

*The Anti-Archive*  
as  
*Trans Archival Future*

By Cait McKinney

At the beginning of *Framing Agnes*, directors Chase Joynt and Kristen Schilt are both on camera, talking about archives. They're in a green room that is not really a green room because it serves as the set for half the action in the film. This off-space that is not actually an off-space is a bit like the structure of archives—their aura depends on being hidden, walled-off, and discovered. But they are nothing new to the people who made these records in the course of living their lives, nor are records new to the archivists who arranged them. Joynt is describing the almost unimaginable labour he and Schilt put into their research for the film as they searched for the case files of Agnes, a trans woman famously interviewed and written about by UCLA sociologist Harold Garfinkle in the late 1950s.

*Schilt: "Harold Garfinkle had died in 2011 and I knew there was a sociologist who had been gifted all of his papers."*

*Joynt: "Kristen and I started visiting the archive over and over again, in part helping to organize the content, and all the while, we were looking for Agnes. A couple years later, we're in the archive, and there was a large metal filing cabinet that had long been rusted shut. We pried the drawer open and found the entirety of Agnes's case files and in the back of the filing cabinet were eight other case studies of gender non-conforming people who never make it into the research."*

This is a primal scene of archival research, replete with excavation metaphor: the rusty file cabinet needs to be pried open so trans history can emerge. But *Framing Agnes* is ultimately critical of the economy of attention and visibility driving recent interest in trans archives. This critique emerges as the film's cast relate their own stories of transition to the 70-year-old stories they have been hired to re-animate from the dank file cabinet. "We have always been here, you just didn't care until now," the film seems to say as it situates Agnes's story within a contemporary "trans tipping point" moment.

*Framing Agnes* shares with Chris Vargas's work a "deep and enduring suspicion of the politics and practices of visibility" around trans and gender non-conforming histories as they are leveraged by museums, archives, universities, and "LGBT" organizations.<sup>1</sup> As Joynt pointed out at the beginning of the Q&A after his and Vargas's *Recollective: Vancouver Independent Archives Week* talk, theirs is not an uncomplicated relationship to institutions: "This politics of visibility is the momentum fueling our careers, but also what we are critiquing."<sup>2</sup> Vargas seconded, "As critical of institutions as [*MOTHA: The Museum of Transgender Hirstory and Art*] is, it's very much a darling of institutions too, and I guess I chalk it up to institutions liking to absorb critique a little bit, to feel on the cutting edge of that conversation."<sup>3</sup>

Trans archives are good at making trouble for the structures that want to absorb them. In a [recent series of essays for the Digital Research Ethics Collaboratory](#), Cassius Adair argues that "there's a significant anti-archival trans politics. Such politics have emerged not out of desire for self-annihilation, but out of resistance to being siphoned up, pinned down, by state or corporate collections."<sup>4</sup> For Adair, resistance to being archived, including acts of deletion from digital platforms like LiveJournal, constitute "a trans type of enacting futurity."<sup>5</sup> Adair is not alone in his thinking about an anti-archival trans impulse and he draws connections to [Marquis Bey's](#) and [C. Riley Snorton's](#) work on Black trans fugitivity (in a Canadian context, we might also draw in [Syrus Marcus Ware's work on Black trans resistance to white LGBTQ archiving in Toronto](#)). In responding to Vargas and Joynt's talk at VIVO, and to their work with trans archives more broadly, I want to think alongside Adair's provocation here, about the

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1 Chase Joynt, quoted in *Trans Archival Futures Q&A*, VIVO Media Arts Centre, June 1, 2019.

2 Ibid.

3 Chris Vargas, quoted in *Trans Archival Futures Q&A*, VIVO Media Arts Centre, June 1, 2019.

4 Cassius Adair, "Delete Yr Account: Speculations on Trans Digital Lives and the Anti-Archival, Part 1: Are You Sure?," 2019, Digital Research Ethics Collaboratory, <http://www.drecollab.org/delete-yr-account-part-i/>.

5 Ibid.

anti-archivalness of these artists' projects that are precisely about recomposing the archive and investing in its possibilities.

LGBTQ+ community archives, trans archives within universities, and museum collections are all hungry for trans materials but often bound to cis-sexist and even homo-national ways of collecting, describing, and promoting those materials. I don't mean this to "neg" these institutions, particularly as someone who has volunteered for, researched in, and cared deeply (and still does) for community archives. As a white, non-binary dyke in a tenure-track job at a Canadian university, I am set up to be legible to these institutions, and benefit from them. And I do. What Vargas's and Joynt's work asks us to reconsider is the ways that trans lives resist capture within these frameworks even as they take up prominence within community archives, university collections, and museums. In other words, Vargas and Joynt are both keepers of archives who want to leave open their anti-archivalness. This does not mean abandoning archives altogether, but rather having them differently, provisionally, without guarantees.

*What does it mean to be in a museum that did not used to want you, but really wants you now?*

What I love about [Vargas's evolving MOTHA project](#) (2013-ongoing) is the way it sits in the painful space between institutional recognition and abandonment, and occupies that space with tremendous humour. The project makes fun of popular historical epistemologies like the monument, the "History in 100 Objects" method, and even techniques of museum display like vitrines, didactics, and ribbon-cutting ceremonies.

I've seen Vargas speak about this project before, but I finally got to see *MOTHA* for the first time this summer (2019) at the Oakland Museum, as part of [Queer California: Untold Stories](#). For this iteration, Vargas

built a museum within a museum. Hand-drawn Corinthian columns ushered visitors into *MOTHA*'s small, walled-off space within this epic group show as if all the Golden State's queer art served for just a moment as trans art history's waiting room. This version of *MOTHA* was a tiny monolith whose play with scale and institutional aesthetics gleefully materialized the ways museums and archives often tag trans cultural contributions onto queer ones in an additive framework that ultimately cannot contain or circumscribe them.

This sly institutional critique is a theme that runs through Vargas's video work, and for me, reaches its pinnacle in [ONE for All...](#) (2012), a video about the eccentric trans philanthropist Reed Erickson, whose money helped pay for Los Angeles's ONE Archives. This video was commissioned by ONE and predominantly features Erickson (played by Vargas), his pet leopard Henry, and a dolphin. All three speak. The video documents Erickson's conflict with ONE, which resisted his eccentric interests (dolphin communication, dream telepathy, and telekinesis). Historian and podcaster Morgan M. Page calls this the "new agey kinda stuff" that was very important to the figure she deems "the trans Howard Hughes."<sup>6</sup>

*Vargas, as Erickson, seated between his leopard and dolphin: "Henry [the leopard], I just think the human potential is huge once all these movements are integrated: homosexual people, transsexual people, and animals. We all need to come together, socially, spiritually, and politically, and once there is peaceful unification, I know we'll all be more fully actualized beings." The dolphin concurs. Wind chimes play in the background. Spiralized technicolor shapes twist through the frame.*

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6 See Page's *One from the Vaults* episode on Reed Erickson (Morgan M. Page, "The Trans Howard Hughes," *One from the Vaults*, accessed December 5, 2019, <https://www.mixcloud.com/onefromthe-vaults2/oftv-5-the-trans-howard-hughes/>) and also her interview on *Making Gay History* (Eric Marcus, Morgan M. Page and AJ Lewis, "Reed Erickson," *Making Gay History*, accessed December 5, 2019, <https://makinggayhistory.com/podcast/reed-erickson/>).

It's clear watching *ONE for All...* that Vargas loves the gossipy, less-than-"respectable" aspects of Erickson's persona, and the impossibility they present to conservative institutional histories. Page's pleasure at telling Erickson's story in all its complexity is also palpable in her *One from the Vaults* episode about him. It's not that Vargas or Page are making fun of Erickson—quite the opposite. This is homage based in sheer joy at the aspects of Erickson's life that couldn't be subsumed within homophile and gay liberation respectability politics then, and can't be eaten up by the "LGB" parts of the archives now.

I'm drawn to *ONE for All...* because the video revels in what made Erickson strange, and not just another wealthy businessman-turned-philanthropist. I mean strange here in the sense of "to make strange" as a productive means of destabilizing familiar categories, tropes, and divisions between what is and is not archivable, between what is and is not proper trans history. Erickson is the consummate white-washed trans archives celebrity, in the sense that his legacy is used to make a historically gay and lesbian organization like ONE Archives appear more trans in its lineages. This video, like *MOTHA*, plops itself down firmly in the tension between playing respectability as a trade-off for institutional resource extraction, and having the last laugh, dolphin and leopard cackling along in the background.

But Erickson's odder proclivities are also serious business. In an interview for the *Making Gay History* podcast, AJ Lewis argues that Erickson was "developing other forms of knowledge, other forms of insight, other ways of inhabiting the body. I don't think that his interest in mysticism was disconnected from his conditions living as trans in the years that he did. I honestly think that his quirkiness and his willingness to be very unorthodox in supporting a whole host of different kinds of issues is something that speaks powerfully to trans communities today."<sup>7</sup>

7 AJ Lewis, quoted in Morgan M. Page, "Reed Erickson," *Making Gay History*, accessed December

I love and can relate to Erickson's kinship with animals, and it reminds me of Mirha-Soleil Ross's abiding commitment to animal rights, which informs a significant portion of her archives and reflects an interspecies mode of theorizing that is intimately bound to trans somatechnics but confusing to gay and lesbian archives narrowly focused on sexual difference.<sup>8</sup>

My most intimate encounter with trans archives and their resistance to institutional capture occurred over the course of 2016-17, [which I spent processing Ms. Ross's collection with Sid Cunningham and Aaron Cain](#). Ms. Ross is a well-known video and performance artist and activist for sex worker rights, animal rights, and other issues. At the time I was a Postdoctoral Fellow at the [LGBTQ Oral History Digital Collaboratory](#), a project directed by Dr. Elspeth Brown and funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (if we want to talk institutional resource extraction). One of the project's goals was to amplify and create pathways to trans materials at what was then called the Canadian Lesbian and Gay Archives (CLGA), and is now [the ArQuives](#).<sup>9</sup> The irony of labouring to amplify trans collections at a "Lesbian and Gay" Archives was not lost on any of us. Ms. Ross had donated her very large personal collection to the CLGA in a hurry, before moving back to Montréal from Toronto after the death of her partner, the video artist and editor Mark Karbusicky. Her records sat in the archives' basement, mostly untouched, for more than a decade. Our job was to inventory and organize the materials, communicate with Ms. Ross to help her make decisions about access, and create a finding aid for researchers.<sup>10</sup>

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5, 2019, <https://makinggayhistory.com/podcast/reed-erickson/>. Lewis writes about this idea in depth in a longer paper: 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 (2014): 13-34.

8 Harlan Weaver, "Trans Species," *TSQ* 1, no. 1-2 (May 2014): 253-54, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-2400100>.

9 Brown writes about this process at the ArQuives in a forthcoming article focused on the challenges that anti-racist and trans-inclusive work poses to historically gay and lesbian community archives: Elspeth H. Brown, "Archival Activism, Symbolic Annihilation, and the LGBTQ+ Community Archive," forthcoming pending minor revisions, *Archivaria* 89 (Spring 2020).

10 Nora Butler Burke and Trish Salah were also hugely helpful in coordinating this process.

Unlike Agnes's case file, written by Garfinkle and housed with his papers, Ms. Ross assembled this fonds to represent her own life, on her own terms. We spent many hours on video calls with Ms. Ross talking about how to organize and describe the materials, and deciding how accessible they ought to be. In an anti-archival move, some files were removed and returned to Ms. Ross in Montréal at her request.

Ross's archive contained many video tapes—records of her own work, but also an ample collection of trans film and video she amassed over the years while running the Counting Past 2 (CP2) Festival in Toronto, and audio recordings of every episode of her animal-rights themed community radio show, *Animal Voices*.<sup>11</sup> There were also several boxes of papers related to her art practice, activism, and personal life. These are the types of materials you expect to find in an archive, but other aspects of Ms. Ross's expansive practice challenged the logics, policies, and even available storage containers at the ArQuives, which is, to its credit, practiced at valuing and safekeeping unusual ephemera.

I remember a day when we were asked to “clean up” a small box filled with dollar-store quality small plastic toys, old candy, and other everyday objects that looked like detritus at first blush. In fact, these were materials created in a workshop Ms. Ross led on reimagining sperm and ovum, part of her larger *Pregnancy Project*.<sup>12</sup> The archivists did not want old food in the archives, because it can attract pests, like mice, who will eat paper records to build their nests. In retrospect: fair. At the time though, the idea of throwing away a Kinder Surprise egg from 2001 was unthinkable to me. “This was a community art project!”

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11 Counting Past 2 (CP2) was a trans arts festival that ran in Toronto in the late 1990s. Viviane Namaste writes about the festival in *Sex Change: Social Change* (Toronto: Canadian Scholar's Press, 2011).

12 See *Allo Performance!* (2002), <http://www.vtape.org/video?vi=5075>.



I bristled, before composing myself and working with Sid to come up with another way to document these materials.

When I think back about this project, the ArQuives did a lot to support processing this collection. They have promoted Ms. Ross's archives widely since our work wrapped up, and many researchers have made use of the materials as they write exciting books that will foreground Canadian and Indigenous trans women in the rapidly growing trans history field. And yet when I think back on what it felt like doing that work, there were many moments where I was on the defensive. I made assumptions. My back was up because I expected resistance, even when there was little to be found.

Institutions like universities and archives put forward Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion mandates that try to eat up and colonize the lives of trans people (especially Black, Indigenous, and People of Color), whose bodies and stories are allowed to appear to the extent that they serve these institutions' mandates. Art that is imaginative in and with trans archives pushes against the ways trans histories and lives are being pulled under the "LGBT" umbrella. So too do routines of working in archives differently: in collaboration with their makers and trans communities and with openness to the resources intuitions can offer, but also skepticism about their motives and methods.

How do we navigate the thorny terrain between archives as potentially productive, future-oriented spaces of encounter for trans records, researchers, and communities and their normalizing and straightening impulses? Joynt and Vargas each give us methods, like infiltration, humour, and re-enactment. So too does Agnes (played by Zackary Drucker), whose story is about a particularly trans, anti-archival resistance to institutions and their logics. Agnes exceeded existing U.S. frameworks for trans healthcare provisions in the late 1950s, but rather than let these systems swallow her up, she played them to her advantage, telling

Garfinkle the kind of story he needed for his file cabinet so she could access gender-affirming surgery. This is a classic, anti-heroine narrative, about a young woman who is smart and cunning enough to get what she needs from those with power, while only giving them what of herself she is willing to offer up. Agnes's anti-archivalness is so much bigger than Garfinkle's rusty cabinet, and in that failure of containment, another kind of trans futurity is glimpseable.

# Produced in Response to:

## *Trans Archival Futures:*

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