

**It's Almost As If We've Existed: Contemporary Art in
LGBT Archives**

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Nicki Green, *It's Almost as if We've Existed (Tres in Una)*, 2015.

Glazed earthenware, 15.5" x 12" x 3.5" in *Transgender Hirstory in 99 Objects: Legends and Mythologies*, ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archives, March 21- July 2 015, Los Angeles CA.

Three graces lean casually against one another. Arms snake across backs and shoulders, a jug is casually balanced on a hip. Fully naked the graces stare out from their home on the surface of a sacred earthenware vessel. The grace on the right tilts her head up, her gaze confronting the viewer with seductive contempt or perhaps knowing defiance as her beauty eschews binary gender. Commanding an unknown mythology the vessel is crowned with six floral patterned phalluses and supported by a base depicting a magic well protected by crossed broken swords and delicate pansy flowers.



L: Craig Calderwood, *This world will soon be ours*, 2015. Pen on Cotton Paper, 18" x 24".
in *Transgender Hirstory in 99 Objects: Legends and Mythologies*, ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archives, March 21- July 11, 2015, Los Angeles CA.

Detail laden patterns push against each other as reality chafes against the unknown. In a marital style portrait, lifelong trans activist Angela Keyes Douglas reaches her hand up to meet the talon tipped fingers of her reptilian companion Randy Towers. Theirs hands connect in an affirmation of trans-extraterrestrial solidarity. Small alien heads anointed with three-pronged gender markers float in Douglas's glasses, visions of liberation by otherworldly means reflect back at us.

R: Morgan Sea, *Transsexual Dream Girls in The Conceptual Archives of Queer Eros and Ephemera*, 2016. Comic strip; in *Tape Condition: Degraded*, Canadian Lesbian and Gay Archives, June 16- September 23, 2016, Toronto ON. Photo: Toni Hafkenscheid.

After negotiating a complex range of feelings while watching a porn VHS with trans performers from the CLGA archives Morgan Sea falls through the light activated pixels of her sex filled tv screen and finds herself in a dream world built on porn. Awaking on the equestrian hindquarters of trans-porn-heartthrob turned centaur-transgender-avenger Megan Chavalier, Sea is introduced to trans legacies unknown to the archives. Just as she is about to lay hands on her dream porn tape—"Toppo Femme Mean Girls"—the pixels flicker and the dream world crumbles due to exterior conservative threats and material degradation.

Forming a triad of speculative transgender pasts and futures, these works of art dwell in a common liminal space between fact and fiction, history and fantasy. Inspired by what is unearthed from LGBT archives, and what in turn is not found, the pieces occupy resounding absences with the imaginary. Gay and Lesbian archives may seem unlikely places for the imaginary and contemporary, or even art. However, in the last decade, in addition to their usual work as repositories and community hubs, LGBT archives have increasingly become sites of display. The power of display to articulate legitimacy and constitute historical narratives has spurred artistic, activist, and scholarly investment in exhibition making and creative historical agitation. When I was invited to write an essay for the Bookcase catalogue, I settled on the topic of art exhibitions in LGBT archives because of the Bookcase's inventive micro exhibitions and my own investment in queer art histories. The Bookcase exhibitions, which take place on one to two shelves of a bookcase, are both interesting stand-alone projects and paths into the contents of the larger book collection in which they are staged. This essay considers two art exhibitions at two different archives; the Los Angeles based ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archives, which began curating art exhibitions in 2011, and now employs a curators, and Toronto's Canadian Lesbian and Gay Archives (CLGA), which formed a volunteer curatorial committee to run a devoted gallery space in 2009.

Display plays a constitutive role in the construction and dissemination of hegemonic histories. Art histories are largely built through collecting and display practices at galleries and museums, supported and propelled by the symbiotic

discourse of Art History. Queer histories of art and the non-heterosexual sexualities of many canonical artists have seldom been acknowledged in galleries or art historical texts. In fact for a long time queer content or context has been actively silenced, avoided and disassociated in the institutionalized art world. This exclusion has been enacted both through the written discourse of art history and through gallery display frameworks. Because of these practices it is not surprising, for example, that scholar Jennifer Doyle found an unlabeled unabashedly homoerotic Andy Warhol print in her long standing local LA gay bar rather than the massive Warhol retrospect at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.¹ For previous generations of queer or trans artists whose work was met with disdain or hostility recognition may only arrive posthumously if a friend or lover held on to their undervalued works. Current generations of queer and trans artists who are finding themselves without legacies or representation in the art world are turning to community built archive collections in search of these artists and histories.

Like any archive however, community constructed gay and lesbian archives are limited by the bias of their builders. Though many community archives were originally built piecemeal by amateur archivists or activist organizations, the archives were made possible through personal or organizational resources that securely housed expanding collections and advocated for funding. The result is archives that tell few stories well, and reflect the dominant representation of economically or racially privileged subjects. As artists and historians increasingly search for material from marginalized narratives, questions of how to address absence, difficult knowledge, and uncomfortable excesses become central.

Rumors, gossip, and ghost stories become compelling.

Display offers an avenue of discourse that can skirt the potholes and roadblocks of typical historical research. The physical display of objects allows a matrix of non-linear and atemporal relations to be cast. In her study of display practices Celiné Condorelli asserts that practices of display, “change the way we see things, but are also a transformation of the things themselves as well as ourselves, in a process that corresponds to the alteration of existing conditions”.² She argues that display practices have the ability to alter existing conditions and assert if an object should be recognized or valued as an object at all. Display and its corresponding practices of physical and intellectual support have the ability to make invisible conditions visible, and breathe life into objects that previously went without value. Curatorial and artist projects are increasingly becoming important sites in which histories are questioned and constituted at the complex intersections of evidence and absence.

Given that few formal works of art by transgender artists have been collected or recorded, it follows that The Museum of Transgender Hirstory* and Art (MOTHA) is forever “under construction”. MOTHA is the creation of contemporary artist Chris E. Vargas. The fictional museum allows Vargas to creatively stage both critique and celebration. The project seeks to “bring a cohesive visual history of transgender culture into existence”, while also questioning if such a history is productive or even possible.³ Vargas considerably employs a variety of legitimizing platforms such as; lectures, exhibitions, artist awards, and public programs to promote trans artists, historians, and scholars. Careful tongue in cheek manipulation allows Vargas to promote the visibility

and legitimacy of trans lives while performing a queer critique of the formats of institutional knowledge.

Grandiose claims of singular historical knowledge made by hegemonic cultural custodians such as the British Museum and the Smithsonian, respectively producing programs and exhibitions titled *The History of the World in 100 Objects*, and *American History in 101 Objects*, seemingly beg parody. MOTHA has responded with an ongoing series of temporary exhibitions and publications titled *Transgender Hirstory in 99 Objects*. The first exhibition in 2015 subtitled *Legends and Mythologies* took place at Los Angeles’s ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archives. Because MOTHA does not have a collection or display space of its own (alas always “under construction”) Vargas borrows both space and material from existing collections such as the ONE Archives. Using local archives or art collections also allows each iteration of the exhibition to focus on locally situated histories.⁴ Rather than present a direct selection from the archive’s extensive holdings however, *99 Objects: Legends and Mythologies* presented nine objects comprised of a mix of commissioned contemporary work by trans artists and historical materials from the archives. Making little distinction between the two categories, the exhibition sought to do away with tidy boundaries between the known and the unknowable. Vargas states the exhibition, “embraces partial facts, rumors, and maybes, recognizing that the archive is incomplete and not every truth has left a trace”.⁵ The selected works by contemporary artists Tuesday Simillie, Wu Tsang and RJ Messino, Sam Lopes, Nicki Green, Craig Calderwood, and Emmett Ramstad engage with, “the real and imagined pre-histories of the identity and community formation we call

transgender.”⁶

The choice to bring together contemporary artists, unlikely historical figures and unknown histories is purposeful. Vargas seeks to confront the past and resist seeking out “clean narratives or faultless figureheads”.⁷ The exhibition performs the two-fold task of drawing on scholarly histories and theories of trans art to expand transgender histories; while also interrogating the structures through which art is made and historicized. Jennifer Tyburczy has termed this practice queer curatorship and she defines it as,

a curatorial activity that can highlight and rearrange normative narratives about what it means to be a historically and geographically specific sexual subject. It can also materialize a spatial and discursive approach to display that utopically imagines new forms of sexual sociality and collectivity between bodies, things, and nations in public institutional display spaces, such as museums.⁸

Vargas undertakes a practice of queer curatorship to resist the mainstreaming of LGBT histories and begin to display the messy and complex contents and structure of the archive. As a curatorial project *99 Objects* works to construct historical narratives about transgender art and culture; it also develops critical theories of curating and writing these histories.

As an exhibition, *99 Objects* challenges the archives to display reflexively imagined mythologies and difficult legends. Nicki Green’s work *It’s Almost As if We’ve Existed* (2015) imagines an unknown trans mythology based on existing

mythological figures and practices. Her contemporary ceramic works are deftly crafted to look as if they have been unearthed from a previous society that celebrated and honored the mysteries of gender. Craig Calderwood’s *This World Will Soon Be Ours* (2015) celebrates trans activist Angela Douglas, whose proclivities for conspiracy theories, intergalactic alliances, and “difficult personality” are a point of historical tension and as Abram J. Lewis argues, make it difficult to “recuperate Douglas as a transparently rational, politicized, and agential historical subject”.⁹ Douglas who founded the first chapter of the Transsexual Action League in 1970 in Los Angeles has, however, been increasingly reconstructed “not as a socially disposable indigent with a colorful past but as a key forerunner to a global social justice movement”.¹⁰ Occupying a similar status of uncomfortable biographical excesses is a private photo album from one of ONE Archive’s most important supporters and donors Reed Erickson. Reed’s initially enthusiastic and supportive relationship with One Inc. later turned hostile and is a point of controversy within the history of the archives. Additionally Reed’s preoccupation with new age science and otherworldly forces, personal idiosyncrasies and late life withdrawal into drug use pose a difficult and ethically fraught biography for recuperative historians. Weaving fictional mythology with community memory *Transgender Hirstory in 99 Objects: Legends & Mythologies* is positioned as a conversation that questions and exceeds reliable forms of historical explanation during an important contemporary moment of widespread trans visibility and movement building.

Transgender Hirstory in 99 Objects performs an excellent example of deconstructing historical discourse while simultaneously constituting it.

A recent exhibition at Toronto's Canadian Lesbian and Gay Archives (CLGA) is exemplary of how display can implicate historic and contemporary queer bodies beyond objects or images. *Tape Condition: degraded* is a site-specific collaborative installation by academic Cait McKinney and artist Hazel Meyer. The exhibition was inspired by McKinney and Meyer's discovery that the CLGA holds a collection of over 800 VHS porn tapes. Spending two years watching, rewinding and reporting the condition of the tapes, the pair began to fantasize about their dream tapes—tapes that were homemade, kinky tapes, tapes with women, trans folks, people of colour, and people with non-normative bodies. Finding little to none of these dream tapes in a collection that was built through donation and is largely commercially produced gay male porn from the 1980s and 1990s, McKinney and Meyer began to imagine a different kind of archive. Rather than focus on reconstructing absences or nostalgia, the installation realizes a multifunctional space for watching, archiving and creating queer porn in the CLGA's gallery.

In a departure from the CLGA's more formal exhibitions of contemporary art and archive ephemera, *Tape Condition: degraded* seeks to dislocate visitors from the archive proper. Requiring visitors to duck through a jagged hole bashed into a false wall built over the gallery's usually generous entrance (the wall once proposed as protection against police raids), *Tape Condition: degraded* doesn't immediately feel like an art installation. It doesn't really feel like an archive either. It feels domestic, colourful, welcoming, kitschy and sexy in a secret and seedy way. There is no customary vinyl on the wall proclaiming the title of the show, no works loudly declaring their status as art, and no densely packed archive stacks.

Rather, the colourful space feels like one in which, depending upon the time of day you arrive, you could find people digitizing VHS tapes at the large work table, dreaming and drawing up sexy porn ideas at the drafting table, or pulling out the video camera and pushing aside the furniture to shoot their very own dream tapes against the vibrant green screen wall. Various objects such as tools, props, contemporary artworks, archived party flyers and newspaper clippings co-mingle in the space. The ways in which the objects are displayed is as, if not more, suggestive than the objects themselves. A full wall of pink pegboard is devoted to displaying a mix of art, sex toys, and activist tools, suggesting visitors may easily employ the objects for a variety of purposes both inside and outside of the space.

The set-up of the exhibition as equal parts archive, digitization suite, pervy queer zone, sex dungeon and community recreation room invite embodied and imaginative responses to the installation. Tyburczy argues that this focus on embodied response is central to a queer praxis of display. She states;

This approach to display as a materialization of queer theory and as a mode of queer world making draws inspiration from theater and performance studies scholars who prioritize questions of embodiment and corporeal histories to forge new paths for rethinking display in museums. These scholars agree that, like in theaters, museums carefully position viewers in particular scenes of meaning making where knowledge and the organization of that knowledge have always been staged.¹¹

Tape Condition: degraded is staged around generations of queer desire. As the exhibition demonstrates queer desire does actually manifest in the material world, though often fleeting ways. Historian Nick Matte describes in the exhibition's publication how, "there is something so emotional about creating a new world with pleasure and finding refuge and relief through sex, in healing the damages done, over the years, if only temporarily".¹² Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner further describe practices of queer worlding elaborating that, "queer culture has learned not only how to sexualize these other [non-normative] relations but how to use them as a context for witnessing intense and personal affect while elaborating a public world of belonging and transformation".¹³ Within the small space of the CLGA's gallery McKinney and Meyer draw on the archive's capacity to be a community hub and shared repository, using queer traditions of world making to construct a colourful cosmos of queer desire and agency.

Like Vargas, McKinney and Meyer advocate the potential of archives to stage expanded narratives of queer and trans history while remaining critical of recuperative representations tempered by respectability politics. The pair seeks to acknowledge the conditions of class, race, and gender privilege that govern the archive's limited holdings. Juan Maria reminds us that institutions are founded on divisions between legitimacy and illegitimacy and it is thus imperative to "challenge how legitimacy is established and the forms of power it serves and upholds. Our response to risk needs to be about generating promiscuous forms of knowledge production, responding with activist creativity and intellectual agility rather than efforts to conserve or canonize".¹⁴ Rather than creating a formalized counter-archive to flesh out marginalized narratives,

the exhibition acknowledges that often objects from these narratives do not exist for specific reasons and responds creatively. Doubly appropriate for an exhibition about queer sexual subjectivities, *Tape Condition: degraded* promotes promiscuous knowledge in the form of gossip, anecdotes, unofficial histories, and dirty desires. A free publication brings together the dream tapes of eleven artists, activists and thinkers illustrated in Meyer's signature black and white ink drawings. The dream tapes center fantasy, mythology, and personal desire as generative points of approaching the absent and the unknown in the CLGA's holdings. Creating a space of potential, the exhibition is suspended between the archive's past and the present, activating what exists in archives but cannot be seen, as Ulrike Müller describes, "things that are intensely felt but that cannot be pinned down. Iconographies of what could be, under other political conditions".¹⁵

Both *Tape Condition: degraded* and *Trans Hirstory in 99 Objects: Legends and Mythologies* develop complex critical strategies of queer curatorship and community knowledge sharing grounded in committed archival research. They do this through creative, collaborative, non-traditional, and unusual display frameworks that mix contemporary art with historical objects. By placing equal value on legitimate and illegitimate forms of knowledge the exhibitions revere and critique the archive simultaneously. Writing extensively on archives Ann Cvetkovich has asserted that "we need both, a passion for alternative collections and ongoing attention to absences that can't be filled", because what is at stake is "not just inclusion but transformation of what counts as an archive and innovative approaches to an engaged public history that connects the past with the present to create a history of the present."¹⁶ Certainly not a coincidence that

both exhibitions were masterminded by artists, these exhibitions demonstrate that creative display of unlikely objects can stage a necessary and productive tension from which to approach the complexities of constituting history.

Notes

1. Jennifer Doyle, “Queer Wallpaper”, *A Companion to Contemporary Art Since 1945*, ed. Amelia Jones. (Malden, MA : Blackwell Pub., 2006).

2. Céline Condorelli, “In Support: a theoretical and practical investigation into forms of display”, (PhD thesis, Goldsmiths University of London, 2014), 8.

3. Chris E. Vargas, “An Introduction”, *Transgender Hirstory in 99 Objects: Legends and Mythologies*, exhibition catalogue (Los Angeles: ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archives, 2015), 3.

*Hirstory is like the feminist reclamation term herstory but utilizes the pronoun hir, a gender neutral pronoun.

4. The second iteration of the exhibition series is currently on view from August 13, 2016 — June 04, 2017 at The Henry Gallery in Seattle. This iteration focuses on “lives and experiences specific to Seattle and the greater Pacific Northwest: individuals including Nell Pickerell (also known as Harry Allen and Harry Livingston [1882-1922]), and Marsha Botzer, transgender activist and founder of Ingersoll Gender Center (1977); and places such as The Garden of Allah, a social gathering space popular in the years after World War II known for its female impersonator cabaret acts”. “MOTHA and Chris E. Vargas Present: *Trans History in 99 Objects*”, *The Henry*, accessed 07/10/2016, <https://henryart.org/>

exhibitions/motha-and-chris-e-vargas-present-trans-hirstory-in-99-objects.

5. Vargas 4.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid.

8. Jennifer Tyburczy, *Sex Museums: The Politics and Performance of Display*, (Chicago;London: The University of Chicago Press, 2016), 4.

9. Abram J. Lewis, ““I am 64 and Paul McCartney Doesn’t Care”: The Haunting of the Transgender Archive and the Challenges of Queer History”, *Radical History Review* 120 (Fall 2014), 14.

10. Ibid.

11. Tyburczy 5.

12. Nick Matte, “Dream Tape”, *Tape Condition: degraded*, exhibition catalogue, Hazel Meyer and Cait McKinney, (Toronto: Canadian Lesbian and Gay Archives, 2016) 7.

13. Michael Warner and Lauren Berlant, “Sex in Public”, *Publics and Counterpublics*, (Brooklyn: Zone Books, 2002), 199.

14. Anjali Arondekar, Ann Cvetkovich, Christina B. Hanhardt, Regina Kunzel, Tavia Nyong’o, Juana María Rodríguez, Susan Stryker, Daniel Marshall, Kevin P. Murphy, and Zeb Tortorici, “Queering Archives: A Roundtable”, *Radical History Review* 2015 (122): 222-3.

15. Ulrike Müller, “Notes on Herstory Inventory: A Collaborative Work in Progress”, in *Cruising the Archive*, ed. David Franz and Mia Locks, (Los Angeles, ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archives, 2011), 135.

16. Anjali Arondekar et al. 222.

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