John Q
PROJECTS | 2009-2014
Foreword

This catalogue, John Q: Projects 2009-2014 accompanies the exhibition Hearsay, and is the companion publication to Excerpts. A collection of individual projects, Hearsay is a compilation of responses to questions about notions of truth and southern narratives. Each project offers alternative points of view to the historical canon, providing a window into the world of second-hand information. Not revisionist history, nor necessarily based in fact (though many are), the projects in Hearsay seek to privilege information and perspectives that have been historically underrepresented, obscured, fictionalized, or untold.

Hearsay is presented with significant contributions from artists, archivists, historians, and community members, offering a truly interdisciplinary collaboration to visualize portions of history/ies as they intersect with the American South. We are especially grateful to our collaborators’ willingness to share their individual or collective voices through visual presentations within the Bernard A. Zuckerman Museum of Art. Each story builds on the next, allowing us to collectively explore our own narratives and how they are often woven together through hearsay.

The John Q project and catalogue is the result of a collaborative effort between the members of John Q in conversation with Julia Brock, Kirstie Tepper, and myself. Borrowing the terminology of John Q, we have been operating as an idea collective. Thank you Joey, Andy, and Wesley. We are particularly grateful to the essayists Jonathan D. Katz and Shawn Michelle Smith.

Julia Brock

Julia Brock
Teresa Bramlette Reeves
Kirstie Tepper
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June, 1962: It is a warm summer evening, and the men gather on the front porch, laughing, acquiring numbers and courage. They tell each other stories of the week’s events, of daily contests and conquests. After a while, they collect themselves and set out together to parade through the neighborhood. They are African American men, twelve in all, and they have adopted a uniform of blue pants and white shirts to announce their solidarity. They march in single file in front of windows where curious neighbors stand to look or abruptly pull the curtains closed. They parade in front of balconies where people seek refuge from the summer heat. A heckler recognizes a handsome young man at the front of the line, and shouts, “Hey, Mother Hodges;” without looking back, the young man retorts, “Hey, motherfucker.” It is Sunday in Atlanta’s Fourth Ward, and the Jolly Twelve are on their way to a party.

April, 2010: Redbud, dogwood, and Japanese magnolia are in bloom, welcoming spring in Atlanta. Three white men walk along the sidewalk of an urban neighborhood greeting people seated on doorsteps and waving at passing cars. They wear blue pants and white shirts, and one of them sports spectacular two-tone shoes. These are the members of the “idea collective” known as John Q. Wesley Chenault, Andy Ditzler, and Joey Orr. Pooling their expertise as archivists, film curators, and visual culture scholars, they recreate public events and performances that highlight little-known moments in Atlanta’s queer past.

John Q performed the walk of the Jolly Twelve in the Old Fourth Ward on April 3, 2010, as the first episode of its four-part performance Memory Flash. Freddie Styles, a former member of the Jolly Twelve, told his story at the event (retold above). The collective and participants then proceeded to a recreation of the Joy Lounge beer locker, where drag queens hid during police raids of the club in the late-1960s. In John Q’s version, young men and women crowded into the back of a refrigerated truck to watch videos of drag performances in the cool, dark space of the...
small game. Next everyone was invited to a softball game at Redmond Park where women read from the oral histories of former players of the Tomboys and the Lorelei Ladies who found friends and lovers in the queer communities of the softball league. The final stop was for a projection of Andy Warhol’s Lonesome Cowboys near Ansley Mall, where police raided a theater and photographed audience members watching the film in August 1969.2

John Q gleaned much of the source material for its multi-site performance from the collections at the Kenan Research Center at the Atlanta History Center. There archivists (including Wesley Chenault) endeavored to expand Atlanta’s “official” history to include the otherwise largely undocumented lives and stories of queer men and women in the pre-Stonewall-era South. Oral history interviews with Freddie Styles of the Jolly Twelve, Billy Jones, a popular drag performer at the Joy Lounge, and softball player Nell Stansell recount how gay men and lesbians lived in Atlanta in the 1950s and 1960s, before the Gay Rights movement began in earnest. For John Q, these documents become, in the words of Ann Stoler, “active, generative substances,”3 allowing participants to inhabit those spaces and remember them in new ways through their reenactments. The places they engage become not only sites of historical note, but also places remembered for John Q’s performances. Participants might drive by Ansley Square and think, “That’s where I saw Lonesome Cowboys last year, in the same place that was busted over 40 years ago.” Or, “That’s where we played softball on that lovely spring evening.” Or, “What were those guys in the blue pants and white shirts doing, anyway?” John Q aims not simply to make the past “come alive,” but to enliven the past in the present, to activate sites that might also be said of John Q’s public archival performance: “Here, belonging is a matter of the embodied repertoire,”4 as a form of archival documentation. John Q’s reenactments question the limits and possibilities of the archive, asking in Rebecca Schneider’s words: “To what degree is a live act then as well as now? Might a live act even ‘document’ a precedent live act, rendering it, in some way, ongoing, even preserved?”5

The work of John Q is intergenerational and often interracial, the 40-somethings of the collective engaging the memories of a prior, pre-Stonewall-era generation of queer individuals. They pursue and produce “a queerly intergenerational relationship” forged through the archive and animated through performance.6 What Elizabeth Freeman has said of the queer time of drag performance might also be said of John Q’s public archival performances: “Here, belonging is a matter of pleasurable cathexis across Historical time as well as across the space between stage and audience.”7 Indeed, “stage” and “audience” do not readily apply here, as participants in John Q’s installations and performances inhabit both positions to differing degrees, breaking down the divide between active and passive that often informs performance, and further heightening the “pleasurable cathexis” of participation across time.

John Q might be listed among the group Freeman deems “the new queer historians”: “Many of these scholars have championed eclectic, idiosyncratic, and transient archives including performances, gossip, found objects, and methods (or antimethods) that rely on counterintuitive juxtapositions of events or materials.”8 Such a counterintuitive juxtaposition is readily found in John Q’s “essay on queer migration,” The Campaign for Atlanta, a performance at the Atlanta Cyclorama in May 2013.9

Three images run across the top of the advertisement for John Q’s Campaign for Atlanta. The images tell you where you are: In the front seat of a car, windows wide open, moving down the road on a sunny day.
man sitting next to you, eyes on the road, captures your full attention. You keep up a banter as you film him, and he turns to you, grinning, his long hair flying in the wind. He is beautiful and buoyant, drawing the outside world in and holding it in the reflection of his sunglasses. In his words, he is broke, but “young, good looking, and always horny,” and you are happy to take him with you.

Crawford Barton grew up in the small town of Resaca in northern Georgia. As a young man he moved to Atlanta, and then, in the early 1970s, to San Francisco, the city that was quickly becoming a gay mecca. Barton photographed the Castro district during decades of political and social change, and under the collective title Castro Street, he created a photo-essay, a 1,700-page manuscript for a novel, and a screenplay. Over the course of his travels he kept up a correspondence with friends near and far, and documented his comings and goings on Super 8mm film.

John Q traces Barton’s migration backward, from West to East, San Francisco to Atlanta, and all the way back to Resaca, whose rural roots Barton kept with him in photographs and films. As the collective redirects Barton’s movements, it also sutures a temporal divide, connecting Barton’s migration, through Resaca, to the movement of troops in the Civil War. For Resaca was the site of one of the first battles of the military operation known as the Atlanta Campaign, in which Union troops moved through the state of Georgia, into Atlanta.

The Battle of Atlanta, an important conflict at the mid-point of the Atlanta Campaign, was commemorated in a 42-by-358-foot panoramic painting commissioned by an Illinois politician to celebrate his military service. The painting made its own migration, traveling across the country, where it finally stopped (not by design) in Atlanta, the site of the historic battle it depicts, and where it has remained installed ever since in the Atlanta Cyclorama, a building designed specifically to house and showcase the work. The Atlanta Cyclorama also tells you where you are: in the immersive space of a virtual Atlanta, caught in the throes of the Civil War. The Cyclorama directs your gaze and even moves you physically around its 360-degree view. Portions of the painting are dramatically lit as a spoken narrative animates the scene in your imagination. Here you are the “pre-
cinematic” mobile viewer that Anne Friedberg describes, literally and virtually in motion. But on a warm night in May 2013, under the direction of John Q, your precinematic virtual mobility merges with a doubly mobile point of view, for as Barton’s story intersects with the Battle of Atlanta, you occupy a place in the Cyclorama but also a viewing position behind a handheld Super 8mm camera, filming in a moving car. The apotheosis of the virtual viewer in motion could not be more complete.

John Q’s Campaign for Atlanta “suggests a potentially queer vision of how time wrinkles and folds.” Through layered and mediated reenactments the collective explores how performance might access or even produce such wrinkles, momentarily conjoining past and present through repeated acts and viewings. As time folds, places accrue multiple meanings, activated as palimpsests of the movements and migrations that continually make and remake them.

Shawn Michelle Smith is Associate Professor of Visual and Critical Studies at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. She has written extensively on the history and theory of photography in the United States and on race and visual culture. Her most recent book, At the Edge of Sight: Photography and the Unseen (Duke 2013), won the 2014 Lawrence W. Levine Award for best book in American cultural history from the Organization of American Historians.

John Q invites one to consider and participate in a living archive in which places take on meaning as registers of performances across time. Its reenactments fold past into present, transforming an understanding of both. Drawing on an archive of documents, John Q enlivens past and present, engaging time queerly to illuminate Atlanta’s queer history.
Other minority traditions do it much better, this business of maintaining a distinct history and a cultural identity amidst an overwhelming, often hostile majority culture. Such preservation of cultural memory turns on narrating one's story, whether the story in question is ancient, as in the Jews’ flight from Egypt, or more recent as in Wounded Knee, the immigrant's Ellis Island, or the African American Great Migration. These cultural narratives, whether written down, told in song and ritual and recipes, performed, sung, spoken or eaten, are thus transmitted from generation to generation in something we can generalize as cultural memory. And their defining character is that they become deep shadows, adumbrating the present through the past, lending the shape of the now the rich, rounded contours of what once was. These narratives operate on us in the shape of analogy, an implicit parallel between what we now feel and experience and what we assume others once felt. As such, cultural narratives are less about the past than the present, for they are that which gives the contours of the now their deeper meanings.¹

Arguably, the first cogent argument for US queer culture as a minority culture is Donald Webster Cory's [(born Edward Sagarn)](1951 book, *The Homosexual in America: A Subjective Approach*). Indeed, the earlier work of Alfred Kinsey pointed in the opposite direction, for one of the most controversial conclusions of his 1948 empirical study *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* turned on precisely how widespread and generalized homophobic behavior was in America. But despite Kinsey's army of statistics, Cory's account of minority identity still continued to inform popular conceptions of a queer “minority” in part because it seemed more intuitively true than Kinsey's universalized same-sex eroticism. And surely a large factor in the success of Cory's minority model was our culture's aggressive policing that effectively prevented until fairly recently any mention of same-sex desire, traditions, or history—except in a juridical context. From laws that prohibited public assembly to a generalized resistance to name or historicize any collective sense of queerness, the great genius of homophobia

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¹ This regrett is based on Freddie Styles's story of the Jolly Twelve, part of his oral history archived at the Kenan Research Center at the Atlanta History Center. A portion of Styles's interview is included in John Q's essay, “**Dissociative Memory:** Queer Histories in Atlanta's Public Spaces,” *Southern Spaces*, 28 February 2010, http://southernspaces.org/2010/dissociative-memorial-queer-histories-atlanta-public-spaces (accessed 8 February 2014).

² In my description of John Q's Memory Flash performance I am drawing from the collective’s website, http://johnq.org/ (accessed 8 February 2014), its essay in *Southern Spaces*, the group's interview with Julia Brock for *History@Work: A Public History Commissions from the National Council on Public History*, http://publichistorycommons.org/brock-john-q-interview/ (accessed 8 February 2014), and the announcement/program for the events.


⁷ Freeman 164.

⁸ Freeman 162.


has been to enforce a sense of isolation, to interrupt the formation of a shared culture, which is to say to interrupt the transmission of cultural memory.

Not surprisingly, resistance to this wholesale erasure of queerness from the stage of public history is increasingly proffered in the form of representing repressed histories, mechanisms of switching on the transmission of cultural memories. But in place of a generalized, one-size-fits-all claim to a collective past, be it Stonewall, ACT-UP, or Bowers v. Hardwick, the work of John Q is, by design, small, local, and individuated, and as such operates in the space between the collective and the particular, the universalizing and the minoritizing. As the aesthetic equivalent of the locavore, John Q thus finds in its immediate surroundings a particularity that opens out into a collectively, or put less grandly, details particular how rarely the experience of queer black Americans stands in as collective, this memory flash not only successfully reconfigured the notion of private/public, but also redrew the terms of shame/pride, in/out, minority/majority, and many of the other structuring binaries of pre-Stonewall queer life. As a result, a very local, classed, and raced memory came to be articulated as presciently representative of a post-Stonewall claiming of public space and collective identity. In this sense, John Q ironizes the absent word “Public” that concludes its name, for the public it addresses isn’t the public as it’s usually conceived according to dominant ideologies. Rather, the public here is a site for the projection of an identification across the very racial, sexual, gendered, and classed boundaries generally key to the reproduction of a dominant notion of “the public.”

In the second movement of Memory Flash (The Joy Lounge), participants/observers huddled in a mobile refrigeration unit while watching images of drag performances at The Joy Lounge. During the not infrequent police raids of the Joy Lounge in the 1960s, drag performers would flee into the refrigerator to avoid arrest. John Q stages this memory flash surely in part because a few months previously, The Atlanta Eagle, a long-established gay leather bar, was illegally raided by Atlanta police. The implicit parallel to pre-Stonewall homophobia is apt, but equally so is the transformation of drag queens into leather boys, a sartorial inversion that is all the more delicious for its invocation of the Janus-faced nature of gender performance à la Judith Butler, girl drag and boy drag as the twinned, mutually constituted and shapeshifting and decidedly not flat screen of trees, as was projected—combine to form an eruption of archival modes—oral, written, recorded, and projected—combine to form an eruption of the past in the present from a series of distinct standpoint epistemologies. In the first movement, which is built around the story of the Jolly Twelve, member Freddie Styles narrates a very public queer parade within a cultural context that still demanded that the fact of sexual difference stand as a private, individuating, and shameful secret. Reenacting that queer public parade today not only underscores its political courage and prescience, it moreover made a very local, specific African American cultural development available to all as a site of projective identification. Given how rarely the history is a site for the projection of an identification across the very racial, sexual, gendered, and classed boundaries generally key to the reproduction of a dominant notion of “the public.”

In the case of their suite of performances called Memory Flash, four very different archival modes—oral, written, recorded, and projected—combine to form an eruption of the past in the present from a series of distinct standpoint epistemologies. In the first movement, which is built around the story of the Jolly Twelve, member Freddie Styles narrates a very public queer parade within a cultural context that still demanded that the fact of sexual difference stand as a private, individuating, and shameful secret. Reenacting that queer public parade today not only underscores its political courage and prescience, it moreover made a very local, specific African American cultural development available to all as a site of projective identification. Given how rarely the experience of queer black Americans stands in as collective, this memory flash not only successfully reconfigured the notion of private/public, but also redrew the terms of shame/pride, in/out, minority/majority, and many of the other structuring binaries of pre-Stonewall queer life. As a result, a very local, classed, and raced memory came to be articulated as presciently representative of a post-Stonewall claiming of public space and collective identity. In this sense, John Q ironizes the absent word “Public” that concludes its name, for the public it addresses isn’t the public as it’s usually conceived according to dominant ideologies. Rather, the public here is a site for the projection of an identification across the very racial, sexual, gendered, and classed boundaries generally key to the reproduction of a dominant notion of “the public.”

In the last movement, Warhol’s high camp remake of a Hollywood Western, Lonesome Cowboys, was projected outside against a shifting and decidedly not flat screen of trees, resulting in near illegibility. This failed showing of the film mirrored the confiscation and censorship of the movie in 1969 amidst an investigation of its putatively homosexual local audience. The overt homoeroticism of Warhol’s film thus stood in pointed contrast to the social world of its Atlanta public, marking the degree to which the angle was skewed from
New York to Atlanta, from center to periphery. Yet the outdoor projection itself is a strategy borrowed from the 1989 protests following the censorship of Robert Mapplethorpe’s retrospective The Perfect Moment at the Corcoran Gallery of Art, when photographs from the exhibition were projected at night against the museum’s white marble walls. A 1969 act of censorship is thus mobilized via a 1989 strategy in 2010 to explore the resonance of memory—thus the anachronous floating world of memory in which past and present mingle.

Of course, in all four of its movements, Memory Flash projects the past forward, daring us to narrate its parallels to the present. Here the past is both active and constitutive, a calling into being through the act of narration. As parallels emerge, repeated patterns that help explicate previously blank spheres of experience, we can’t know if they are the past speaking in the present or the present ventriloquizing the past. But it doesn’t matter, for either way John Q has told us a new story of ourselves, and it will necessarily inflect all our other stories, past, present and future.

Jonathan D. Katz directs the doctoral program in Visual Studies at the University at Buffalo. He was co-curator with David Ward of Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture, the first queer exhibition ever mounted at a major U.S. museum, which opened at the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery in 2010. Katz is the president and chief curator of the new Leslie Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art in New York City and is presently completing a new book, The Silent Camp: Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg and the Cold War, to be published by the University of Chicago Press.

1 See Joey Orr, “What I carry with me most during my visits is Michel Foucault’s idea that the archives produce us. In other words, there is a way in which the proliferation of recuperative collecting efforts supports particular kinds of identity constructions. My presence in these spaces is therefore an effect of these disciplinary models. I am, in a sense, called forth by the ways I am articulated. For all of these reasons, I maintain an intellectual commitment to exploring personal connection as a way of mapping the past.” http://publichistorycommons.org/brock-john-q-interview/ki-thanh-17a111-U.dpdf
Memory Flash

Memory Flash, a series of site-specific temporary public installations and performances, Atlanta, Georgia, April 3, 2010.

Presented by Flux Projects, Memory Flash was a progressive series of public interventions meant to create new memories based on Atlanta’s LGBTQ pasts. Taking source material from the Kenan Research Center at the Atlanta History Center, particular moments from personal stories or events were represented using the visual media of performance, installation, and projection. These specifically located interventions were intended as ephemeral, morphing, and discursive memorials, an idea developed in the essay “Discursive Memorials: Queer Histories in Atlanta’s Public Spaces,” published by Emory University’s online multi-media journal Southern Spaces.
Movement I: The Jolly Twelve

Movement II: The Joy Lounge

Photos by Bo Shell/GA Web.
Movement III: Tomboys vs. Ladies

Movement IV: Lonesome Cowboys

Photos by Bo Shell/GA Voice.
MondoPotato

For the group exhibit, City Stories, part of the 2010 MondoHomo festival, John Q repurposed the Mr. Potato Head toy. MondoPotato juxtaposed conventional, manufactured, and anthropomorphized potato bodies and pieces with John Q’s hand-crafted and ambiguous body parts, exhibited on a play table with chairs. Viewers were encouraged to engage with the potato forms in a familiar game that was modified for alternative possibilities, bodies, interactions, and creative play.
Discursive Documents

Discursive Documents: Performing the Catalogue, exhibition, Museum of Contemporary Art of Georgia, Atlanta, Georgia, October 2, 2010 – January 8, 2011.

In Discursive Documents, John Q contemplated a question: What if a catalogue was not simply printed text and images, but rather a dialogic process through which the meaning of past events could be continually renegotiated? Discursive Documents attempted to expand the catalogue for Memory Flash into the space of a museum. The exhibition, which was installed in MOCA GA’s archives and research area, included artifacts and sound recordings from the event, a resource table, and works and ephemera produced by others in response to Memory Flash: murals, photographs, academic course syllabi, and more. The written components of the catalogue included an essay in Southern Spaces, as well as a guest-curated special issue of the JOSH (the Journal of Sexual Homos). John Q’s individual catalogue essays took the form of three programs on the place of archives in theory and practice, the role of research in art and art in research, and memory, sound, and performance.
Policing Ourselves


Policing Ourselves was both a performance and a reading for the release of a special issue, “Remember Me, Forget Me,” of the JOSH (the Journal of Sexual Homos). For the event, John Q appeared in handcuffs and dressed in police uniforms. The performance was a reference to the unlawful 2009 police raid on the Atlanta Eagle, a leather bar in Midtown. The notion that police were in plain clothes and avoiding being noticed, but Eagle customers were visible within the space and possibly at times uniformed seemed ironic. During the raid itself, any notion of play and trust was obliterated by the real violence. We have considered this a reflection on Freud’s uncanny in which slippage is created between the intimately familiar and the eerily unknown. John Q remained in handcuffs while individually signing the JOSH issues, as a way of performing as both subject and object of authority.
The Campaign for Atlanta

The Campaign for Atlanta: an essay on queer migration, performative essay, Atlanta Cyclorama and Civil War Museum, Atlanta, Georgia, May 17-18, 2013.

The Campaign for Atlanta was a performative essay that addressed notions of queer migrations, visuality, and how history and place are imaged in ways that make them seem inevitable. Indicative of the latter is the Atlanta Cyclorama, a large-scale Civil War battle painting which provided a backdrop to the collective’s exploration of alternative ways to engage landscapes of the past, queer memory, and fragmentary documents, primarily home movies. Crawford Barton was an artist who photo-documented San Francisco’s Castro district during the 1970s and 1980s, decades of immense social and political upheaval for queer communities. He was also a native of the rural Georgia town of Resaca, site of one of the earliest battles in the Atlanta campaign during the Civil War. A selection of his Super 8mm movies of 1970s San Francisco, Resaca, and Atlanta—perhaps unseen for decades—were screened in the auditorium of the Museum.

As a useful metaphor for reverse migration, John Q navigated the building backwards with those in attendance, inverting the intended movement of people from the auditorium to the space of the Cyclorama painting and introducing Barton back to Georgia and to those who now occupy Atlanta, one site on his migratory journey.

Photo by Cory Locatelli, courtesy of the City of Atlanta.
Stills from Crawford Barton’s films, courtesy of the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Historical Society, San Francisco.
For its NEA-funded Southern Constellations residency, John Q created and installed the conceptual piece *Untitled (books)* in the library of Elsewhere, a living museum in Greensboro, North Carolina. Utilizing inscriptions from books in its library, moments from the book owners’ and museum’s histories, and fragments from John Q’s past projects and individual lives, the collective installed a border of associated words and dates, a frieze of sorts, drawing from one of Félix González-Torres’s untitled works. In his minimalist installations, González-Torres considers relationships between multiple references, among them identity, loss, memory, and participation. As a conceptual piece, *Untitled (books)* is designed to accommodate intervention and invite change from Elsewhere artists and curators, just as it can be borrowed and exhibited by other institutions. The parameters are set forth in a certificate of re-use, a contract which also resides as a new inscription in a novel by James Hall Robert titled *The Q Document*, part of Elsewhere’s permanent book collection.
communist america... must it be?

When you are through reading this book pass it on to some one who needs to do the work.
Take Me With You

Part of Hearsay, a series of solo projects at the Zuckerman Museum of Art, Kennesaw State University, Kennesaw, Georgia, July 26-October 24, 2014.

For this two-channel video installation, John Q returned to the Super 8mm films of Crawford Barton: landscapes of his native north Georgia and his record of an early-70s road trip with a friend, presumably from Atlanta to San Francisco in an era of gay liberation. Driving from Atlanta to Barton’s hometown of Resaca, Georgia, we retraced Barton’s trip and his film of it. Footage from both cars (1970s and 2013) is intercut alongside Barton’s evocative imagery of trains and a child making a wish on a dandelion. The title refers to our desire to explore the potential of the past, as well as the past’s wishes for the future. The visible contrast between the different ages and eras of the protagonists is formally underscored by the oscillation between the Super 8 mm transfers and contemporary digital video.

A vitrine in the center of the installation displays a parallel reenactment: John Q’s redesign of an undated flier found in the Crawford Barton papers at the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Historical Society. It reads in part:

TAKE ME WITH YOU
I’m looking
for a ride…
I can not afford
Gas expenses. How-
ever, I’m young,
good looking and
always horny
863-7136

This quotidian and seemingly trivial object becomes an important evidentiary document, in part since it evokes the sexual ethos of a pre-AIDS gay male culture in San Francisco, but also because it is one of the few traces left of social networks that operated underneath the historical radar, a communication as fleeting and ephemeral, perhaps, as the ride itself.

How did John Q come to be? How did the three of you discover that you shared certain areas of inquiry?

JOEY • Wesley Chenault has done an incredible amount of work building queer archives in the city of Atlanta. I worked with him briefly as one of many curators of oral histories for his social history project, Atlanta’s Unspoken Past, at the Kenan Research Center at the Atlanta History Center. This project focused on bolstering weaker areas in the collection, specifically the period just prior to the gay rights movement. My curatorial practice at that time was focused on organizing installations set in the city’s transitioning neighborhoods. Soon after, I began training in Visual and Critical Studies at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago where there was an emphasis on hybrid methods—scholarship that included some form of creative and critical practice. It was during this time that my archival research and interest in public space began to inform one another.

When I returned to Atlanta in 2009, I wanted to further this practice and to begin looking more closely at how memories might be explored in public places. At this same time, I learned that Andy Ditzler, curator of Atlanta’s Film Love series that explores avant-garde film, was looking to address an Atlanta incident from 1969 in which a screening of Andy Warhol’s film Lonesome Cowboys was interrupted by police. The film was confiscated and audience members were photographed. His plan was to complete the screening on the site of the original theater, allowing the image to fall where it may. This was just the kind of work I was interested in pursuing. Andy and Wesley had also met through the Atlanta History Center, so the three of us convened for a brainstorming session, and we were all interested in the possibilities of a collaborative project. This is how our 2010 series of public interventions, Memory Flash, was born.
Do you see yourselves as each contributing something specific to the collective by playing a unique role (for example, Wesley as professional archivist and historian, Andy as film and sound curator and collector, Joey as curator and visual culture scholar)?

JOEY • I believe this is the first time any of us have worked in a collective, and our individual interests definitely complicate the work in productive ways. I have experience as a curator in public spaces and have been researching socially engaged art recently, as well. Our collective process maintains a level of rigor simply because we are each taking up slight variations on our collective questions, and so the work must be in conversation with several fields simultaneously. Working as a team makes interdisciplinary projects vastly more efficient and enjoyable.

WESLEY • As an archivist, I am interested in the politics of collection development, especially those related to communities that have been underrepresented or little-documented in cultural institutions and in the art of balancing collection care with promotion and use. These interests partially inform my scholarship on place, identity, and memory, which focuses on Atlanta’s queer past. I am not a historian by training; my approach to history is interdisciplinary and reflects my background in psychology, women’s studies, and American studies.

Adding to a comment made by Joey about the rigor involved in our creative process, we also have a shared understanding of and appreciation for the research process. Our collaborative work is deeply challenging and rewarding, intellectually and creatively.

ANDY • I think we’re each aware that we bring something different to the collective, but we overlap a lot, too. I don’t think of us as playing unique roles; it might be more accurate to say that we approach the same interests from slightly different angles.

Why an ‘idea’ collective and not an ‘art’ collective?

JOEY • In the most banal sense, we understand that there is some slippage in our work between public scholarship and public or socially engaged art. I don’t think we feel the impulse to shore our work up into one category or another. The intersections of knowledge production and cultural production are one of the things at issue for us. The move to art-as-research underscores that there are connections between art, curating, writing, and otherwise participating, even if at times these connections are ambivalent or otherwise unresolved.

You frame your work, which engages queer history and politics, as public (and often site-specific) interventions. How and into what are you intervening, and to what end?

JOEY • This is a complicated question. The word “intervention” has some associations with the work of historical avant-gardes. In this context, artists attempt to wake people up from a passive state and thus provoke them to participate or to take a more critical view of the world. This view is often associated with a critique of capitalism. I hold a much more open-ended view of potential participants in our work. The learning that takes place in a publicly constructed project is not unidirectional and can never be predicted in advance, so I do not assume our job is to wake people up. I do hope that actions such as Memory Flash help people discover or rediscover that life happened in those places we drive and walk past every day. It’s no less a process of discovery for us. I view my own film curating in the same way.

Joey has said before that John Q explores the idea that archives can function as more than a place of “capture” and that they are capable of a different kind of relation and fluidity—how does your work play with that potential?

JOEY • John Q is very much interested in exploring ways in which archival collections can do public work. [W]e might imagine
that the form of the work both performs an operation of social negotiation and reflects lived histories to heterogeneous publics. Participants may, in turn, take them up or refuse them in ways that are not predetermined, but are themselves the work of social negotiation. This kind of memorial work can explore archival material in a manner that does not shoulder the work of memory onto monuments or other more static forms, but rather posits memory as a link between lived pasts and presents.

WESLEY • The work of John Q might be seen as a practice of ideas expressed in contemporary writings about archives as active participants in knowledge production and creative endeavors—or to appropriate verbiage coined by scholar Ann Laura Stoler in Along the Archival Grain: “archives-as-process” rather than “archives-as-things.”

ANDY • One thing I discovered through co-presenting Memory Flash and grappling with Joey’s and Wesley’s ideas on the archive is that archives are not always buildings with printed materials. Our bodies are archives of our memories and sensations; the places we live and work carry traces, material and otherwise, of our presence and activities. A writer was interviewing Neil Tennant of the Pet Shop Boys and he remarked that walking through London was like walking through his own autobiography. I like that. It gets at one goal of our projects that Joey and Wesley have both mentioned: that people will create new memories of their own through the interaction with other people’s stories in public space. Walking through someone else’s biography for a moment, we change our own.

In Memory Flash, in which you recreated or restaged particular historical moments in Atlanta’s queer history through performance and installation, how did you choose what stories to tell?

JOEY • We have often described our method for selecting the archival memories for that project as registering their affective resonance. Some of this is based on Frances Yates’s landmark book, The Art of Memory. In it, she discusses memory as part of the ancient art of rhetoric and some of the methods used to ensure the persistence of memory. These techniques include creating distinct visual impressions and arousing affective response. These methods make clear that our work is concerned with the complexities of public memory, rather than with strictly setting the record straight. This project also memorialized a historical population that generally did not have access to permanent, secure social space and therefore had to constantly renegotiate the spaces and appearances of their community. We felt this kind of impermanence should also be reflected in some of our scholarly forms.

WESLEY • It’s also the case Andy was already working on the Lonesome Cowboys piece prior to the collective. Then, there were aesthetic considerations. We discussed which stories might lend themselves to visual or aural presentation for example. Here, Andy and Joey’s backgrounds combined allowed for exhilarating explorations of possibilities. There were also strategic considerations. We looked for stories with the potential to resonate across diverse groups. Having curated an exhibition and co-authored a pictorial history that utilized the same oral histories that we used, I had viewer and reader feedback at hand that provided another level of information for consideration in the selection process.

ANDY • There was a certain amount of intuition involved. As soon as Andy told me the story of the Jolly Twelve—a group of black gay men marching down the streets of the Old Fourth Ward in Atlanta in the early 1960s—the spectacular theatricality of it was apparent. It was the same with the now-forgotten bar on Ponce de Leon Avenue called the Joy Lounge, where drag queens performing in the late ’60s had to hide in the walk-in beer cooler when the police came to bust the place. The story is so rife with associations: the beer cooler as the closet, the chill of homophobia, the absurd contrast between the glamour of drag and the dinginess of the surroundings—a playwright could set an entire play inside that cooler. Our mode of presenting the story was different but nonetheless informed by a sense of theater (as was the original drag show!) and the immediate sense that this was a story worth telling.

What do these stories and memories become once they leave the archive and are performed for and witnessed by an audience?

WESLEY • Elsewhere we’ve talked about Memory Flash as both a remembering and a forgetting. The performances and installations deployed critical and interactive practices in ways that invited participation on the part of attendees to experience and document little-remembered or forgotten moments in Atlanta’s queer past, thus, hopefully, creating new memories.
however, I see no reason not to take its seriously the notion that memory is collective, passage through public space. If we take really want to leave no mark or trace of their and Christopher Reed smartly ask if queers Promise of a Queer Past, Christopher Castiglia If Memory Serves: Gay Men, AIDS, and the work of memory for the public. So one monuments induce forgetting by doing Memory, James Young has suggested that “keep up” impermanent memorials? of the audience. Are there other ways to role of active memory formation on the part one is generous to one’s audience. There is a sense in which that story could be told, letting the space guide us. So The Campaign for Atlanta itself became a way of examining the process and construction of storytelling. What excited me most about the piece was that it forced us to construct an unfamiliar form—one that involved the temporary takeover of a tourist apparatus with a reformulated script, the moving of an audience through an institutional space in ways contrary to the design of that space, and finally a combination of spoken/ visual essay and traditional cinema screening, albeit one that made large-scale cinema images out of small-gauge Super 8mm films and quotidian subjects. The story and its form possibilities for participation in formulating our shared past.

In other writings you’ve explored the significance of the Atlanta Cyclorama as a venue for your performative essay, The Campaign for Atlanta. After having time to reflect on the performance, has the significance changed? Was there any added meaning or response that you did not foresee?

JOEY • For me, dealing with the massive cyclorama painting and a selection of Crawford Barton’s films enabled us to overlay multiple parts in the present. In a sense, the work explores how the representation of place and the past are historically contingent. It also brought out another strand that bears some scholar and artistic attention: nostalgia for the past (especially in the context of critical nostalgia in the field of memory studies) and melancholia as it was articulated a few years back in relation to a lost AIDS generation and the (political) refusal to stop mourning. We should also mention that the performative essay will be available in written form in June 2014 in the journal QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking (Michigan State University Press).

JOEY • Since this kind of memory work is tied directly to space, we have thought about the city itself as a memory palace. The idea is that someone who has participated in Memory Flash, for example, would remember moments from Atlanta’s queer history whenever they pass the sites of our public interventions. In this way, heretofore unknown moments become part of people’s experience of the city.

You’ve written that your interventions require “public upkeep,” suggesting the role of active memory formation on the part of the audience. Are there other ways to “keep up” impermanent memorials? JOEY • In his book, The Texture of Memory, James Young has suggested that monuments induce forgetting by doing the work of memory for the public. So one suggestion about how to do public upkeep of impermanent memorials is to simply continue doing this kind of work. In their recent book, If Memory Serves: Gay Men, AIDS, and the Promise of a Queer Past, Christopher Castiglia and Christopher Reed smartly ask if queers really want to leave no mark or trace of their passage through public space. If we take seriously the notion that memory is collective, however, I see no reason not to take its practice seriously, as well. After all, permanent memorials do not necessarily do better work than impermanent ones. The latter might just simply be more explicit about the fact that memorials are inherently contingent in the first place.

Your work puts much emphasis on process and co-discovery between the collective and public audiences. Can you speak a bit more to this priority?

JOEY • While writing, thinking, and project work in general can often be more efficiently produced working alone, in my experience collaborations that are particularly focused on public work have often resulted in leaving behind worries about authorship and investing energies into exploring the most urgent questions as they arise. There is a sense in which one is generous to one’s audience by trying to make engaging work, but it is equally important to realize that the work itself is transformed by way of its filtering through a public situation. Access is always an issue when producing knowledges in art, academic, archival, and other institutional contexts. Methods for public scholarship and socially engaged research do not, of course, eradicate these issues, but they might create new

ANDY • Some of the differences between Memory Flash and The Campaign for Atlanta have had unexpected implications for our working methodology. First, Memory Flash happened in truly public spaces: sidewalks and streets, Piedmont Park, and the interior of a popular bar. The Cyclorama is public, but not in the same way because it’s also definitely institutional. Second, in Memory Flash we started with the archival stories, and chose the places for the piece based upon their centrality to these stories. But The Campaign for Atlanta began with the idea to utilize the Cyclorama as a working space. We then had to construct the story and the form in which that story could be told, letting the space guide us. So The Campaign for Atlanta itself became a way of examining the process and construction of storytelling. What excited me most about the piece was that it forced us to construct an unfamiliar form—one that involved the temporary takeover of a tourist apparatus with a reformulated script, the moving of an audience through an institutional space in ways contrary to the design of that space, and finally a combination of spoken/ visual essay and traditional cinema screening, albeit one that made large-scale cinema images out of small-gauge Super 8mm films and quotidian subjects. The story and its form
were constructed organically, and that was very energizing for me.

WESLEY Since the performance I would say its significance has become increasingly apparent. In preparing this catalog, we had the opportunity to read a draft of Shawn Michelle Smith’s essay, in which she elucidates the temporal in our projects. And, she’s spot-on. The notion of “queer time” or “queer temporalities”—a particularly resonant area of thought written about by numerous scholars, among them Elizabeth Freeman, Carolyn Dinshaw, Jack Halberstam, and the late José Esteban Muñoz—threads through our work to varying degrees in relation to memory, archives, and queer lives. Looking back, it strikes me how The Campaign for Atlanta endeavored to operate outside of linear time to fold in Barton, troop movements, and queer migrations into a two-night structure for belonging and remembrance. To borrow from Dinshaw (Getting Medieval, page 3), one might say the performative essay was “an impulse to make contact...a desire for bodies to touch across time,” where bodies include texts, films, cycloramas, and people.

Is it significant that you are showing Crawford Barton’s films in northwest Georgia (a return, of sorts, to the beginning of his journey)? Does it suggest something about the many migrations made by gay men and women from rurality to metropole?

JOEY Enacting a reverse migration was at the center of our efforts to trouble the rural-to-urban narratives of queer diaspora around which so many erasures proliferate. To underscore this reversal, we had participants at The Campaign for Atlanta navigate the institutional space of the Atlanta Cyclorama and Civil War Museum backwards. This underscored our interest in memory studies as opposed to history, and negotiating fragments rather than constructing rigid narratives.

ANDY Barton’s films tell us so much about migration, but it’s interesting to consider that Barton’s migration entailed all telling us about film and cinema. These films were records of a migration that themselves traveled back across the country, reminding us that film has been about travel from the beginning, as well as about visualizing new kinds of movement. This resonates with the Cyclorama painting’s own travels across the country, and its eventual accidental home in Atlanta. These records of movement and migration became markers of movement themselves. The phrase “moving images” becomes resonant on multiple levels, then.

WESLEY Yes, I think so. The performative essay marked a return—a type of homecoming, if you will, of Barton to northwest Georgia—just as it served as a referent to, in the context of the academy, a turn to the rural in multiple humanities disciplines. While the essay dwell on select locales, however, it also considered how a focus on movements and migrations can—through the lens of personal material culture, of traces left behind after one’s death—renew forgotten connections between people and places and serve as a mode of remembering. During Barton’s lifetime, for example, AIDS affected lives in Resaca, Georgia, just as it did in Atlanta and San Francisco, but the former is a little-known story. One might say John Q is insistently that these connections between the rural and urban remain well-worn pathways in our collective memory.

Does your work (or the aims of your work) change when it becomes part of a museum-based art installation (as it will in Hearsay)?

JOEY Absolutely. While the video installation for the Zuckerman Museum of Art is certainly the result of our work cycling through research and public situations, we are also taking the occasion of the exhibit to reflect in specifically visual and filmic ways on topics that received other forms of attention in the past. Also, there is a sense in which an installation that is the result of public interaction and collaboration might serve to rescue the art object from a strictly commodified state. In other words, situations and artifacts that serve to remind us of and reinforce our connection to our pasts are part of what Richard Terdiman smartly calls a "mnemonic economy."

ANDY Our work for Hearsay continues our project of thinking about visuality and its implications for history and memory. In The Campaign for Atlanta, we considered these questions in performative and site-specific ways, and our QED article considers them in written essay form. At the Zuckerman museum, we are interested precisely in how our research translates to a museum context and the form of video installation. The work, then, may change—but the aims of our work don’t. One thing we have discovered about unfixing archival documents by way of...
performance, or by activation in public space, is that this process produces its own documents, its own archive, whether this new archive is more or less “fixed” than the documents with which we began. Rather than simply activating archives, I believe we are activating a process that sometimes results in fixity, sometimes in unfixing, but always in an examination of that process.

WESLEY • Oh, yes—and that change is part of what holds our collective interest. I’ll riff off of Andy and Joey’s responses in a slightly different way. An installation, a scholarly article, a series of public interventions all operate on varying levels with a commonly understood sense of form. While our projects take up a particular idea or question, one might say we are in some ways, to borrow from filmmaker, literary theorist, and composer Trinh T. Minh-ha, deploying a technique of repetition, a mode which allows one to say the same thing, though with slight shifts in accent, focus, resonance—work that allows for creative ruptures in form.

From Julia

As a public historian, I’m interested in the ways that contemporary artwork gives the past an affective power and how it can transmit historical and mnemonic information that is sensory, critical, and non-rote. I first learned of the work of John Q from my colleague Teresa Bramlette Reeves, and was immediately curious about the collective’s practice of what Andy Ditzler describes here as “activation” of the archive in public spaces. As contemporary artists continue to navigate, represent, and deconstruct historical themes, I hope that public historians can begin to think seriously about an aesthetic of historical knowledge, if one can speak of such a thing. The interview with John Q was my own attempt to begin this thought-work.