel. Through her precarious performance, she commanded the atmosphere of the urban flow below through her affective performance.

I have performed in earlier bodies of work, however my preference is to be behind the camera. Due to current COVID-19 restrictions however, it is necessary for me to perform and document the piece. In the *Reading* performance, a nude male figure sits on a stack of encyclopedias in the archive and is described in detail in the introductory *Books and the Disappearing Body* section, (p. 8). It is a durational performance piece where a nude male wearing a VR headset reads from the encyclopedias

stacked within the shelter of the archive. Since I will be the performer in the video, I will absorb lessons from the memory of Liliefeldt's past and recent performances where elements of timing, stillness and motion are so expertly and effectively executed.

Michel Foucault

When queer theory was exploding through academia in the 1990's, I was co-directing artist-run-centers and galleries. I was not studying at a university at the time, but whether one was a queer artist in the studio or a professor, Foucault needed to be considered as a major influence within the realm of queer theory. I did not recall the full impact of his writing until I recently re-read his volumes from the *History of Sexuality*. How would I have known then that he would have a major impact on my process? I re-read the Foucault books I had from many years ago that were completely scrawled with Sharpie highlighters and diary-like notations that took me back to a younger version of myself. I had a feeling that I had returned home through the twenty-five year old marginalia.

Recently I have read his *Discipline and Punish* and *Confessions of the Flesh*. It is clear to me that much of his writing has had an impact on my life and the *Books and Disappearing Body* work. As a queer male artist it was reassuring to read an academic theorist reach back into the historical archive of time to sew a continuing thread between the ongoing desire for power and the need to control the body. In

Confessions of the Flesh he reaches back to the early days of Christian baptisms to illustrate one of the earliest needs for surveillance ordained by the church, relatives of the child and the community.

Subsequently he reminds readers of the Catholic act of Confessionals where control of the body was ensured through admissions, shame and guilt under the pervasive all-seeing eye of the priest. (Foucault, 2018, p. 101).

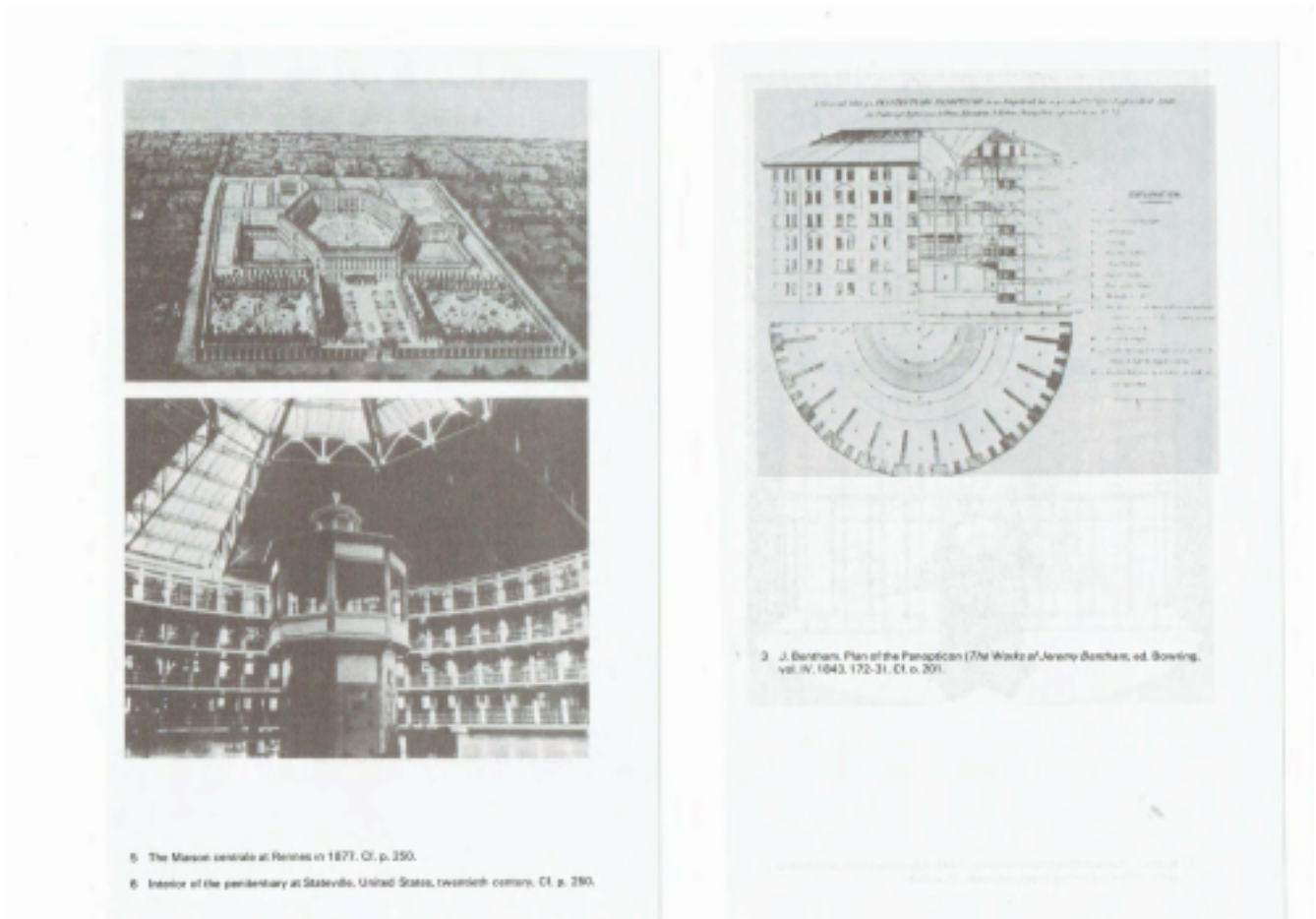
He continues his attack on surveillance through *Discipline and Punish* where he attributes the modern architecture of military barracks, schools, hospitals, prisons to the need to control urges of the body and its suspicious sensual actions. Of particular interest are his images of Bentham's evolving panoptic prison guard towers. (Foucault, 1977, p 201) The tower is the all-seeing, all-knowing eye of the prison complex. The cells all face the tower in a circular formation so that inmates can be surveilled at all times. At no point do prisoners see or know which eyes are scrutinizing their every movement, as the guards are secured behind blackened glass.

One theme of my paper explores how technology is impacting our lives. From social media platforms to smart houses and health apps, we are never without the touch of technology. From Marshall McLuhan's *Global Village* to Foucault to Michel Serres' *The Five Senses*, theorists and novelists alike have been predicting a range of technological incursions and intrusions on human-kind. It is more than apparent that omnipotent technology has a grasp on our lives, but the conveniences offered continue to seduce our sensibilities. It is Foucault's surveillance of coercion (Foucault, 1977, p. 196) that threads power and control of the body through history, conveniently settling under our computer keyboards during a

global pandemic. As friends monitor platforms for social updates, platforms mine personal data to sell. The same keyboards provide sexual pleasure and connections from webcams and dating sites. However, as Chief Marketing Officer of the xHamster porn site warns, “many free porn sites are unwittingly broadcasting your personal information, including which videos you watch, and which terms you search for, to hackers, neighbors, spouses and family” (Hawkins, 2017). This close circle of sharing “friends” brings to mind the historical surveillance of coercion that Foucault often refers to when writing about baptisms, confessionals, panoptic prisons or regiments to prevent masturbation and homosexuality. We have been trained through the archives of time to monitor one another. Historic surveillance, endorsed by the authoritative archive, has been a precursor to the strategies enforced by “big tech” and social media platforms where consumers replace the prison guards and prisoners while personal computers assume the role of the panoptic tower. It is from Foucault’s direct influence that I construct a book column for the installation that from the outside represents a panoptic prison tower from the past and a concrete condo tower from the present. Viewers experience the heart of the tower by walking behind the column to discover the interior archive hollow and entrance. Both elements shared by the one book tower conspire to enforce Foucault’s coercive surveillance.

Figure 19

Bentham's Plan of the Panopticon



Bentham's *Plan of the Panopticon*, 1843, referenced in Foucault's

Discipline & Punish, 1977, image #3

Queer Archive

Upon entering the SPG Gallery, viewers are confronted by a ceiling-high tower composed of hundreds of second-hand books. The multiple rows of books on the exterior of the column are muted in tone and color, representing a Bentham prison surveillance tower referenced by Foucault in *Discipline & Punish* (Foucault, 1977, p.201). Circling behind the tower, viewers discover an entrance into a welcoming circular form consisting of spines of the exterior book covers. An inviting stack of encyclopedias tempts viewers to sit and read. This sanctuary chamber is referred to as the archive.

The word “archive” often indicates a collection of historical records and can be associated with the word house, as in “housing a collection”. Derrida implies that the early archives were the residence of the authorities who decided what would be added to the archive and what would be left out. These authorities had the power to shape the contents of the archive. Whatever was collected in the archive would depend on who was elected to curate at the time. (Derrida, 1995, p.12) Historical scholars remind us that archives are not neutral bodies of knowledge (Zepeda, 2018, p.95), but instead reinforce political power through their very existence (Manoff, 2004, p.15). In my book tower the same pages that feed the surveillance tower, feed the archive. They are born of the same book bodies inferring that the two surfaces are united in their inherent need to oppress desires of the body.

In the past, the tower of surveillance and the archive have worked together to control the sexual body through coercive surveillance and authoritative archival collusion. The marriage of these two elements has ensured a continued alliance into the present where similar measures are implemented to co-opt and

control the senses of the body through technology. Thus, the book tower has the two-fold purpose of representing a panoptic surveillance tower and an authoritative archive. In her *An Archive of Feelings*, Ann Cvetkovich reminds us that attempts by queer archives to share emotion, sexual trauma and intimacy are not easily conveyed through the traditional archival formats and presents challenges to standard documentation processes. (Cvetkovich, 2003, p.7) Part of the solution for queer archives is to collect and share remnants of everyday detritus that resonate with touch. Kumbier provides samples of cultural ephemera that are “housed” by queer archives such as club night fliers, personal diaries, photographs, protest signage, zines, Tee shirts, pornography and buttons; detritus of life from queer street life, protest marches and bar walls. (Kumbier, 2014, p.22). The book tower installation is built with hundreds of discarded used books that carry the touch of personal histories; an archive of life evidenced through the marginalia and assorted random bookmarks.

In the *Reading* performance a male nude performer sits in the heart of the book column referred to as the archive. The performer is wearing a VR headset that compromises his vision and is therefore necessary to experience the world through touch. In the archive, our sense of touch is usually prohibited without gloves. The reading and ripping of each encyclopedia would be forbidden within an archive and represents a need or desire for transformational change. The eventual lowering of the male performer beneath the pages of text conveys a metaphoric descent of the body as he joins the detritus of torn pages on the ground. By the end of the performance, the only remaining item visible from the body is the VR headset.

The performer identifies as queer. For centuries, queer bodies have been the subjects of surveillance by authorities, due to the sexual nature of our desires. Thus, when envisioning the *Reading* performance, I felt it necessary to be staged by a queer nude male; unapologetic and; unashamed of his natural body that has provoked fear for authorities for centuries. As the digital age tightens its grip on affective transmissions of everyday objects through technologies such as VR, the book object, like the body, is under siege by technology. The pages of the physical book are rapidly fading through mounting pressures to succumb to sensory data formats such as audio books, VR experiences and cloud folders for the sake of expediency, space, accessibility and convenience. In his 1985 book *The Five Senses*, Michel Serres and others before him lament how the loss of the sensorial body and the transmission of affective objects are being replaced by digital technology (Serres, 1985, p. 50). In her *Queer Phenomenology*, Sara Ahmed highlights the relevance of objects and encourages readers to ask questions of touched materials that have their own orientations; orientations that involve secrets or histories that “no archive can uncover or recover” (Ahmed, 2006, p. 152). And just as we can never hope to recover intimate secrets of objects, we are at the mercy of the irreplaceable sexual body to uncover sensual desires that are also not shared through traditional archives.

There are however archives that could provide hope for the sexual body. I recall the Tom of Finland Foundation where I stayed in 2001 to jury their annual erotic art fair. The week-long experience introduced me to insights from an immersive “living archive of desire” environment. In 2000, Horacio N. Roque Ramirez used the “living archive” term in the title of his essay, *A Living Archive of Desire: Teresita La Campesina and the Embodiment of Queer Latino Community Histories* to reference queer

Latino community histories in San Francisco (Ramirez, 2000)). I use the term similarly to express how sexual encounters, physical desires and embodied memories are experienced, collected, and shared through oral traditions such as gossip and how objects such as sex toys, fetish apparel and art resonate with affective desire from one generation to the next. It is this timeless desire that the Tom of Finland Foundation strives to protect and preserve.

The foundation headquarters is the house where Tom lived for much of his later life. The visiting artist-in-residence sleeps in the attic, the heart of the foundation where celebrated Finnish-born artist, Touko Laaksonen, created his exquisite drawings of confident gay men with enlarged penises. In this evocative house one experienced the environment that the artist worked with first hand. You live within the walls of an iconic legend, from the attic to the basement. As the attic represents the tenacious craft of the foundation, the basement of the headquarters is true to form of the full heart of the Tom of Finland experience, celebrating the male body through a BDSM dungeon. As with many dungeons, there is a combination of fetish and fantasy. Somewhat like a cell, this timeless subterranean space rejects Bentham's panoptic "all seeing eye" (Foucault, 1977, p. 201) and the *Guardian Boundary* cage of the VR world. Instead, - whips, paddles, slings and shackles are the furnishings of this home. This functioning shrine to the sexual body is timeless like the VR world, but unlike the VR world, all of one's erotic senses are charged through real time pleasures. And unlike the VR world, the body persists as a chapel to all of its senses, not a figment of one's imagination through a headset. In this setting, the erotic body controls the senses. This is the living ToF archive that welcomes you home through the union of lived history, desire and pleasures that celebrate the physical body.

Touch

The naked male figure in the *Reading* performance is the locus for touch in the installation and it is through him that the conflict between touch and technology plays out. My previous work has used the male figure and touch as a way to express anxieties, fears and resilience. As a queer cis male, I have come to trust the touch of another's body as a sphere of knowledge.

In the *Reading* performance, the nude performer stumbles into the archive wearing a VR headset. In my narrative, I envision that he goes to the archive in search of a book of knowledge that will divest him from the virtual world he is experiencing through the headset. The experience he is seeing through the headset will be projected on an adjoining wall for viewers. We suspect the headset controls him and that he needs to keep skimming and searching through encyclopedias for an answer as to how to escape the VR realm. As the performer has no sight in the physical world, he has to feel and touch every element of the archive down to the smallest detail of text on a page. He is trying to regain a sense of his physical body through touch. After he touches all the text of each encyclopedia page, he rips it out and lets it fall to the ground, dispensing with pages that are of no use to him. After he rips all the pages out of the bindings of an encyclopedia, he lets the covers fall to the ground. The more pages he rips from the encyclopedias, the lower his seat descends. He is gradually sinking into the ground, unaware of the fact that he is causing this descent. Soon he disappears beneath pages of text, oblivious to the fact that he could remove his headset to regain control of his body.

As the performance progresses, he continues the page ripping at a quicker pace realizing he can't be in the physical world and the virtual world at the same time. He suspects through his quickened pace that he is running out of time and that the choice between the two worlds will be made for him. The performer, his body and ability to feel, disappears into the page debris on the archive floor. The only element remaining is the headset looking upward without sight.

During a catastrophic crisis, we often feel that we are walking blind; blind to solutions and blind to one another. As the COVID-19 virus escalates through global populations, gay men recall a not too distant past when the HIV/AIDS epidemic decimated and terrified the gay male population from the early 1980's onwards. For many queers there is an overwhelming sense of déjà vu. We have been here before. During the terror of HIV/AIDS, gay men were virtually frozen with the fear of touching one another. When David Leonhardt compares the HIV/AIDS crisis to COVID-19, he relates the similarities through "absolutist" behaviors where anything, such as touch, that has the slightest risk of virus, is eliminated from one's life (Leonhardt, 2021, para. 1). He feels the behavior is equivalent to the instinct that led gay men to stop having sex with one another during the HIV/AIDS crisis. (Leonhardt, 2021, para.2). When Ahmed refers to touch of the past, she recalls the psychological and physical effects that accompanied the "untouchable" stigma and "othering" through the HIV/AIDS crisis. (Ahmed, 2006, p. 115) ; effects that will inevitably re-traumatize during the COVID-19 crisis.

During the current pandemic, the masks, gloves and PPE that are worn ensures that touch is not only eliminated but also stigmatized as it was during HIV/AIDS. Due to the necessity to wear masks,

emotions, such as fear, happiness, anger and sadness, can no longer be fully expressed through the face. The wonders of the body are not to be trusted as touch of another person is prohibited to the confines of family/partnered “bubbles”. We can be assured that Leonhardt’s absolutist behavior is taking effect on touch and the body as people cross the street to avoid oncoming sidewalk pedestrian traffic that might potentially carry COVID-19. The stigma around touch that surrounded HIV/AIDS now consumes all of humanity. There is an escalating suspicion that as paranoia sets in, our bubbles or “COVID cages” will become the normalized living condition. (DiMatteo, 2021, para 4) As a touchless regime is enforced, the immersive seduction of VR has the potential to pacify and dull feelings of loneliness caused by the prohibition of touch. Since the pandemic is causing an accelerated race towards “greater teleworking, digitalization and automation” (DiMatteo, 2021, para 7), we risk normalizing a touchless society. The concern is that as touchless time progresses, the experience of personal contact becomes increasingly foreign, increasingly irrelevant and poised to be replaced by immersive platforms such as VR. It is anyone’s guess as to whether or not touch will lose its stigma or how the lack of touch during COVID-19 will ultimately affect our future touch.

COVID-19 has necessitated particular considerations for art practices and processes. My research into the VR world started with a desire to see how real life artwork would translate on the walls of a VR gallery. I leased 1500 sq ft of virtual space through a virtual art fair and installed large-scale photographic prints into a virtual gallery. One of the first things I discovered about the VR world is that the viewer functions in a realm that is controlled by a headset and networked to *Touch Controllers* held in each hand. The headset, *Touch Controllers* and touch from flesh of the hands are symbiotically

networked through the Internet so that real hands become simulated avatar hands in VR. The immediacy of haptic hand sensations through the controllers is shockingly fast and real. It occurred to me that highly controlled immersive VR environments have already become surrogates for IRL experience. Through sensitive buttons that provide haptic feedback to the screen in the headset, the handheld *Touch Controllers* allow the performer to manipulate his virtual right and left avatar hands just as he would his real hands. Through the controllers, the performer can manipulate objects, point, grip and squeeze his avatar hand just as he would his real hand. The performer in *Reading* however, has abandoned his *Touch Controllers* for his real hands and is still attempting to use his physical sense of touch, but is not receiving desired results. Without his *Touch Controllers*, the performer is trapped in the physical world without the ability to decipher pages of text through either the touch of his skin or the abandoned hand held controls of the VR world.

At the beginning of the performance, before entering the archive, the performer first draws an outline of his play area on the floor with his *Touch Controllers*. The play area becomes a *Guardian Boundary* that defines a physical floor surface that is free from objects. This designated boundary area transforms into a 3 – D cage consisting of simulated bars preventing limbs from trespassing beyond the space outlined in the boundary. In the VR world, the cage is portrayed like a cell. It is often depicted with gentle blue bars that abruptly convert into threatening red colors that converge on offending limbs threatening to abandon the VR realm for the physical world.

Historically, queer touch and self-touch have been condemned as a sexual transgression. It has taken generations for queers to break out from under the reins of dominant cultural confinements. When Foucault refers to surveillance and control of the body through both homosexuality and self-touch, he draws a direct line from the theological past of the compartmentalized Jesuit Priest cells to the surveillance strategies used in present day schools, factories and military barracks including Bentham's all-seeing, all-knowing, "panoptic eye" that guards hundreds of prison cells simultaneously. (Foucault, 1977, 201). Was the use of a cell-like cage the most convenient way for VR platforms to let viewers know they are trespassing into their own physical world or are cells used to communicate to players contained in the *Guardian Boundary* that they are locked out of their physical reality? Does the title of *Touch Controller* authorize control to the viewer or to VR authorities? Since the viewer created the *Guardian Boundary* with the *Touch Controller* they had to purchase, are they really "trespassing" when they violate the boundary cell walls? We should be asking this VR terminology and symbology, "Whose world is it anyway"?

Our sense of touch is being hijacked and seduced by platforms that guard their entrances with cell-like cages, prohibiting touch in the physical world. Through the use of cage representations in the VR world, viewers can be assured that owners of VR will do everything in their power to imprison the senses and discard the body. Through touch, the male performer in the *Reading* performance attempts to resist the stranglehold of the virtual world and to reclaim his body. Immersive VR however, will not concede its grasp on his physical senses so easily. Through the performance, the male protagonist is metaphorically trying to escape his VR house arrest.

Current studies commend the educational and mental health benefits of VR such as the Department of Psychiatry at the Saint-Antoine Hospital in France where VR is studied for beneficial treatments of addiction (Baudry et al, 2020). Due to the immersive environments, patients can learn how to cope with problems in a simulated atmosphere that can be modulated to trigger and assess conditions. In direct contrast however, a number of professionals from within the tech industry, such as William Davidow, highlight serious consequences of an immersive world where brains become rewired and start to depend on the technology they are selling to you. (Davidow, 2012). Like the male performer in *Reading*, the choice between technology and touch hangs precariously in the balance. As a queer man living through the age of COVID-19 experiencing the prohibition of touch, and the potential confinement of the senses through digital platforms, I have to ask: as we experience a touchless society through the pandemic, how do we value our primal need for physical touch? Can any form of digital technology replace skin-to-skin contact? Given the current conditions of COVID-19, are we to concede the physical world of touch to a controlled simulated network that dominates the body and its senses? Will people become so dependent on digital technology that we unconsciously surrender our sense of touch and our sexual bodies that have been dominated for centuries, to a more highly evolved form of oppressive incarceration?

Surveillance and Control

In the VR world, the headset and the *Touch Controllers*, synchronized with the body, complete the circle of surveillance and control. The left and right hand controllers are networked to the platform and headset through the sensory touch of hands. The touch sensitive grips and buttons on the controllers ensure that avatar hands replicate the motor functions of real hands in a virtual space. When one feels sensory vibrations stimulating real hands that hold the controllers, one is assured that the VR world, the body and the cycle of surveillance is complete. Through the symbiotic connectedness of all three components, the VR platform can control and monitor physical motion and perception. The body becomes a conduit for the creation of a networked “automaton”, a word Serres used to describe a flayed man hanging with his internal wiring exposed; (Serres, 1985, p. 59) internal wiring that is now mediated through a VR platform to capture, share and sell compliant data.

Upon completing the networked circle, subjects can function in the VR world free of the physical body. The hands become that of an avatar; the senses of the body become one with the “machine” that controls the body. In a very real sense, one virtually becomes the automaton that Serres refers to in his *Five Senses* (Serres, 1985, p. 59). The flesh and senses are woven tightly into a network of digitized sensations where an immersive simulation supersedes the physical world. Subjects are fused to a curated realm where options to express identities and desires are mediated through a platform that doesn’t want to know your history, values or beliefs. The ranges within which subjects can define themselves are limited to the imagination of a profit-driven platform that only exists for its own corporate motives.

One of the consequences of entering this new world is that the body is being controlled through every blink and avatar motion while under constant surveillance of the VR platform. Even though virtual reality offers an unlimited range of immersive App adventures and immersive luxury environments, the platform is entirely indifferent to the subjects' needs, desires or feelings. As long as the platform is able to captivate the subject for extended lengths of time to mine data through surveillance, the life and the body are irrelevant. The cycle of exploitation is complete through the gratification of the senses. When New York Times writer, Kavlev Leetaru compares Orwell's *1984* novel to today's society of surveillance, he indicates we are far worse off than the citizens portrayed in the novel. In *1984* it was the government who funded state controlled surveillance. Today it is public citizens who are forced to purchase the latest digital update at regular intervals, pay for Internet and relinquish private data to a tech deity in the sky (Leetaru, 2019, para. 18 - 20). An all-encompassing colonization of the body occurs as subjects surrender total control to an omnipotent system that eats private and sensorial data infinitely. There is no way to tell who is receiving the information, which part of the data is being sold or for what purposes it is being collected beyond the monetary value.

As most people now socialize on digital Internet applications, the programs are designed to keep eyes on platforms for as long as possible to ensure marketing and consumer data profiles. Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* focuses on strategies of surveillance and coercion that appear to have been a foregone precursor to the strategies employed by social media platforms; synchronized platforms where our shared surveillance of one another is a subterfuge for the underlying profits amassed from personal data collection. It could be stated that we have reached a state of compliance through the "frog and the boiling water" analogy where the frog recognizes the water is slowly boiling but is reluctant to leave due to the comfort and convenience that overcomes its natural inclination to escape.

In the *Reading* performance, the male nude is wearing a VR headset implying that he is immersed in the virtual world. In order for him to enter the virtual world, the performer will have had to create a *Guardian Boundary* with his *Touch Controllers*. In virtual life the protective boundary becomes a simulated cage composed of neon blue bars. On the outside of the bars, the performer's personal physical space will have been muted into the background through a spectral black and white grain data. The digital bars delineating the cage are robust, intense colors in comparison to the performer's faded physical world. It is within this cell-like structure that the performer will wait to be teleported to the virtual destination. We can refer to the graphic cage depiction as a virtual waiting room container that holds the subject captive until entry into the virtual world. The performer's real life physical world is dissolved and the wonders of the virtual world are waiting to gratify all of his needs. In effect, the subject is being detained within a virtual world that is analogous to Ahmed's comparison of the archive as a literal "house arrest". (Ahmed, 2006, p. 118). During the current pandemic, "lockdown" and "stay at-home" orders reinforce the "house arrest" metaphor with masses of the population confined to their domesticity like never before; consuming online platforms and streaming services like never before.

Beyond pandemic house arrests, the digital depictions of the cage-like cells in the VR world can be compared to physical prison cells. Prisons might be associated with a shared small room where convicts are being detained. Many modern prisons, in fact, are not made with bars. (Jaruseviciute, 2019) From a North American perspective, we may picture a constricted room constructed of thick masonry blocks, containing a small window on the end wall that lets natural light through bars of metal. This room description portrays the prison cell environment at the Reading Gaol in England where renowned author, Oscar Wilde was incarcerated and charged with "gross indecency" in 1895 for acts of sodomy. In 2020 the Reading Gaol prison complex was to be sold to developers. However the deal recently fell

through and the Reading Borough Council is hoping to revive its bid to turn it into an art complex. The BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation) story provided an interior image of cell C 33 where Wilde was imprisoned for two years and endured hard labor. (BBC News, 2020) The historic cells that bound queer sexuality finally became more pliable in 1973 when gay and lesbian desires were no longer classified as a “disease” by the American Psychiatric Association. (Cvetkovich, 2003, p. 45) Until such time, queer men and women were legally “fit to be cured” by the medical community through various forms of “therapy” including Conversion Shock Therapy. To this day conversion therapy is conducted on queer youth under the watchful eye of the authoritative archive. (Human Rights, n.d.)

Physical cells are used to control the physical body. Historically, the biased selection processes of the authoritative archive have reinforced surveillance tactics by collecting and distributing unfounded theories about the sexual body thus completing the cycle of surveillance. A blatant example of one baseless theory can be found in the well-known Kellogg’s Corn Flake cereal whose bland taste was originally produced by John Harvey Kellogg to prevent masturbation and self-touch (Hunt, 1998, p. 598). Kellogg was convinced that if he didn’t add sugar to the flakes and kept the taste mild, the morning cereal would prevent excitement or the need to masturbate. Through the historical investigation of themes such as self-touch and homosexuality, the archives of the day reinforced the need to stalk and shame the sexual body by coordinating and disseminating theories of “respected” authorities in medicine, religion and science: unverified theories that have damaging effects on the queer body to this day. In the installation, the fusion of the panoptic eye and the archive form an all-powerful book tower of one; a force of uncompromising authority where harmful theories and biases can be perpetrated.

Dominance of Digital Technology

In the gallery installation, the book tower evolved as digital technology intensified through global and local surveillance measures to respond and adapt to COVID-19 security demands. As a result of pandemic measures, policing of the body has intensified through increased digital surveillance used to monitor, control and collect data from mass populations. Originally the book tower was going to be a 10' round structure of layered books with edges of pages facing outward and spines of the books facing inward towards the centre of the circular form. This 5' high circular form constructed of layered books would represent an authoritative archive. The book structure evolved to a shared archive and surveillance tower representing an omnipotent force that controls physical bodies of the past and will no doubt evolve to shape an indestructible path of control for the future.

As COVID-19 progressed, it was clear that we were going to have more than physical health concerns to contend with. Within weeks of the outbreak in March 2020 most of the global population had become accustomed to phrases such as “contact tracing”, “lock-down”, “stay at home” and “bubble”. Anywhere one went that involved social gatherings, it was essential to sign in with name, address and phone number in case you, someone you knew or someone you didn't know contracted the virus. COVID-19 Emergency Alerts blasted on cell phones and thanks to GPS systems, governments could monitor anyone through mobilization tracking devices. (Villeneuve, S. & Elias, D., 2020, para. 1)

In countries such as Australia (Matyszyk, 2020, para. 4) strict guidelines were enforced for months through drone surveillance. So far, Canadian cities have not reported drone surveillance from the sky.

However helicopters are often seen hovering above larger park green spaces. While some Canadian provinces enforced lockdown curfews or travel bans, local bylaw officers roamed parks and streets to monitor outdoor gatherings and sports activities. There was also a noticeable increase of surveillance on marginalized neighborhoods and BIPOC bodies.

COVID-19 has accelerated a dominant digital takeover of almost every aspect of our socialized physical body. Over a year into the pandemic, many bricks and mortar businesses including gyms, theatres, restaurants and hair salons have no option but to close. Online shopping is at an all time high while school learning for all ages is moving into potential permanent digital online course instruction. (Dangerfield, 2021, para.9) Most aspects of human interaction are now mediated through online digital platforms. Films, theatre productions, art gallery and museum exhibitions, fitness classes, funeral chapels and venues of worship are now online. If and when the COVID-19 cases drop to a reasonable level, the human species will be at a loss as to how to socialize with one another, desire one another or hold one another. As vaccination rollouts ramp up across the world and vaccine passports are issued, we relinquish personal and private data to protect the physical body. Marginalized bodies will continue to be under continuous surveillance (Young, N. 2021, April 30) while cultural entertainment venues will be mediated through curated digital platforms that will select programming dependent on 2-D screen formats, potentially restricting critical alternative content.

Pre-pandemic, we were in the midst of a hybrid human/technological existence. Now, during the sixteen-month of regulations and surveillance, we no longer associate with humanity person-to-person. As public spaces are controlled and outdoor spaces are closed or policed, there is a stronger incentive to remain in the home. As homes become offices, schools, gyms, restaurants and daycares, will there be a

stronger incentive to disappear behind the safety of digital immersive platforms in the comfort of the all-in-one house? Monika Kim in her article, *The Good and the Bad of Escaping to Virtual Reality* (Kim, 2015, para. 5) provides pros and cons of the virtual world and ultimately agrees that the immersive escape is worth relinquishing privacy data and surveillance. She references Dr. Aboujaoude and his book *Virtually You, The Dangerous Powers of the E-Personality* (Kim, 2015, para. 11) who reminds us that we have already reached a combined Internet and physical life reality through social media platforms. In the article, he stresses that virtual reality is a game changer that could drastically change a person's social needs and that we may stop craving real social interactions as they "may become foreign to us" (Kim, 2015, para. 11). In the same article she quotes Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg predicting that the immersive, augmented reality will become a part of daily living for billions of people while futurist Ray Kurzweil in 2003 stated that by 2030 we would all become virtual humans. (Kim, 2015, para. 5)

From an LGBTQ+ perspective, queers experimenting with the virtual world go beyond touch to enhance queer values. A recent *Advocate* interview with *Fearless 360* Founder Sandi Coffi, advocates for the use of VR as a transformational tool where participants can forge queer spaces to challenge traditional binaries that restrict the body. (Advocate, 2018). Similar pioneering communities are asserting queer values in the dominant online virtual world. A 2019 study out of England called *Virtual reality enhances LGBTQ community building* (Smythe, 2019, para. 2) followed by a World of Warcraft (WoW) LGBTQ "guild" that hosts annual Pride parades where members with multiple avatars construct safe spaces within the dominant WoW community. As technology appears to be here to stay, queer

innovators are finding ways to ensure that diverse values are inserted into virtual communities just as dominant communities were confronted in the past with queer desires, sensibilities and the questioning of dominant values.

Through the project, I offer no solution to the dominance of technology. I have advocated for the preservation of humanity's sense of touch and the significance of the body in relation to technology. The question I am curious to explore is; will queers join the screen-based Internet chorus or remain outcasts, challenging prohibitions of sexual touch as we have in the past?

Can we learn from the representations of virtual cells that guard the entrances to the VR world? Can the VR world learn from queer archives such as the Tom of Finland foundation where the sexual body is freer in their BDSM dungeon than any other dungeon in the physical or virtual world? It feels like we are currently oscillating somewhere between the physical and virtual worlds like the overwhelmed male in the *Reading* performance.

Figure 20

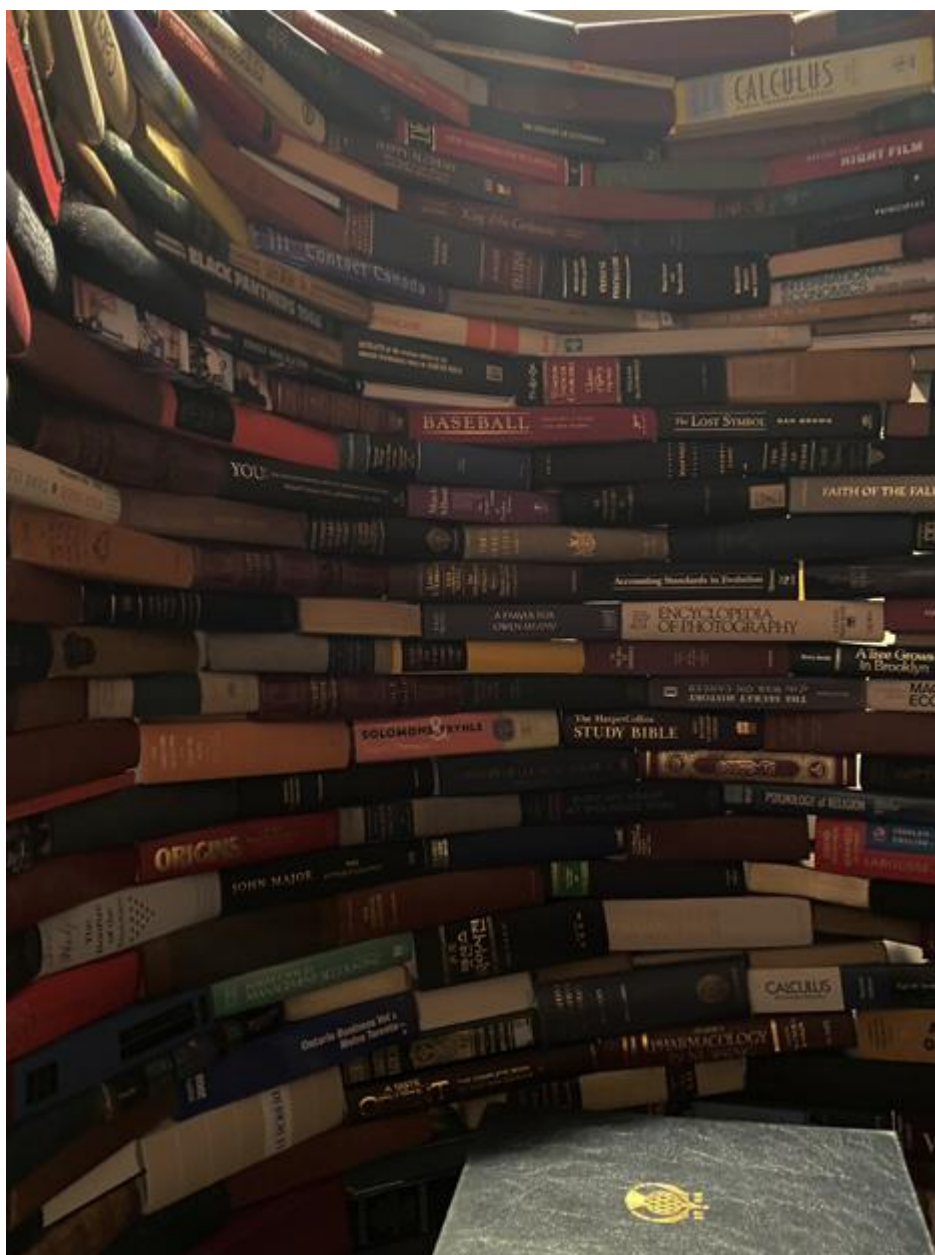
Authoritative Archive with light from above



The omnipotent *Authoritative Archive* with Encyclopedia seat.

Figure 21

Authoritative Archive and remaining encyclopedias.



Light catching the remaining encyclopedias left on the ground.

Conclusion

The gallery installation and performance provided me with a unique opportunity to investigate the control of the body through the combined force of technological surveillance and the authoritative archive. I was able to research innovative installation methods through the construction of the book tower and critique virtual technologies through performance. In the paper, I defend the sensorial body and attempt to illustrate the urgent loss of touch through epidemic, pandemic and intruding technologies. At a later date I may investigate data algorithms being collected by platforms and explore where they are being sold and how they are being used.

In the physical world, queer bricks and mortar institutions such as LGBTQ+ archives, bars and bathhouses play a vital role in the preservation of community values. However, through the accelerated use of technology due to COVID-19, it will become necessary for queer communities to adapt to a sweeping tide of neighborhood demolitions. Pre-COVID-19, queer urban centers were already facing challenges from rising rents, condo development pressures and device-driven online dating platforms. (Mastronianni, 2021, para. 5). The COVID-19 crisis has contributed to this time bomb where there has been a more alarming rate of loss of queer social and sexual safe spaces (Mastronianni, 2021, para. 14). Through my investigation, I have learned there is an urgent need to ask questions such as; can queer touch and community values be affectively transferred to platforms such as virtual reality? If a mass population wraps itself in immersive realities, will VR disengage the body from the need to touch and desire one another? If a VR world dominates, how do marginalized communities demand inclusive

histories and how do societies contribute to immersive realities they are travelling to? As referenced in *Dominance of Digital Technology* (p. 50 – 51), there are pioneering efforts being made to include queer values and safe spaces in virtual platforms. However, if we progress to the point where sexual touch is no longer needed or wanted will queer communities forgo touch of the sexual body? Will we relinquish sexual touch, one of our primary defining fundamentals, in order to claim a space in the virtual, digital realm?

As we approach this precarious time of touch, I feel it is vital for queer people to question aspects of the VR world such as the use of depictions of virtual cages where converging red bars prohibit a trespassing physical body. We might remind ourselves that queer embodied spaces such as the Tom of Finland Foundation will continue to honor the desires of the sexual body as COVID-19 recedes. We might want to remind each other that LGBTQS+ safe spaces are essential to our values and that we will need to support them as much as possible through this time of crisis in order to ensure a modicum of human touch to survive beyond the grasp of technology.

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