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Included in a collection of responses to Alexander Nemerov, "Art Is Not the Archive," *Archives of American Art Journal* 56.2 (Fall 2017): 76-83.

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Nemerov polemically plays devil's advocate, offering an all-or-nothing proposition: "As art historians, we hope to find an archival document that explains a work of art. What this practice omits, however, is the otherness of the art." Is art a symptom of its times, or "a thing apart" that "comes from nowhere"? His omitted otherness is elsewhere in the essay equated with purity, and the specter of financial speculation threatens to cast Quidor's paintings as other than art, other than pure.

I get worried when such things as purity or apartness are upheld as endangered and in need of defense. This polemic could not help but remind me of how non-normative sexualities are viewed as sully reputations. As with talk of personal finances, some might say that sexuality is too vulgar and better kept to one's self. While there is nothing in Nemerov's or Barrett's essays to suggest sexuality, the stakes of this methodological tug-of-war seem both familiar and urgent when seen from the perspective of queer history.

Queer histories rely on archives but must remain critical of what has survived. Patterns of historical erasure and epistemological banishment are rife, and those looking for evidence can never trust the archives they must nevertheless scrutinize. Silences are telling. Even when found, archival corroboration must be vigilantly defended, since there are many who would deny or simply choose to ignore it. They would have us believe that queer

associations tarnish the work or limit its appeal. For a queer history, the archive remains a compromised necessity and, always, a site of continuing struggle against effacement. Any wish for purity from it—unsullied by such attachments—is the willful turning of a blind eye.

A queer archival method, too, upholds “otherness” for its objects. I agree with Nemerov that we cannot merely make artworks symptoms of the past. I take his call for otherness as a reminder that art is present beyond the confines of its production and its time. No one context ever explains *entirely* (the word that hinges Nemerov’s complaint). Queer histories, in particular, are often chronicles of rogue receptions or capacities that depart from the original intention, address, or audience. One must track artworks from their conceptualization to their materialization to their receptions and ask what patterns of queer identification or resistance emerge across the artwork’s relations with successive viewers over time. This is an unremitting archival question that exceeds a singular, sealed contextual explanation. Such an ongoing aggregation of queer attachments is a means to combat disregard and erasure. Queer methodologies teach us to be skeptical of the archives that survive but, also, to scour them for evidence of the continued unfolding of “otherness.” Art is always both *now* and *then*, and the never-finished tale of those episodes of contemporaneity is an ongoing archival project.

# In Conversation

## *Art Is Not the Archive*

IN OUR FALL 2017 ISSUE, art historian Alexander Nemerov explored a question of vital interest to this journal and its readers: How might we describe the relationship between artworks and archives? He applied this question to the case of nineteenth-century American painter John Quidor, whose historical and literary subjects scholar Ross Barrett has connected to the artist's fervor for land speculation. Nemerov commended Barrett for deftly yoking Quidor's art to his social context, supported by archival evidence. Yet Nemerov maintained that art can still be "a thing apart" from the social realm, marked by its "otherness" and thus not wholly explained by the archive. These ideas have sparked much debate among art historians, and so we invited a selection of them to respond with their own questions and case studies. The eleven responses featured here represent a variety of research areas and methodologies, and conclude with reflections by both Barrett and Nemerov.

*frontispiece*

Dayanita Singh, *File Room*, 2011 (detail).  
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