





DEAR FRIEND,

Cut to me:
a spot-
light illumi-
nates an empty stage.

I lean into the dust-glittered beam, huddling on the floor over a book cackling with unbridled glee. Who planted this here? Was this figure conjured up with the sole purpose to thrill to *me*?

Esther: 'If Kay had not existed, I might have had to invent her.'

Finding Esther and Kay happened just at the right time. I was several weeks into a residency high up in the Swiss mountains, where I was invited to work with a particularly uninteresting dead artist's library. I was doing nothing but getting over heartbreak. Morning coffee drunk whilst staring wistfully above the clouds forming across the neighbouring valley made the emotional drama all the more fabulous. It wasn't that I didn't feel like working. The library was simply too homophobic. Trans people and queers appeared within the pages of its books, but only as textbook pariahs: salacious criminals, medical illustrations of biological "freaks" or objects of heterosexual fantasy. I was struggling to joke myself out of these bad feelings, annoying myself with the question of what it might mean for me to point this out as part of the "work". Then I saw it. Wedged amongst the German men on the Philosophie II shelf: *Margaret Mead Made Me Gay*.

Margaret Mead Made Me Gay is a collection of writings by butch anthropologist heartthrob Esther Newton, charting her pioneering work on queer communities through personal and professional reflections. Tucked at the very end is an essay called "My Best Informant's Dress: The Erotic Equation in Fieldwork". Here lives Kay, a veteran resident of Cherry Grove, the long-standing queer haven located on Fire Island, who provides Esther with intel for her ethnographic research on the community.

When they meet, Kay is in her eighties and Esther in her thirties. When I meet them, Esther is in her eighties and I am in my thirties. Kay is a heartbreaker. A suave, wealthy, flirtatious, charming dyke who has both Esther and I crushing hard from the moment she rolls up on the boardwalk in her electric wheelchair, flashing her expensive dentures. So begins a 'pattern of flirtation and teasing' between the two, propelled by the possibility of fucking—their desire traversing erotic experience across histories. Kay, Esther, and me, are brought together in a three-way tryst and the thrill of legs touching under the table.

Esther: 'But now, instead of *having* ideas she *embodies* ideas. Kay spans almost the entire period from "smashing" and romantic friendship to the age of AIDS. When I kiss her I am kissing 1903.'

Esther confesses she probably wouldn't have fallen hook, line and sink-her for Kay had they met at the same age (because Kay's 'more of a party girl rather than an intellectual'). I'm not sure if their forms of lesbianism make them good boyfriend material for me either. If their forms of sexual legibility are interesting is it because it describes a path to mine, not a mirror image of it. Their relationship validates my own horny feelings, and how powerfully or honestly they might drive my work. I'm turned on by Kay, and by Esther being turned on by Kay. Our three-way flirtation grounds a basis of

trust, and in turn, an ethics of research. A methodology for queer work.

Esther: 'My fieldwork experience has been fraught with sexual dangers and attractions that were much more like leitmotifs than light distractions.'

Perhaps I shouldn't admit I don't really like capital letters Graphic Design. I find it hard to muster enthusiasm for a certain design-guy reverence towards particular artefacts and their makers, materials, timestamps. Recipes of information blunt the affect of objects. Feelings, emotion and intimacy—too difficult to contain—become lost in favour of a simpler story. If the kind of design that floats my boat makes it into the canon, it can only be kept buoyant by holding onto my kind of erotics.

Sure, I'll confess I sometimes feel the thrill of a beautiful poster whilst scrolling myself into oblivion—but I've always feel a little cheap after giving it my like. I'm not interested in the aesthetics of design unless aestheticising cycles objectification back round to sociality. Instagram design might be hot if it were a real fetish, if variable type was a route to actualise bodily pleasure. But it's too disembodied for me. I'm busy thinking about Boyd McDonald jerking off on his single bed at Riverside Studios whilst compiling *Straight to Hell*, the proto queer zine that Boyd variably described as: 'The New York Review of Cocksucking', 'The American Journal of Revenge Therapy' or 'Just shameless, sorry'. I can't commit to the purely visual value of a poster and its accumulating status as air-conditioned archival *objet* when I'm drifting into a fantasy of how the bodies writhing together smelt in the darkness of the club night it was promoting. The poster is useful to the extent that it brought people to the club. I remember you would say nobody knows texts like designers do, that typesetting requires you to delicately stroke the end of every single line of text. (I'm trying to make a joke about ragging, but it seems I already have.)

The lesbian erotic photography book I've been working on for two years is wrapping up, and though it is my dream job I haven't got much to say about my *design decisions*. It's actually supposed to pass as a proper Art Book, so I played it straight. I mean, I hope it will be a beautiful book, but I don't care to claim that it's possible to see the conversations that went into making it. Only we know the ways in which it required us to turn around our identities like 3D renderings; how sometimes revelatory and other times disappointing it was to realise we were asking ourselves the same questions as the people in the images were asking 30 years ago. Our friends' and lovers' names litter its pages and will be printed 3,000 times and shipped to different parts of the world.

Whenever I open that InDesign document, the first face in the first photograph on the first page looks so much like yours I'm jolted across time to the year I was born. Suddenly, it is 1989 and I'm at the Castro Street Fair in San Francisco. A group of dykes wearing variations on leather and denim sit on top of a line of phone boxes, cutting a mid-line across the photograph. I catch them mid-euphoria, gassing and lighting each other's cigarettes, arms around each other and gesticulating a story. Every time, among the gazes, yours catches mine. In that moment we are held together. I give you a wink, and continue with my work.