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PRESS

QUEER AMERICAN MEMORIALS



Brick Memorial Mockup. Courtesy of the Queer American Memorials team.

Joy, Community, & Memory: Sean Fader's Queer American Memorials

KEN KRANTZ MARCH 2, 2025

"All librarians go to heaven, that's clear to me," explains photographer Sean Fader, who has spent countless hours tracking, and subsequently creating, historical archives on murdered queer individuals.

The Queer American Memorials project, spearheaded by artists Sean Fader and Maureen Towey, seeks to address the urgent need for visibility and acknowledgment of queer lives lost to violence.

The project began during Sean's tenure as a Professor of Photography at Tulane, when he was assigned the office of a former archivist. While cleaning out the boxes, Sean found two few key artifacts from the turn of the century: a Sony Mavica digital camera and the spreadsheet listing the names of the dead, originally downloaded from gender.org, a now defunct digital archive of queer life.

When Sean attempted to find more details about the lives belonging to the names, he hit a wall. The records

were scattered, buried in archives, or in some cases, nonexistent. Even institutions dedicated to preserving queer history, like The LGBT Community Center National History Archive in New York, were difficult to navigate without prior knowledge of exactly where to look. As a lifelong advocate for equal rights, Sean had to ask, "How do we not know these stories?"

Sean quickly realized that he would have to archive the stories himself. He took the Sony Mavica on a road trip around the country, photographing every confirmed place of death with the Sony Mavica, geotagging the images, and leaving behind a bouquet of flowers in memoriam. The experience of visiting these sites was deeply emotional: "I was in a perfectly normal suburban neighborhood taking a picture of a rock on a corner, but I felt like I was looking at a murdered person on the ground. I didn't expect to feel that way. It was an extremely emotional response."

Sean's tireless work has been loaded into Insufficient Memory, a GIS-enabled photography project documenting the lives of those who died between 1999 and 2000, while the Hate Crimes Prevention Act was debated in Congress. Well-received critically, institutionally, and publicly, Insufficient Memory has toured Denny Gallery (New York City, NY), Galeria Labirynt (Lublin, Poland), Antenna Gallery (New Orleans, LA), the Beall Center for Art + Technology (Irvine, CA), the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts (San Francisco, CA), Gray Area (San Francisco, CA), and Wrightwood 659 (Chicago, IL). The project has also been acquired by Buffalo AKG Art Museum (Buffalo, NY) and the Brooklyn Museum (Brooklyn, NY).

Following the resounding success of Insufficient Memory, Sean has teamed up with co-creator, friend, and respected multimedia producer Maureen Towey to build a physical monument. A memorial to the people who died while politicians talked, the scope was expanded to include all loss of queer life from hate crimes from President Bill Clinton's State of the Union Address in 1999 (a response to Matthew Shepard's brutal murder) until the Hate Crimes Prevention Act was passed in 2009. With over three hundred individuals identified for memorialization so far, Maureen reflects, "This is a lifetime project."



Brick Memorial Mockup In Situ. Courtesy of the Queer American Memorials team.

Designed in collaboration with MASS Design's Public Memory and Memorials Lab, the memorials are simple but striking. The outer brick will blend into its surroundings, but show a striking rainbow through an engraved symbol. Over time, weathering will reveal the vibrant colors beneath—a poetic reminder that queer history, though often buried, resurfaces. Fader's monument is not just a symbol of queer resilience but a literal act of resistance.

"I worked at the New York Times for many years," explains Maureen, "so this idea of corrective reporting and finding stories which shouldn't have been lost in the first place is very close to me. For most of our victims, if it was reported at all, it was reported on with slurs and derogatory language. There needs to be a correction of the record."

If attacked, the bricks will "bleed" rainbow-colored cement—an unmistakable message that attempts to erase history will only make it more visible. The bricks stand as both a memorial and a call to action, challenging society to confront its own history of violence against marginalized communities. Sean says, "You can keep trying to erase us, but we remain."

The addition of the wavelength tail is novel, but the lambda was chosen by activist Tom Doer to serve as a logo for the Gay Activists Alliance in New York City, then formally acknowledged at the first Congress for Lesbian and Gay Rights in Scotland, 1974. Adding a wavelength in science, reflects the ever-changing spectrum of queer identity. Maureen explains, "We wanted to make a marker that felt like it was new queer iconography, and that the image could be used in different ways. It is flexible, it has a motor to it as an image."

Drawing inspiration from global memorial practices such, the project aims to restore dignity to communities

whose histories have long been silenced. The use of brick links the project to historic memorialization practices, such as those used in Holocaust memorials (like the Stumbling Stones in Germany), while also offering a deeply personal, localized tribute to individuals whose lives were violently taken.

Tapping a phone to the name engraved on the brick will bring up videos of friends or family members sharing the story of the person memorialized. Visitors can also leave digital tributes, ensuring the monument remains a living, evolving site of remembrance. Maureen continues, "It keeps us honest in making sure the community of each person is engaged and allows a bigger picture. It's more than just sadness – we're celebrating who this person was at their brightest."

Learn more at queeramericanmemorials.com.

KEN KRANTZ

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