



TransMission: Sissy TV

Nando Messias

To cite this article: Nando Messias (2024) TransMission: Sissy TV, Contemporary Theatre Review, 34:3, 251-260, DOI: [10.1080/10486801.2024.2388026](https://doi.org/10.1080/10486801.2024.2388026)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10486801.2024.2388026>



© 2025 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



Published online: 06 Jan 2025.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 1660



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

TransMission: Sissy TV

Nando Messias

Abstract

This article looks at unconventional archives in order to propose an ‘auto-archiving’ approach to queer and trans lived experiences. The writer starts from their own positionality as a trans-gender, trans-national, trans-disciplinary artist and researcher and goes on to describe a journey through the archives of other queer subjects such as Lou Reed and Quentin Crisp. This journey is at times real and at other times imagined, giving an affective account of how a visit to a haptic archive can productively unsettle notions of a stable self.

Keywords: haptic archive; affective archive; trans archive; auto-archiving; seed-dispersing archive

Introduction

The present article is part of a larger project, which includes a live performance piece with the same title—*TransMission: Sissy TV*. As well as this article and the homonymous performance, I have developed knowledge exchange activities with the Bishopsgate Institute and The Museum of Transology, repositories of queer and trans histories. My aim is to challenge institutional practices of trans and queer exclusion.

I once heard that there are eight floors beneath the British Library on Euston Road in London. A hidden underworld that houses their extensive archives. Even though I have never visited this underground space, I picture it as a dark, damp, and secluded subterranean universe. A bit like Hades perhaps, only not so gloomy.

This article emerges from a similarly deep ground. In visiting the underworld that is my personal and artistic archives,¹ my goal is not to drag the

1. In *Ephemeral Archives, Queering the Archive* (Sacramento, CA: Litwin Books, 2014), Alana Kumbier explains that 'the preferred term among archivists, when referring to a (single) repository is *archives*', 10.
2. Kumbier, *Ephemeral Archives*.
3. Marika Cifor, 'Stains and Remains: Liveliness, Materiality, and the Archival Lives of Queer Bodies', *Australian Feminist Studies* 32, no. 91–92 (2017): 5–21 (9).
4. Helis Sikk, 'I Hate the Archives: A Queer Lesbian Meditation', *Journal of Feminist Scholarship* 19 (Fall 2021): 119–134 (123).

contents up towards the surface – after all, this would amount to a normative, colonial approach. An approach that seeks to excavate and dig out of the earth the treasures left there by past civilisations, to take possession of such treasures and to place them behind glass display cases, out of reach and out of touch, making them, in essence, inaccessible to others. It reflects on the intersection of an ongoing research and live performance project titled *Transmission: Sissy TV* with the organisation and archiving of the material remains of my performance history. In doing so, it draws on Alana Kumbier's² archiving from the ground up as a critical framework for thinking through an anti-normative, trans approach to that work.

My language here is deliberate. I use 'underworld' as a metaphorical universe. My items have never been buried. Rather, the mythological space of the underworld, the destination of a hero's epic journey, the place one might enter after death is more a figure of speech or an embellishment to my narrative. I interweave my own narrative with that of literary characters who have fictionally visited the underworld. Dante and Virgil, for example, appear in my writing as spectral figures who have travelled deep in the bowels of the Earth, one guiding the other through the dark. It is worth adding that the archive has been described as a graveyard. 'Archives are often and potently associated with dead things and a state of stasis', claims Marika Cifor.³ It is also worth noting how cold most archives are. 'A great source of discomfort' to Helis Sikk – almost like a morgue.⁴ I alternate 'underworld' with 'underground', not interchangeably, but as references to sites that exist outside the surface, the centre, the mainstream. The underground of subterranean scenes, like queer club nights in windowless basements.

In countering the archaeological approach of excavation, extraction and, eventually, analysis of data as a way to learn more about the past, I choose to move in a different direction by leaving my archival objects where they are – well alone and undisturbed. I am using archaeology here as metaphor, of course. My belongings are not buried in the sand, although the idea of a time-capsule at the back of a public garden somewhere does feel somewhat whimsical and attractive, if I am honest. Instead, I am using the analogy of the underground as the space where queer and trans existence is lived out whereas the overground is commonly designated as the locus of dominant, hegemonic society.

In practice, what I mean by leaving my archival objects well alone and undisturbed is a proposition at odds with conventional archives and practices such as locating, preserving, organising, and accessing records. In other words, I want to explore how archives can be queered, how trans, non-binary, Global South and anti-oppressive sensibilities can rub against the imperatives of archival projects. My endeavour in finding a trans approach to archiving is about specific practices. I am talking about archive as discourse here, archive as a form of concrete knowledge, stemming from practice.

Here are a few ideas that come to mind when contemplating the future of my archive: (a) enacting a refusal to allow my costumes to be

5. Ibid.

sterilised, a procedure so widely practiced in institutional repositories such as the Victoria & Albert Museum's, for example; (b) allowing the stain of a lipstick, the smell of a perfume or the hastily mended tear of the fabric in a gown to remain intact; (c) allowing the textile on a costume to naturally decompose, to live out the extension of its life, if you will, and then perish. Going from dust to dust, resisting the allure of posterity; (d) housing my archive in my front room, my closet or in an open queer space with free access to all, who would be free to touch, feel, smell, try on some of these objects, rather than keeping them behind glass – a haptic archives *without* the need for the clichéd white gloves – 'why white'⁵ or (e) giving it all away and allowing it to spread across the world – a seed-dispersal type of archives. The offers above range from semi-public to private spaces and back to public again. The encounters experienced in these differently coded sites would allow for different exchanges to take place. The space of my bedroom, for example, would instigate a transmission of knowledge that is much more direct in the retelling of stories, tales, and provenances – an ephemeral, gossipy archive, perhaps – whereas an open queer space would invite a more performative exchange such as I have done when performing with my archive on stage and giving items away as an attempt to repurpose them and put them to use.

But I am not there yet. I have not made a final decision about what to do with the things I have accumulated over the 20 odd years I have been creating work in the field of Live Art in the UK and abroad. What I do know is that the archive itself will tell me where it wants to go.

For now, I would like to invite you to come with me on a journey into the chthonic regions of my memories, my dreams, and my reflections while I flash a light – gentle and tentative – at what resides inside the archives. I will be Virgil. You can be Dante. The light I shine on each object will refract back as the constituent spectral colours of a rainbow and, from there, onto us and onto the walls, creating a dazzling mirror-ball effect.

To be clear, this article will look at unconventional archives. I begin with my own but go on to describe my visits to Lou Reed's and Quentin Crisp's archives in New York. I will investigate my desire to, at times, preserve my repository and, at other times, destroy the whole thing by setting it all on fire. My impetus to preserve and organise my accumulated ephemera is one of self-preservation. In adding to existing documentation of trans and non-binary histories, I speak for myself while strengthening community bonds with those who have also been spoken for while being misrepresented. The work of archiving trans and non-binary lives is imperative. It looks not at the past but at a possibility of a future. 'An archive', Derrida has argued, 'is a pledge to the future, a denial of death, extinction, ephemerality'.⁶ He continues:

6. Jacques Derrida and Eric Prenowitz, 'Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression', *Diacritics* 25, no. 2 (1995): 9–63 (18).

the archive is not, we repeat, a question of the past. It is not the question of a concept dealing with the past that might *already* be at our disposal or not at our disposal, *an archival concept of the archive*. It is the question of

the future, the question of the future itself, the question of a response, of a promise, and of a responsibility for tomorrow.⁷

7. Ibid., 36.

8. Michel Foucault (1972) *The Archeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972).

9. Derrida and Prenowitz, 'Archive Fever'.

10. Kumbier, *Ephemeral Archives*, 12.

11. Sikk 'I Hate the Archives', 130.

As Kumbier has shown, Michel Foucault⁸ and Jacques Derrida⁹ 'have developed understandings of the archive as a discursive system, or have invoked The Archive as a metaphor'.¹⁰ While acknowledging the significant contributions these two theorists have made to the field, I am also keen to de-centre white, male, cisgendered, Euro-centric understandings of archives, understandings which have often ignored or neglected the lived experiences of trans people like myself. To that effect, I will adopt an 'auto-archiving' approach while speaking from a position of a trans-gender, trans-national, trans-disciplinary artist and researcher on a trans-mission. My project is to join Sikk in 'chipping away the harm that continues to be done by most institutional archives that remain unchanged'.¹¹ My wish is to denounce hetero-patriarchal, elitist retellings of history and disrupt biased views of whose stories matter and whose do not. Further to that, I will foreground the voices of scholars who have written from a similar positionality such as Cifor, Sikk, and Kumbier, whose strategy of archiving from the ground up I borrow here. I conclude by outlining how this archival and embodied transmission of knowledge could produce meaning not just for me but for particular queer and trans communities and subcultures.

A Note on Methodology

Kumbier's *Ephemeral Material, Queering the Archive* advocates for the importance of *archiving from the ground up*, a concept that 'involves collaborations initiated through – or strongly determined by – community interests, rather than being directed from within conventional archives (which would be top-down archiving)'.¹² 'Archiving from the ground up', Kumbier continues, 'can also refer to archival projects that happen without conventional archival involvement or institutional support'.¹³

12. Kumbier, *Ephemeral Archives*, 17.

13. Ibid.

For *TransMission: Sissy TV*, I want to extend Kumbier's surging movement by proposing an opposing pull that advances in the opposite direction, progressing *from the ground down*, into the soil. My hope here is to disrupt traditional understandings of value. I want to complicate the understanding of the normative value ladder, if you will. The notion of what lies at the top is what is most desirable, respected, and worthy of trust. Instead, I wish to reverse this hierarchy of values by privileging what lies at the bottom. Furthermore, in resisting a unitary direction, I also actively affirm my belief that two paradoxical things can be simultaneously true. In moving from the bottom up *and* from the bottom down, I create a movement that goes *across* the top and the bottom of the earth – a *trans* archive, in other words.

Finally, in borrowing Sharon Marcus' concept of 'auto-archiving', I describe and explore an archive whose producer – me – self-identifies as trans and non-binary.¹⁴ The archival project considers my body as part of my archive too; a body that holds histories, trauma, fear, and joy of

14. Sharon Marcus, 'Queer Theory for Everyone: A Review Essay', *Signs* 31, no. 1 (2005): 191–218.
15. Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire, Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 24.
16. Ibid., 20.

living on the margins of society. These associated traditions (histories, trauma, fear, and joy) of living out a life in the underground are preserved in the body, which becomes itself a repository of trans and queer knowledge. 'Traditions', as Diana Taylor has suggested, 'are stored in the body'.¹⁵

Besides my physical body, my body of work, my corpus, my repertoire – my cultural production – belongs in this collection too. The 'repertoire', as Taylor has written, is a form of archive which 'enacts embodied memory: performances, gestures, orality, movement, dance, singing – in short, all those acts usually thought of ephemeral, nonreproducible knowledge. Repertoire, etymologically, "a treasury, an inventory", also allows for individual agency'.¹⁶ Body and repertoire both register and document the trauma and the bliss I have experienced as a visibly trans, non-conforming subject in the world.

To sum up, my methodology is an *auto-archiving trans methodology*, moving across top and bottom layers of the earth, burying and exhuming material, using the self as the primary source of knowledge.

The Beginning

In 2017, I decided to give an end to a persona – Sissy – I had been working with since 2009. I created a piece called *Death and the Sissy* to mark the symbolic death of this character. I was ready to move on. Or so I thought.

I use the terms 'persona' and 'character' interchangeably here to describe Sissy. In reality, neither of them fit neatly at the same time that they both do, oddly. Sissy is a result of my work with autobiographical material, a part of my identity that I rehearse while I am onstage or while in performance mode. Akin to Sissy, is my use of the name Nancy on social media, which often confuses those who encounter my work online first and believe my name is in fact Nancy, rather than Nando. My strategy here is twofold: first, to destabilise the idea of a singular identity, deliberately confusing those who will try to fit me into a neat box and, second, to engage with my trans identity online in order to find my community and then, safely, take it AFK [Away From the Keyboard] 'with greater individual purpose, community support, and holistic understanding'¹⁷ (N.B.: both 'Sissy' and 'Nancy' are female names often used as transphobic slurs, being harnessed here in a queer strategy of resignification and reclamation of the term).

Part of my creative idea for this piece was to have all the costumes, props, creative journals, drawings, notebooks, and other memorabilia associated with Sissy with me on stage. My intention was to burn the whole thing live in front of the audience – a thought that still horrifies whoever I describe this to. There is almost a sense of sacrilege being committed here, they seem to think, in my wish to destroy any signs, any traces, any marks of my ever being in the world. It is as if in burning my archive, I were resisting an unspoken imperative to register my own trans, queer, marginalised existence for posterity – the failure to do so

17. Legacy Russel, *Glitch Feminism: a Manifesto* (London & New York: Verso, 2020), 47.

marking a compliance with the heteronormative tradition of erasing our lives.

Before the performance, I set up what I then called ‘The Museum of the Sissy’ in the foyer area of the theatre so that the audience could see and touch all the costumes, try on the different perfumes I wore for the three previous shows, flip through the journals and so on.¹⁸ The costumes were mounted on mannequins and, once the show was about to start, were taken into the theatre on a funeral-procession proto-performance. I asked friends and collaborators – Dr Stephen Farrier, Lois Keidan, and the late Dr Catherine Silverstone – to each write a eulogy for one of the three sissies I was performatively burying. I printed the eulogies on A7 pieces of paper, referencing what we call ‘santinhos’ (votives) in Brazil, to give out to audience members as they entered the space.

In retrospect, I see that ‘The Museum of the Sissy’ was an early manifestation of what I am now calling a trans archive. Six years after that event, as I sit here and write this article, Sissy has come back from the symbolic realm of the dead, reappearing in the title of this piece of writing and also in the title of its corresponding show.

Two years after *Death and the Sissy*, in the summer of 2019, I was awarded a Develop Your Creative Practice (DYCP) grant from Arts Council England to go on a research trip to New York City. There, I visited the personal archives of Quentin Crisp and Lou Reed, among others, with the aim of investigating how queer histories are preserved and passed down – transmitted – from one generation to the next. What I was not expecting in this trip was the affective responses brought about by both of these repositories. I have given a joint paper and co-written somewhat extensively about my encounter with the Lou Reed archives, but I will briefly recount part of it here with a specific focus on how it has informed my understanding of what archives can do – both physically and emotionally.¹⁹ My retelling is also a way to connect back to the notion of *archiving from the ground down*, which is at the core of my argument.

Three Archives

Upon arriving at the New York Public Library, I requested to see Lou Reed’s personal effects, which had only been made available to the public that very day. The items I called out of storage included a collection of his T-shirts and a collection of his sunglasses. These were brought to my desk on a trolley which seemed to have a mysterious aura around it, like a reliquary containing the physical remains of a queer saint. Upon opening one of the boxes containing a T-shirt, I felt transported to an parallel plane, away from the freezing, air-conditioned room of the NYPL. In this alternative world, I could see in my mind’s eye the act of physically undressing Reed and being left with the T-shirt in my hand. We were about the same age in this involuntary dream, young, perhaps in our early 30s and were about to

18. There were three performances with Sissy on the title before *Death and the Sissy*. They were *Sissy!* (2009), *The Sissy’s Progress* (2014–5) and *Shoot the Sissy* (2016).

19. Nando Messias and Stephen Farrier, ‘Sniffing Out a Past: A Staging Decadence Long Read’, *Staging Decadence*, June 9, 2021, https://www.stagingdecadence.com/blog/sniffing-out-a-past?fbclid=IwAR10hVJx4DCSMvzJjJdwein0mcHnKF4hN5QF1MAurdY8U8A3GV_LI6OAKRY (accessed February 2, 2023).

engage in the intimate act of a sexual encounter. To be clear, this never happened in actual fact. It only ever existed in fantasy.

I had been fixated by his relationship with Rachel, the transgender woman he was in a relationship with in the late 1970s and to whom he dedicated the record *Coney Island Baby*—‘I’d like to send this one out to Lou and Rachel . . . I swear I’d give the whole thing up for you’, he says at the end of the song. The song was the first and only time I ever heard of Rachel, whose last name is never mentioned. As I write this, I am left with a pressing question: what has become of Rachel’s archives? Who will tell her story? I am sure the record is not the only surviving document that outlives her. Yet, Reed’s voice seems to be what remains in the collective memory of a trans life that was not given the opportunity to speak for herself. Rachel’s life is testament to the disappearing nature of trans identities. Maybe the vision I had while holding Reed’s piece of clothing in the summer of 2019 in a cold New York library was brought on by Rachel’s spectral presence in the room. ‘Please, remember me too!’, she might have said.

Back in the room, I was taken over by a burning desire to smell Reed’s T-shirt, which I knew might be *verboten*. The librarian, standing behind her imposing desk, seemed to be keeping a close watch over me – surveillance. Despite the fear of being ejected and barred for life, I did nevertheless manage to bring the fabric nearer my nostrils. I do not remember detecting a particular scent (although, I admit that I was hoping for a distinctive body odour) but, in this illicit act of intimacy, I saw what appeared to be flakes of dead skin on the collar. Real flakes this time. Not imagined. The sight of Reed’s bodily remains translated into a quickening inside me that led to the following action: to lean into my impulse and to actually lick the flakes that had transferred into the tip of my gloved fingers, to take Reed into my mouth and to swallow him, which is how Reed is now part of my DNA.

Marika Cifor outlines a similar affective encounter in the archives when opening a manilla envelope with the words ‘Harvey Milk’s Pony Tail’ written on it. ‘This encounter between my own body, Milk’s bodily matter, and the archives itself is startling’, she says. ‘These locks’, she goes on, ‘seemingly both dead and alive, trouble me because of the queer body that is actually present in the archives’.²⁰

This notion of a queer body that is actually (rather than notionally) present in the archives, albeit not as a whole body but rather as traces of bodily matter or as a body’s ephemera, is one that I encountered again when visiting Quentin Crisp’s archives. Held in piles of boxes in his archivist’s bedroom in New York City, Crisp’s repository escapes the hold of the institution, actively resisting – even after death – the normative processes of classification and preservation. This visit felt like a quasi-religious experience to me as well. But here, as opposed to the NYPL, I did not feel watched or under surveillance. On the contrary, I was invited to try some of Crisp’s accoutrements: the purple Fedora hat, jacket, scarves, jewellery, perfume, and even his lipstick. The latter I immediately blotted on the pages of a notebook upon stepping out of the door as a keepsake, a relic, if you will. These pages, with Crisp’s blotted lipstick, are indeed still in my archive.

20. Cifor, ‘Stains and Remains’, 5.

This affective experience with Crisp's belongings brought me to floods of tears. The smell of his perfume, the touch of his lipstick on my lips (almost like kissing him in the mouth) and the touch of his silk scarf on the nape of my neck made his physical presence in the room almost tangible.

But this journey into trans and queer archives began long before that trip to New York. Long before *Death and the Sissy* too. Here is where the seed of an idea of creating an archive was planted.

In the final year of my undergraduate degree in Brazil, a tutor told me about the Japanese dancer Kazuo Ohno, one of the originators of Butoh and the creator of *Admiring La Argentina*. This was the first time I had heard of Ohno. My mentor, on the other hand, had seen him perform live in Paris and recounted that the whole audience had an emotional response to his live stage presence, bringing them to a collective shedding of tears in the theatre audience. In introducing me to Ohno's work, she introduced me to the queerest performer I had ever encountered at that point. A unique figure: spectral, heavily made-up, wearing a long dress and feathered hat while appearing to have risen from the dead exclusively for the short duration of the performance. It was said that Ohno was known in Paris for visiting thrift shops, buying vintage gowns which he collected, not really sure when or if those gowns would be worn again.²¹ Something about this hoarding of vintage gowns must have stuck in my head as I too went on to collect them. Every time I purchased a new one, I imagined a beautiful performance in my head, perfectly formed in the realm of the ideal. In these wondrous performances, I could be a duchess, a princess, a queen, a screen goddess . . . all those figures I was never allowed to dream of being when I was a child. I am sure most of my trans siblings will identify with this myth-making, fabulous-becoming queer strategy of survival.

If I had enough dresses, I figured, perhaps I could rescue that little girl I wanted to be when I was a little boy. The one who was socialised out of me by psychiatric treatment for Gender Identity Disorder.²² But the performances never materialised and the gowns have lived in the back of my wardrobe like ghosts, waiting for their turn on the stage ever since. I have changed with the times and what I see now is that accumulation and hoarding cannot save me from harm.

In wishing to burn my whole archive, part of me was acting on a destructive impulse to delete the evidence of my failed attempt to tame my greedy consumerism. What the other part of me was trying to do – unconsciously, granted – was to make the traces of my trans trajectory disappear, to make sure the archives were invisible, untraceable, irretrievable, perhaps because the memory was too painful, too distressing to keep reliving. I am thankful to have resisted that drive, so I could resuscitate Sissy as I have now. She will help me retrieve all those trans ephemeral materials that literally need to come out of the closet now. Having visited the underworld and having returned from the dead, Sissy can help me manifest the practice of reading the archive from the ground down.

21. I see this form of knowledge transmission, the type transmitted through gossip or hearsay as a very queer form of knowledge transmission, an affective archive, if you wish.

22. I write extensively about this childhood experience in Nando Messias, 'This is My Body: The Queer Messianic Dysphoria of *The Pink Supper*', *Contemporary Theatre Review* 33, no. 1–2 (2023): 44–60.

Conclusion

As an extension of collective memory, I propose that the archive has a political function as well as a memorial one. In under-representing queer and transgender subjects, institutional archives fail to register our lived experiences, both past and present. There is a critical urgency in chipping away at the harm that has already been done. We have always existed despite the work of patriarchal systems that wish to tell us otherwise. In their beautiful novel of historical fiction, Jordy Rosenberg suggests that ‘the archive is less a record of what has been said, and more an ongoing problem of what cannot be ... what is forgotten, repressed, disallowed’.²³

23. Jordy Rosenberg
Confessions of the Fox,
(London: Atlantic
Books, 2018), 84.

At times, we may feel tempted to believe the discourse that claims we have no past. In speaking for myself, as a trans artist and researcher, I can say that I have only nearly avoided falling into the trap of literally burning my own history. It is crucial that the project of preserving trans archives continue. For, as Jack Halberstam has put it, ‘the archive is not simply a repository; it is also a theory of cultural relevance, a construction of collective memory, and a complex record of queer activity’.²⁴

24. Jack Halberstam, *In
a Queer Time and
Place: Transgender
Bodies, Subcultural
Lives* (New York:
NYU Press, 2005),
169–70.

From a personal perspective, the question of how Live Art imagines itself in the future is closely tied up with how I imagine myself as a trans Live Artist in the hereafter. The answer to this question lies beyond my own existence, but I suspect it might be grounded in a knowledge of where we have come from. In heeding Rachel’s voice in the archive—‘Listen to me too!’ – I know that there are a few things I can personally do to start this process. I list them here as a tentative mini-manifesto.

I will infiltrate the institutional archive.
I will initiate interventional conversations about archival practices.
I will amplify trans voices.
I will celebrate trans lives.
I will preserve my history.
I will not wait for an archivist to come and rescue my archive.
I will come to understand myself as an archival/archiving subject.

In entering the dark, chthonic reaches of the archive, I fear I may lose something. Is the price of entry, the act of relinquishing my corporeality? Certainly, a more productive approach to this endeavour would be to investigate what can be gained upon travelling down further into the underground. My haptic archive, my seed-dispersing repository, will guide me towards the answer. Although I start with my own collection, in an ‘auto-archiving’ undertaking, I am sure that in order to forge a sustainable way forward I will choose to build community bonds with individuals who have been forgotten, repressed, disallowed, silenced. They may come from the past in the shape of ghosts. Or they may visit me from the future to see what will be left behind.

Notes on Contributor

Nando Messias' work straddles performance art, dance and theatre, combining beautiful images with a fierce critique of gender, visibility and violence. As well as a practitioner, Nando is movement director and a researcher of queer theory and performance with a number of publications in the field. Nando is a Lecturer of Theatre and Performance at The Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, University of London.