“We’re telling our truths, demanding the truths be told.”
Lesbian Avengers Communiqué No. 5

In 1992 in New York City, six women gathered in Ana Maria Simo’s apartment in the East Village to create a solution to a decades-old problem, both within activist communities and the queer world at large: the invisibility of lesbians. These women - Maxine Wolfe, Sarah Schulman, Marie Honan, Anne Christine D’Adesky, Anne Maguire, and Ana Maria Simo - had years of varied organizing experience at their backs and a shared frustration with the erasure of their efforts and the efforts of other lesbians in almost every movement of the previous decades.

They witnessed the influx of young lesbians entering the activist worlds of AIDS Coalition To Unleash Power (ACT UP), the Irish Lesbian and Gay Organization (ILGO), Queer Nation, and others, and identified the need for these young dykes to learn the organizing skills they would need to survive. These ideas and others coalesced and the product was the Lesbian Avengers, a direct-action activist group dedicated to lesbian visibility and survival.

In a conversation with Sarah Schulman (Lesbian Avenger co-founder), she commented that, almost everywhere she goes, she meets a former Lesbian Avenger. During my research, I met a college professor who lived with an apartment of Lesbian Avengers, a peer who had a class with one, and when I mentioned my research, I came to expect the nod of recognition from those
connected, however distantly, to LGBT and queer activism of the early 1990s. From high-end CEOs to school teachers to artists, there are former Avengers everywhere. At their peak, the New York City Avengers’ weekly meetings drew over seventy women. There were multiple chapters across the country and internationally, and swarms of women continue to flock to their brainchild, the annual Dyke March. The Lesbian Avengers, a group whose life spanned the three years between 1992 and 1995, witnessed the political and activist growth for hundreds of lesbians and made significant dents in homophobic and lesbophobic activity in New York City and the rest of the country.

However, despite its impact, published work on the Lesbian Avengers constitutes a comparatively small cache of information. Sarah Schulman and Maxine Wolfe, the two co-founders most widely connected to the Avengers, have a handful of interviews, articles, and autobiographical information published. There are articles that give a basic introduction to the Lesbian Avengers and books that mention Avenger actions, often in the context of other groups like ACT UP, but it is rare to find more than a few pages at a time. To find information, I explored the Lesbian Herstory Archives, safely ensconced in a brownstone in Brooklyn, where there are folders upon folders of flyers, correspondence, phone trees, meeting minutes, and other papers belonging to the Lesbian Avengers. I also interviewed some former members of the Lesbian Avengers to be eventually donated back to the Lesbian Avengers Special Collection at the Lesbian Herstory Archives, although that is a project that must continue after this work is finished.

Nearly twenty years later, the majority of information beyond the basics about the Lesbian Avengers exists only in the memories of its participants and in archival boxes in basements and spaces like the Lesbian Herstory Archives. This work grew out of both a fear of loss and a belief in the Lesbian Avengers’ purpose: lesbian visibility and survival. The Lesbian Avengers challenged the roles of lesbians in queer and feminist activism through its specific targets and prolific, visually and ideologically creative actions. The focus on prolific actions, however, caused the Avengers to struggle with creating a cohesive lesbian activist space that adequately addressed intersections of race and class within their activist framework. Reclaiming and uncovering this history is a continuation of that purpose as well as a critical examination of their successes and failures as the queer community imagines the future of lesbian activism.

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Dulcey Rene is a workin’ stiff, former student, and aspiring radical archivist who spent a year researching and writing about the Lesbian Avengers. On Friday, September 9th, 2011, she will lead the event: The Lesbian Avengers w/ Dulcey Rene. [2] This event will be part lecture and part discussion, with plenty of inspiring Avengers materials to peruse. Come remember, and be inspired by, these tough dykes who used a mix of solid organizing skills, creative actions and media, and guts, to spread their message of lesbian survival, visibility, and fierce lesbian love, lust, protest and power.

What: The Lesbian Avengers w/ Dulcey Rene

When: September 9th, 2011 @ 7pm

Where: Red Emma's Bookstore Coffeehouse