Encounters Podcast: Ingrid Pollard and Freya Monk-McGowan

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**Ingrid Pollard** 00:24

My name is Ingrid Pollard and I'm an artist, photographer. I’m in the north of England, looking out on green hills and clouds and sunny sky.

**Freya Monk-McGowan** 00:35

I'm Freya Monk-McGowan, a freelance curator. I'm currently in my living room in southeast London looking at very gray skies.

00:44

In this episode, Ingrid Pollard and Freya Monk-McGowan discuss the history behind the Lesbian Archive, now housed within Glasgow Women's Library, and how it led to Ingrid's current exhibition, No Cover Up.

**Freya Monk-McGowan** 00:58

We first met in 2019. It's hard to kind of date anything these days. But I think it was 2019. Part of this project was the commission and residency within the Lesbian Archive. And we brought together a panel of people to select an artist, and Ingrid is obviously the successful artist of that - everyone agreed that Ingrid would be incredible to work with, and particularly to get into that archive. And so I reached out to Ingrid, very nervous sent a really long email. I read through it actually, the other day, it's this like outrageously long email that I was just like, threw all of this information and just panicked and was like, here is everything that I could possibly say about this in one go. And Ingrid just replied going. Great. I'm gonna call you on Tuesday! [Laughter] Not even a straight answer. I was panicking so much. And then yeah, we spoke and Ingrid managed to come up to Glasgow, and we kind of jumped into the archive as soon as possible, really, and just ran around like kids. That's how I remember it.

**Ingrid Pollard** 02:03

I'm not quite sure I remember that long email it's probably been stricken from my mind. Although I just said, Sure. Yes, Freya was friendly, so that was all right. Yeah, and I got the sense that you know, that I was part of a bigger plan in terms of the archivists and what was happening there and getting the Lesbian Archive sorted out. So as it went on, I realised I was part of a bigger plot. It's part of a bigger residency, a bigger moment, which is all with everything I do, it's about those relationships that you form, or it's all part of it. I'm usually there for the journey, not just the end product, which is the exhibition. So it just naturally occurred, that it became very much an exhibition or a work that's very embedded in that place. And it's about the organisation and the fabric of the building. And it's kind of a big project, with these little feet.

**Freya Monk-McGowan** 03:00

Yeah, that's a perfect way to put it. I felt that. I used to work in a museum by trained in a museum before. And the museum record system that they have modes is filled. I mean, it's millions of records. But one of the first things I did was search 'lesbian', and 'gay' or 'LGBT', and I think out of millions of records about 18 had a connection to a queer history, and that was probably one of the most depressing things I think I'd ever seen. So the archive, the Women's Library hold is the Lesbian Archive and Information Centre, that's what its original name was, and it's kind of a combination, or almost like a cluster of different archives that have come together. So different community or personal archives, that were built in London. And it started out I think in 1984, or at least there was a paid member of staff in 1984 that was caring for this archive. And gradually as we get into the 90s, fundings being cut, and they found it impossible to continue. And they were they were going to lose the building that they were housing the archive in. And it was a bit of a panic moment of God, what are we going to do with these archives, these personal ephemera and records that we hold? As a safeguard? What do we do? And so they put out this advert in the gay press that just said, we need to find somewhere that can house this. And Adele Patrick and Sue John, who started the Glasgow Women's Library, saw this advert and said that they had the space for it. So up, it came in, apparently in a rainbow coloured truck, a lesbian moving truck. And they just unloaded all of these boxes into this archive. And that's where it's been, I mean, the Women's Library itself has moved from venue to venue over that period as well. So this archive is just been kind of boxed from one place to another and rests at the Women's Library now in Landressy St. in the East End of Glasgow, but because of this, all of this moving, the amount of time that's been able to be spent, you know, caring for it in terms of digitising it and recording it, there wasn't enough time as it were. So that's what the project was about a two-year project. And that's where we're at at the moment. I mean, the project obviously got extended because of the pandemic, so that that will be coming to an end. But it was always based as a foundational one, because you know, the amount of objects and items and records and just ephemera that's in the archive is huge. It would take decades probably to do it justice. I mean, there's still a rumour going around that there's a dildo somewhere in that archive, and I am determined to find it before the end. I have not found it yet, but I will. But this was supposed to be a kind of a, what do we even have, let's find out what we have. So that we can then go on and continue finding more funding really to dedicate to this archive. And then we have Ingrid!

**Ingrid Pollard** 05:53

Well, the end products, that's there, that's now part of um, Gi, the bits that I was looking at, seemed to be coming from London, and from the Camden Lesbian Centre and Black Lesbian Group, it was kind of the time where I was around in North London, around Camden. And as I looked through various boxes, it seems to be 'Oh, I recognise that person'. 'I know that person!' 'Oh I remember that even'. So what it's ended up with is looking at myself through the archive in a particular kind of way. So there were lots of events. And there were magazines that I'd helped to lay out in London and the women's liberation letter. And Lesbian Line, all things that I had a connection with. And then there was different connections for all these people in different campaigns and demonstrations that I was at or knew people. So that became a mixture of my experience from being in London at that time and how it filtered through. So there wasn't even though I was looking at lesbian archives, but I was trying to bring through the fact that you know, that lesbians or women would be on apartheid demonstrations... people that're represented in the archive they’re they're still around, so I'd go and interview them. And they had comment on their pictures. "We had six officers, many the officers there was a blind lesbian an Asian lesbian, an African lesbian, there was one Greek man and one white man from Yorkshire. Oh, we, you know, we just had this real old mix,". You know, it gives you a very intimate taste of it, as people talk about what they remember from 40 years ago, what they don't remember, it's a live archive. "People tried to make out that, that, that it was splitting, we were gonna split the community that, you know, there were lesbians and gay men versus the black community, with very little recognition of the fact that we as black lesbians and gay men had a place to be." There's a photograph in one of the areas of Mrs Roach, Colin Roach's mother, who was a young black man in 83, who died in Stoke Newington police station, and I was working in Stoke Newington, Hackney at the same time. So I've got demonstrations trying to trace what happened to his death, we still don't know how he came to die and police station. So it's all those links that are there not necessarily know in a lesbian archive, but those are all there, because of the politics at the time.

**Freya Monk-McGowan** 08:16

That was what I felt when when first visiting the archive was that what connects the objects in the archive and not necessarily the fact that everything is to do with lesbians, which you assume when you hear lesbian archive, right, everything's gonna be about lesbians. But that's, that's not the point. The point of it is that a group of people, whether that was a, you know, a community group, or the people that were looking after the archive at the time, who may have identified as lesbians, cared enough about these objects and these items, and believe they needed to be kept safe. And that's what connects them. Not necessarily the content of the item itself. What it is based on is this fundamental idea that no one exists in isolation, and that queer issues or lesbian issues are also disabled issues. They're also issues about parenting issues about race, they're all connected. And the idea of separating them seems just beyond ridiculous. And that's what I think is so wonderful about this exhibition is that it does kind of bounce from one to another you you get these interconnections, so they may not be immediately obvious, just a short amount of time considering it, you would find the connection, particularly in the world, you know, the digital world that we live in, this feels analog, this feels like you know, that you need to spend time in a different way and spend attention in a different way.

**Ingrid Pollard** 09:40

I guess it does remind you most of the action has taken place, not pre digital, but it's very, very early digital so you wouldn't organise that way it would be cut and paste literally to do out right. And the women's liberation newsletter, the lesbian line, archive and people would write to Lesbian Line wait two weeks, to get response about being like the only lesbian or queer in their village. So they have to wait three weeks to get this answer back. And then you've got an interview with someone who actually was one of the volunteers at Lesbian Line talking about the calls they will get, you know, young people who are desperate, but also very confident, women who were afraid they lose their children. So you've got one example of Lesbian Line as an organisation. And then you've got someone who knows the minutiae detail about how many stairs they had to walk up to, to get to the Lesbian Line office,

**Freya Monk-McGowan** 10:29

I can't help but think about as well. The, the difference, the sad difference and realisation there is particularly you know, when looking at the Lesbian Line, and Outright and things like that, and reading these letters that were saying, you know, this is your local queer thing on Thursday nights in this pub, you know, lesbians, me, and all these things. And what I found fascinating about it was that there was always something, no matter where across the country, these people were in whatever region it was, whatever town it was, there was always something to go to, even if it was so you know, a few miles away. But if you compare that to now, in what we live in a digital space, what should be easier to find these things literally just putting in... I find that there's even less so now. That actually the chances of there being something in you know, the middle of nowhere, that there being this lesbian night, it's just less and less. It brings this kind of, again, attention to the differences of what was then and what's now. And perhaps what should be, or at least, you know, as a 29 year old, queer woman, why I'm desperate to see, you know, coming out as a young person and looking around and trying to find the local gay club in my town. Well, in Kingston, and that quickly got shut down. I mean, I've got refused entry, the first time for looking too straight, which was hilarious. And then a year later, it got closed down. So it was just so sad. And then you go to the archive, you're like, this is where it's been this whole time, I can see that this was a thing I put, you know, you always watch the lesbian shows, you're like, God, that looks amazing. It's all mystery and magic and things that clearly aren't real. And then you go to the archive, no, no, it was real. I was just born in the wrong decade. And we just need to get better at having more of them.

**Ingrid Pollard** 12:18

Yes, did spend time looking at Outright and Spare Ribs. And other magazines, and then you look in the back for events, and there'll be like pages of events, you know, talking groups, clubs, writing groups, that was just amazing how many remember that. And then you'd look in the ad section. And there'll be this organisation needs a gay officer social services or something. And so that was also astonishing, because you know, the way people word it was very, particularly in those days, but now it's even more particularly what you can say what you can't say, opportunities for people, though, that sort of arc of change in language and how you do things and organise is very different. So that was fascinating, just how many opportunities and things there appeared to be and how they all slowly went away, disappeared, or sort of smaller organisations had to suddenly make a profit and suddenly had to pay for their rent themselves when they've been getting money from the Arts Council from the local authority. It's just how these things change. Yeah, the opportunities now are different. They're great, but they're, they're different.

**Freya Monk-McGowan** 13:29

It's that kind of tension between being accepted in wider society and therefore you don't need your own space. Because we can go anywhere and be lesbians anywhere, versus actually feeling like you do have a space where you can go and even, you know, looking at another person and understanding all of these signifiers about them before you even speak to one another and going, No, I know, I can see it. And it's, it's sad, but a reality of these archives that of course, we should remember these things. So it does connect these massively disparate, what at least feels disparate. So there are things in there that you'll see homophobia, and something like that, and it is massive. So you go one one time you're looking at kind of lesbian sexuality or lesbian sex or something, right, and you open it and there's like, three things in there. You're like, well, that's very disappointing. And you sound around you see the homophobia folder, and it is absolutely rammed. I mean, they had to make more than one. It's absolutely rammed sound that the disproportionate kind of volume of things is such an array book, because it is a young archive and because they are still accessioning things. You can imagine that this will just keep growing.

**Ingrid Pollard** 14:42

Yeah, I think that's quite thrilling, especially when I've looked and there's somone whose you see they've been sending their archives or personal archive their life story quite diligently and it's all carefully marked out. They've kind of sat down thought about how they want to be remembered. where they want to be remembered. And they're actually systematically doing that. So they're not hidden, but they sort of are hidden, there's, you know, it's a hidden history, but it's quite clearly there, if you want to look for that, you know, a complete life story on the shelves, it speaks about the safety, you can feel about being out or in that particular period, and continues now. So there are those elements in there.

**Freya Monk-McGowan** 15:27

I remember one of the conversations that we had about one of your previous residencies, particularly in the north of England, there was a phrase that you use that was about, I think, that you're walking on farmland, and even watching people work the land, and that you would wanted to both work the land and walk the land,

**Ingrid Pollard** 15:46

There's photographers that do landscape, some of actually do spend lot of time walking, I'm sort of walking the land type person, repeatedly going to the same landscape, but is that thing of just actually walking and being in it. Being in the library, being in that spot. I've been to the library when there's other exhibitions there, which are about different topics and their place there in that gallery space. So it's a different relationship to the landscape of the library and the landscape of Glasgow and in Scotland. So it felt very much at all the work that being in the library, and it's about the library and the relationships that are formed. So you know, the landscape with its parameters, which is a listed building, so you have to adapt your exhibition to the different spaces and the concerns. And, you know, there was always that architectural spot of the huge half circle that you go in, it's just dominates you. Now, when I knew I wanted to do something there. It's just how big could I make these pictures. So they filled it so that when you come in, it's, you've got these tiny little photos out of the archive, and you've broken them up. So it makes those people involved in demonstrations and political activities, really big... Spent time walking the land, in the library space,

**Freya Monk-McGowan** 17:09

I hadn't thought about it really like that, actually, before, in terms of walking the land or the landscape of the Women's Library. Yeah. And they are on different levels. Because you know, the placement of everything throughout the library, you do have to seek it out, there is a there is intention there. Although you may happen upon something and not realise it, if you do want to see the show, you have to find it. And you do have to walk the entire library. There are parts that are upstairs, obviously, everything's accessible, there's a lift, but you do have to go around to find it all

**Ingrid Pollard** 17:41

Within the library space where the book stacks are, there's a Frieze... images from different demonstrations, both the joyousness of being in a demonstration amongst people and allies. But then there's the other bits where you could get harassed or kettled by the police. Then there's within the book stacks themselves, ther'es these small audio interviews with people actually represented in the archive. So it's both wanting people to just come across those, and then you can go on a map and look around,

**Freya Monk-McGowan** 18:13

Particularly the audio boxes that people can walk past and press the buttons of the idea that these people are kind of whispering to you and calling to you, even when you might not have meant to hear them that you might just be a library visitor that's literally looking for a book.

**Lesley Climpson** 18:27

It was brilliant. I loved it. I loved my work. I worked at Lambeth women's workshop, I also worked at Southwark women's training workshop, which was another carpentry training workshop in South London. The projects were brilliant, they were well run. Most of the women who work there were also really brilliant, highly committed, it was a really great atmosphere to work in.

**Femi Otitoju** 18:50

We started trying to work with young people and schools and trying to get teachers to work positively with young people around the issue of sexuality. And that truly, truly blew up in our face.

**Ingrid Pollard** 19:04

Socialising, demonstrations, political activity are all part of the same mixture of things that as we understand now. And there's another aspect of the as you come in, there's a area in the front which now has a video of Susan Bonnar singing three songs. She's a local Scottish actor and very fine singer. There's something about then connecting it to you know, the wide area of Glasgow and Scotland as well as there's something about having that element of music and song and there's an emotional switch you can have fun singing, I mean, someone there cried when she was singing which is kind of very heartwarming. I know Susanne would like it. So it's kind of a noisy exhibition for a library kept thinking what was I thinking in a library?

**Freya Monk-McGowan** 19:55

I really enjoyed that. That's one of my favorite things about it,

**Ingrid Pollard** 19:57

But you know, it kind of works.

**Freya Monk-McGowan** 19:59

Yeah.

**Ingrid Pollard** 20:01

And there's also the photograph of Colin Roach's mother, which is kind of a stepping off point for the whole exhibition. So you see that on the demonstration with the same signage that's for the exhibition. So there's very subtle, subtle things that are very personal to me. People, you know, I knew from the 80s I see in pictures and I kept thinking, 'Oh I wonder what happened to them, where are they?' But then there's another story about, you know, why didn't they continue being photographers or painters are involved in music and oh they're really, really ill? Why is that is it just life is so grinding and punishing, at the same time as that you find a community? Because there is an interest in 1980s, by researchers and young students. So sometimes, I'm asked if I'm still in there batting, but then I will say, you know, look at those other people, you need to speak to them, why did they stop? Where are they now? What are they doing?

**Freya Monk-McGowan** 20:50

Yeah, it certainly takes a certain amount of resilience to be continuing, as you say, in particularly creative or artistic expressions when you are part of a society or that doesn't necessarily feel like you fit comfortably. I remember reading Sara Ahmed's queer phenomenology that's looking at that feeling of not fitting, and that you feel like the angles of yourself start getting rubbed, almost like a pebble to the point of being smooth so that you fit into this society well enough, and how to challenge that? How And should you?

**Ingrid Pollard** 21:32

I mean, is extremely exhausting. And as I've got older I, it's not that I care less, who I offend, or it's not offend, it's rubbing people up the wrong way. Or they come up with something they don't quite like. And that's part of the work. So hopefully, they can examine what's causing them discomfort. And a lot of times, we're looking at archives and sort of colonial ones, there is a moment where I have to sit with the discomfort of it still goes through it anyway. I'm not going to take the decision to shut myself out. Because it's difficult because it's painful, we're going to have a really uncomfortable conversations. It's like yeah, let's go for it. I don't want to do a screaming shouting thing, really. But it is this is uncomfortable for some people. So we have to constantly remember that I might be very comfortable, supposedly, in LGBTQ community, we can have difficult conversations where they're all there. But you know, you have to be resilient, you just have to carry on, there's a number of younger artists who are saying, No, resilience is not good. It's, you know, makes you ill eventually, there's another way of practicing. So resting, recuperation, looking after yourself is part of their art based practice, which is fantastic. But you know, I'm going to be there in the pits and it's because I'm older. It's still scary and uncomfortable, but I'm prepared to have those conversations. It's part of my job, you know, as an artist, and I never kind of leave my race or sexuality at the door, anywhere I'm going, it's got to come in, it's impossible to leave it at the door. And I always assume, when we're talking about these things abstractly, I'm also talking about race and sexuality, class as well, gender, those are all there with me whether I'm saying, as a black woman, I don't really tend to say that anymore. I might have done it when I was younger, but it's always, it's always there in the room with us. It might be a sort of elephant and we're ignoring it. But I'm prepared to have the difficult conversations. And if people don't want to have a conversation, then there's no dialogue, it's problematic. And any artwork is the start of a conversation. I mean, right, we would have a dialogue, whether it's like, you know, why is that there is disturbing the library, which I have had those conversations, they I don't like that, you know, that's some response that I've had, which is great. Let's talk about why you don't like it, you're allowed to not like it. But you know, what's the reason for that? You know, I'm prepared to have a conversation about something I've just spent two years making, it's all right.

**Freya Monk-McGowan** 24:12

It's very welcome actually to have a conversation about it after this long. Yeah. I feel like I constantly have these not necessarily kind of existential concerns about being a freelance curator, particularly when it comes to art and activism, political art, or anything in between as freelance curator, right, the importance is based on the next thing you're going to do because you have to find yourself, otherwise, how are we going to live? And if you're basing your next work on the fact that you have to eat to live with the integrity in the art that you're either helping to produce or putting on, you know, is that based actually on the integrity of the art itself, or is that based on the fact that I need to pay my rent, so I as a curator, I'm constantly in between this tension of what I should and shouldn't be doing. What's reasonable to ask of an artist or of an audience goer, but also, a wider thought process of art and activism are inextricably linked for me, but also who seeing the shows? And who needs to see the shows? Where are they situated? How do we make sure that if it is supposed to have this drive to activism, those that we feel like should see are seeing it, and importantly, that will take place outside of the white cube gallery setting a lot of the time, because fundamentally, the majority of people that go to a white cube gallery space, are people that aren't necessarily the people that need political activism. If you see what I mean, who's actually seeing it? And why are you doing that? That was a, it was always the question of, why are you putting on this show? And I think it may have left me in this kind of spot where I feel like I can't take a step without having this real, like, powerful drive, why am I doing this? Does it have an ethical base? Does it make a difference? Does it do something? But again, I think that means that a lot of the time you end up not doing anything, but this is this is the problem that I see. I think particularly people that are you know, we're demonstrating in the 80s, it was a case of you did you turned up a lot of the time it was you literally turned up in your body and you were there and you're doing it it was it was regular. And it was it was about a load of different things. I remember I went to the, you know, against the Iraq war, and was it 2003 I can't remember now. But you know, the biggest march that there had ever been, and it made absolutely no blind bit of difference. And it's that feeling of whether anything can change and whether art can be that vehicle for change, whether it does fuel people as a vehicle, or whether it makes us feel like we're doing it and ultimately, nothing actually happens afterwards.

**Ingrid Pollard** 27:03

I think it can make a difference over time, but it is always a long game. You know, you only have to mention George Floyd and see what's happened just in terms of what appeared to happen in terms of policing in America. The discussion of, you know, prisons, and that funding, whether that's, you know, how can we change all that, you know, someone like Angela Davis has been campaigning for no prisons for like 40 years, and she knows she's never going to see the reform in her lifetime. So I mean, as an artist I know I'm in it for the long haul, perhaps I've got another you know, 10 years, you know, mental capacity in me. So, but it's always a long game. It may appear that nothing is changing through your own work, but it does eventually, even if your archive is then in another library, and then a younger researcher comes across it and looks and makes connections between what you did. Yeah, it's a long game. It's not about fame and money, which is sort of, you know, kind of nice, but it's if you're going to work, doing work, that's about activism, then it does take a long time and even if your your work appears to be beautiful, and it's celebrating something it does have a political stance whether you you'll do it or not, because it sits in the world full of all all this fascination. You're all in the world together competing. It's a long game

**Freya Monk-McGowan** 28:25

That makes me feel better about it.

**Ingrid Pollard** 28:29

Oh good, gotta have a plan. 10 year plan.

**Freya Monk-McGowan** 28:35

Yeah, right 50 year plan. It sounds like.

**Ingrid Pollard** 28:39

Five year plan. So you can ignore it! But it's, it's always about change. And change is good.

28:50

Ingrid Pollard and Freya Monk-McGowan. Find out more about the exhibition No Cover Up at glasgowinternational.org. Encounters was produced by Lynsey Moyes for Glasgow International, supported by the Scottish Government's Expo fund and Arts Fund. Thank you for listening.