



To Know Herself (2019)

Acknowledgments

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—Yomna Osman

I can't say I wish you war

*Life has a deeper meaning. I mean,
I can't say I wish you war.*

I heard—or, rather, read—these words, as subtitles, as I watched the film *In the Last Days of the City* (2016) by Tamer El Said.¹ The character Bassem (played by Bassem Fayad) had this thought while talking about how much more Lebanese citizens enjoyed Beirut during the war. I thought about the relationship urban citizens have with their city: Do they enjoy their cities more during times of war? Do they become nostalgic for that intensity? Does it have to be a war that brings people together? Does it take a war for inhabitants to deeply connect with their city?

Growing up in Cairo, I was prompted to consider the grotesqueries of the city in most of my decisions. I moved to San Francisco two years ago to join California College of the Arts's Curatorial Practice and Visual and Critical Studies dual-degree master's program, and immediately found myself attracted to

the city. San Francisco is a city that's hard to avoid. It doesn't recede into the background like some other metropolises. I would be lying if I said San Francisco reminded me of Cairo—but, much like a lost love, I found it easier to deal with my Cairo withdrawal symptoms through allowing myself to delve into a deep relationship with San Francisco.

Because I am a graduate student, my relationship to the city can be rather rough and superficial. I utilize its streets solely to go from one place to another. I barely have any leisure time to spend wandering around. Getting lost in a new city was simply a nonromantic inconvenience.

Then, in the summer of 2018, I got the chance to examine the city more *closely*, so to speak. I was offered a research position with the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA) Public Knowledge Team, working on *Take Part*, a project that seeks to create a collective vision of the city of San Francisco. *Take*

¹ Tamer El Said, *Akher ayam el madina (In the Last Days of the City)* (Zero Production, Zawya Distribution, 2016).

Part is organized by the Dutch artist duo Bik Van der Pol. In collaboration with the SF Public Library, *Take Part* exhibits a 41-by-37 ft. wood scale model of San Francisco. The model was first pitched by the San Francisco planning department to the federal Works Progress Administration, which commissioned its construction in 1938. It is a curious object, colorful and composed of pieces that fit together like a jigsaw puzzle. I spent three months over the summer carefully dusting it with an eclectic group of volunteers who know, and love, the city. I held Dolores Park between my hands and attempted to remove 60-year-old dust off the playground. It was sensual and intimidating.

During the summer, we would meet every Friday with librarians from various SF Public Library branches to show them their neighborhood's piece of the model and discuss the options for exhibiting and curating it. One of the most memorable conversations I had around the model was with Ramon Hernandez, the Mission

Branch library manager. Hernandez was born in the Mission neighborhood; his parents met in the Mission and his grandparents were neighbors. As soon as he stood in front of the Mission piece of the model, the librarian began to point out the places that he knew. Given that the model was built around 1938, and the Mission has been severely gentrified ever since, I began to wonder about Hernandez's familiarity with the city. How was it that a place could experience such hostile upheaval when its relatively unchanged cityscape, at a scale of 1 inch : 100 feet, lay so innocently before us? If not the map, then what had changed?

I began to look through books and talk to people to try and come up with an answer. I read Rebecca Solnit's *Infinite City: A San Francisco Atlas* (2010).² The book examines different aspects of what constitutes a city by reinterpreting the form of the conventional atlas. I was most intrigued by the section titles. For example, "Monarchs and Queens" is a map of butterfly habitats and queer public

spaces. Artist Mona Caron illustrated a map of the city juxtaposing butterfly species and spaces dedicated for members of the queer community. Putting together the various maps in Solnit's *Atlas* with the model gave me a pretty good understanding of the city. What is missing on the model is the texture, the invisible changes that create hostility and force citizens to leave their homes, peacefully or not.

I believe citizens feel most connected to their city through small gatherings, friendships, and safe familiar spaces that hold them. I looked at the "Monarchs and Queens" map and laid it over the Mission, trying to trace what had changed. Almost all of the queer spaces around the city, in the Mission and elsewhere, have disappeared. While the narrative tends toward centering the AIDS epidemic and how it affected the queer scene, I was particularly curious about the lesbian scene. The reasons for this scene's dissolution vary depending on who you ask, and some are more controversial

than others. I became curious about the existing community, and what effect the disappearance of these spaces had had on them.

My exhibition was born from here. *To Know Herself* explores the lesbian bar as a place for social and political change. Once a thriving ground for queer culture, with numerous spaces where queer women gathered, today there is not a single bar in the city specifically for queer women. Maud's, which operated from 1961 to '89, and Amelia's, which opened its doors in 1978 and closed in 1991, were two of the most popular and longest-running spaces, both owned by respected LGBTQ activist Rikki Streicher (1922–1994). More recently, The Lexington Club, a beloved lesbian dive bar and LGBTQ cultural landmark located in the Mission, closed its doors in 2015. This was the last remaining lesbian bar in San Francisco. Queer spots have since emerged in the city, but none have lasted as long or gathered as vibrant a community as any of the aforementioned bars.

² Rebecca Solnit, *Infinite City: A San Francisco Atlas* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2010).

To Know Herself utilizes the bar in the CCA Wattis Institute's event space in lieu of their gallery in order to study the different ways artists are thinking about lesbian bars and the impact of their disappearance—as well as possibilities for their eventual reconstruction. In a commissioned performance installation titled *Save the last dance for me* (2019), artist and CCA Provost Tammy Rae Carland invites visitors to dance to a three-minute song performed by Los Angeles-based musician Kelly Martin. The installation features this specially commissioned song on loop, with the music only audible when participants stand on a re-created dance floor. The work concludes each day with a special appearance by Carland to dance with an audience member. Some days, Carland asks an evening guest to share the last dance of the day with her as spectators are invited to watch. On other days, Carland appears alone in the space waiting for audiences to show up and share the last dance with her. *Save the last dance for me* is a visual and physical reminder of the

power of music to pull people together in synchronicity, even for a fleeting three minutes.

For this Wattis presentation, artist Macon Reed presents her *Eulogy For The Dyke Bar* (2015) as a three-part installation featuring a jukebox, two neon signs, and twenty framed archival photographs from lesbian bars in San Francisco.

The nonfunctional jukebox stands as a materialization of the familiar icon long associated with bringing people together. The neon sign reads “Dyke Bar,” not only pointing to the main subject of the show but also exuding a feeling of vibrancy and movement throughout the entire exhibition through the piece's use of light and color. The framed archival photos call attention to the rich history of these spaces, in San Francisco and around the world, which demonstrate the value of convening queer communities in real time and space. While the reasons for the disappearance of these spaces in San Francisco range from rising real estate costs and shifting demographics

to increasing reliance on technology as a social network, the disappearance of these physical spaces for the queer community remains an undeniable loss—a loss not just of a chapter in the city's history but of all the affective interactions that these spaces enable. It is a loss of songs not sung, connections not made, dances not danced, and lovers not loved.

Ultimately, this exhibition examines the various ways in which a group of active citizens—namely, queer women—can connect with their city and feel empowered to change it, peacefully. Like Bassem, the character from *In the Last Days of the City*, I can't say I wish this city and its inhabitants war, but I do wish for them an experience of the violent emotion and visceral investment of bygone times, when the determination and passion of queer communities fashioned the lasting character of this much-loved city.

—Yomna Osman



Tammy Rae Carland, *Dear Jo*, 2010



Tammy Rae Carland, *Looking for my museum*, 2012



Macon Reed, *Eulogy For The Dyke Bar*, 2015



Macon Reed, *Eulogy For The Dyke Bar*, 2015

History as Sanctuary Space

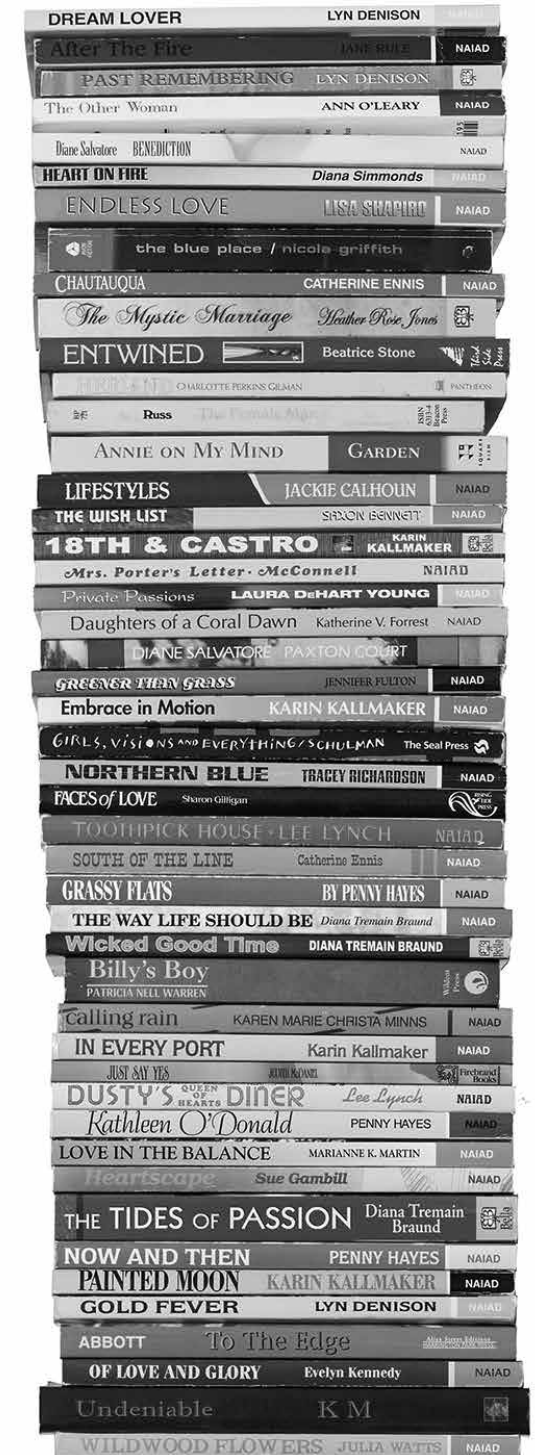
In *The Gentrification of the Mind: Witness to a Lost Imagination*, writer Sarah Schulman gives a first-hand account of what happened to her neighborhood on the Lower East Side of New York City. Starting in the 1980s, children of suburban families that had been part of post-World War II white flight came back to fill the vacancies left by the dying, AIDS-affected queer community of which she was a part. What Schulman found was that the new residents had zero interest in learning about or having encounters with the dynamism of the neighborhood whose cultural destruction they were in fact hastening. In a description that feels all too familiar now, Schulman compares the businesses that catered to newcomers to “the hard currency kiosks in the Soviet Union that sold Marlboros to apparatchiks and tourists.”¹ And she suggests a connection between urban and psychological space when she observes that the process leads to “the replacement of complex realities with simplistic ones.”²



Macon Reed, *Eulogy For The Dyke Bar*, 2015

1 Sarah Schulman, *The Gentrification of the Mind: Witness to a Lost Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California, 2012), 30.

2 Schulman, *Gentrification of the Mind*, 36.



Such tendencies toward homogenization, simplification, and erasure are a reminder of the importance of archives. Without them, the fabric of a city might be like a corporate webpage that seeks to hide all past versions of itself behind an illusion of timelessness. The very existence of archives is a reminder of historical time itself, making them lifelines out of an opaque and frozen present. But more than that, the contents of archives give granularity and a feeling of reality to that which risks becoming symbolic, then forgotten, then lost to history.

When I moved to the Mission District in 2008, gentrification (particularly of Valencia Street) had long been underway. I often wonder how different my experience of moving would have been had I not simultaneously come across Erica Lyle's *On the Lower Frequencies: A Secret History of the City*, which focuses mostly on the Mission and mid-Market. This collection of writings from different sources—letters, interviews, and Lyle's zine *The Turd-Filled Donut*—contains

references to many names, places, and events that may be archived nowhere else, save for the memories of those who were there. Encountering these, I was able to build a picture of my neighborhood whose traces I could see if I looked closely enough. It was this book that gave my experience historical traction—a sense that my present was in conversation with some kind of past.

For her part, Lyle seems to have been on the lookout for a similar kind of traction. In *On the Lower Frequencies*, she conducts a kind of historical dig in an old theater at 949 Market Street, where she and her friends were squatting, putting on punk shows, and offering free food:

Deeper and deeper into the theater I went, through layers of debris and history. I rummaged methodically through desks in management offices, finding family photos, receipts, licenses. Great piles of unsold tickets and pictures of half-assed graffiti tags on the theater's tired facade before it

closed. I found a negative of a woman standing on the deck of a boat, left behind in a folded-up envelope with the questions for the US Citizenship Exam scrawled on it in English and Chinese.

...
I see the piles of unspooled film on the projectionist room floor and think of a march filing past the theater during the 1934 General Strike. Cop cars burning, cinematically, nearby after the Dan White verdict. Gulf War marches, Rodney King riots. Last century's subconscious ideas surfacing from the dark under the street, ideas fought for and acted out on Market Street.³

Every year, the fabric of the city turns over, and so much is lost in the debris. Lyle's act of digging through the scraps, her writing, the publishing of *On the Lower Frequencies*, the stocking of this volume at the local Dog Eared Books, and the reading of it by me and others—all of these acts help to stave off the

3 Erica [Erick] Lyle, *On the Lower Frequencies: A Secret History of the City* (New York: Soft Skull Press, 2008), 120–21.



imminent wash of forgetting and abstracting of the past.

Currently, 949 Market is a mostly empty mall having a hard time attracting retail tenants.⁴ Not only the people that Lyle describes but the very structure they occupied is gone; I will never have a chance to see a show there, nor sample the free bagels. But Lyle's writing lets me inhabit a ghostly space, one that emerges at the intersection of anecdotes and photographs. This is much the same feeling I have looking at the photos of Amelia's. And although I know none of these women, I do recognize something in the ease and conviviality that runs through the images. I am put in mind of the gathering points for different communities in Oakland, where I now live: highly contingent spaces for queer folks, for artists, for poets, and for so many others living in the margins. In the archives of Amelia's, the invitations for birthdays, weddings, and other meetings are a reminder of how much these spaces are substrates for cultural survival.

That present spaces are threatened with closure is directly related to the ways that past spaces are threatened with erasure and forgetting. In "Theses on the Philosophy of History," Walter Benjamin writes that "[o]nly that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he wins."⁵ In the 1980s, women did the work to keep Amelia's open: they ran the business, organized events, tended bar, warned each other of police attacks, danced, and kept each other warm in the glow of familiarity. The space itself may be gone, but the archivist's work remains: to keep Amelia's open in collective memory, with the door ajar for weary travelers from the future.

—Jenny Odell

4 J. K. Dineen, "SF's new mall on Market Street full of challenges," *San Francisco Chronicle*, August 21, 2018.

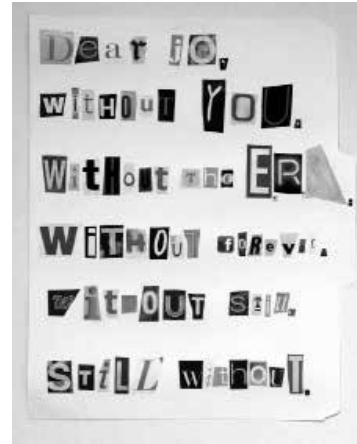
5 Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in Benjamin, *Illuminations* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1968), 257.



Macon Reed, *Eulogy For The Dyke Bar*, 2015



Macon Reed
Eulogy For The Dyke Bar [neon], 2015
 Neon lights mounted to acrylic
 Courtesy of the artist



Tammy Rae Carland
Dear Jo, 2010
 Six framed paper collages
 Courtesy of the artist and Jessica Silverman Gallery,
 San Francisco



Tammy Rae Carland
Dream Lover, 2018
 Framed color photograph
 Courtesy of the artist and Jessica Silverman Gallery,
 San Francisco



Macon Reed
Eulogy For The Dyke Bar [jukebox], 2015
 Cardboard, rope, hot glue, joint compound,
 shellac, matte acrylic paint, and resin
 Courtesy of the artist



Macon Reed
Eulogy For The Dyke Bar [frames], 2015
 Twenty plastic frames with digital photo reproductions
 Courtesy of the artist



Tammy Rae Carland
Looking for my museum, 2012
 Framed color photograph
 Courtesy of the artist and Jessica Silverman Gallery,
 San Francisco



Tammy Rae Carland
Save the last dance for me, 2019
 In collaboration with Kelly Martin
 Parabolic speaker, looped audio, floor vinyl,
 spotlight, theater curtain, daily dance performance,
 and unlimited calling card
 Courtesy of the artist and Jessica Silverman Gallery,
 San Francisco

To Know Herself is on view at CCA Wattis Institute from April 4 to April 27, 2019.

Tammy Rae Carland (b. 1965, Portland, ME) is an artist who works with photography, video, and small-run publications. Her work has been screened and exhibited in galleries and museums internationally, including New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Berlin, and Sydney. Her photographs have been published in numerous books, including *The Passionate Camera: Photography and Bodies of Desire* and *Lesbian Art in America*. Her fanzine writing has been republished in *A Girl's Guide to Taking Over the World*. She is represented by Jessica Silverman Gallery in San Francisco.

Jenny Odell (b. 1986, Mountain View, California) is a multidisciplinary artist and writer based in Oakland. Her work revolves around acts of close observation, often working with existing archives or creating new ones. For example, in her 2015 project *The Bureau of Suspended Objects*, Odell created a searchable online database of 200 objects salvaged from the San Francisco dump, each with photographs and painstaking research into its material, corporate, and manufacturing histories. Odell has also worked with archives as an artist in residence at the New York Public Library, the Internet Archive, and the San Francisco Planning Department. Odell's writing has appeared in *The New York Times*, SFMOMA's *Open Space*, *McSweeney's*, *The Creative Independent*, *Sierra Magazine*, *Topic*, and *Real Future*. Her book *How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy* is forthcoming from Melville House in April 2019. Odell teaches at Stanford University.

Macon Reed (b. 1981, Arlington, VA) is an artist working in sculpture, installation, video, radio documentary, painting, and participatory projects. Her work has been shown at venues including PULSE NYC Special Projects, BRIC Media Arts, ABC No Rio, The Kitchen, Art F City FAGallery, Chicago Cultural Center, Montclair Art Museum, Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, ICA Baltimore, and Athens Museum of Queer Arts in Greece. Her work has received mention in *The New York Times*, *Hyperallergic*, *CityTV: Santa Monica*, *Confederazione Nazionale*, *The Guardian*, *artnet News*, *Whitewall*, *The Washington Post*, *Village Voice*, *BK Reader*, *Art F City*, *Huffington Post*, *New City Art*, and *The Observer*. Reed completed her MFA at the University of Illinois at Chicago as a University Fellow in 2013 and received her BFA from Virginia Commonwealth University in 2007. Additionally, she studied at the Salt Institute for Documentary Studies, Dah International School for Physical Theater and Voice in Belgrade, the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, and as a Research Fellow at Eyebeam Center for Art+Technology. Reed is currently a fellow at A.I.R. Gallery in Brooklyn and a visiting professor at Amherst College.

To Know Herself is curated by Yomna Osman in partial fulfillment of the dual-degree Master of Arts in Curatorial Practice and Visual and Critical Studies. Special thanks to the artists and to Jessica Silverman Gallery, San Francisco.

As of fall 2018, the program's central hub for learning is off campus at the Curatorial Research Bureau (CRB). Located inside the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts (YBCA), the CRB is a combined bookshop, exhibition space, and platform for public programming. Students are integrated into YBCA's infrastructure, giving them opportunities to witness planning meetings, conversations among curators and administrators, and marketing initiatives for exhibitions.

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Cover image: Tammy Rae Carland, *Save the last dance for me*, 2019



Macon Reed, *Eulogy For The Dyke Bar*, 2015