

Babette ([00:00](#)):

I feel like I have this weird thing, which is if I make a decision and it goes well, it means that I am like, this sounds so weird. It means that I'm well aligned in my life and I am good and I made a good decision. And my roommate noticed it. I'll be like, "Yeah, I decided not to go to class today. That was right. I'm so aligned with myself." But if I have a really bad meal, I'll be really upset because I'm just like I made the wrong decision. There's a lot of personal responsibility instead of understanding, oh, shit happens. We live in a world that actually many things are out of our control or whatever. And I think it's because I'm realizing I have this viewer image of my optimal self and optimal space and optimal life that I am constantly working towards, and every choice I make is getting closer to that.

[NEW_PARAGRAPH]And I just learned that other people don't think that way. That's maybe not a healthy way to think. Whereas my roommates from the opposite end is like, "This is just a rat race in life where we have no control and everything's out to get me, and I'm just trying to find little moments of happiness." Whereas I'm like, "No, everything has to be aligned and I have to find my ideal black queer space and my ideal black friends, and we're all going to live in this forest or something." My roommate's just like, I don't know. Do you guys think like that? Do you feel like you think that way or you just like, this is just life and this is just a thing that I'm doing?

Ally ([01:33](#)):

I had that from religious upbringing. So because of God, it was like, oh my gosh, everything is like God talking to me. I would take a right instead of taking a left, but then I'm like, well, no, that was on purpose. There are no mistakes. And it was so exaggerated and honestly exhausting. I feel like I had to pull away from it. I feel like I had to sober up after losing my religion and be like, oh, some things just happened. Some things are just random and there isn't one big cosmic good verse evil battle going on that I'm a soldier in.

Babette ([02:14](#)):

So interesting. I think in this situation, I am my own God and I'm just like, oh, what I am doing. But I wonder because I was raised religious and I wonder if that's from religion, but I don't know if it is. I think it's from being in spaces my whole life where I always had to carve my own path, basically just shitty private schools where it's like I am the master of my own destiny vibes kind of. I feel like I'm literally, I'm so obsessed with utopia and I'm also really obsessed with constantly imagining the ideal. And when, for example, a breakup happens, my therapist notices that I take on a lot of responsibility where it's like, well, I missed the signs and that wasn't me. I wasn't my most aligned self. For every person, there's a million different ways to love. And just because you didn't connect with one person, it wasn't your, I think about it. I'm like, am I pseudo religious? What? It's so interesting.

Ally ([03:10](#)):

Oh my God. But that's also, that makes me think of control. Maybe you earnestly think that you can control these things. And when it fails, it's not just like, oh, the apparatuses that are bigger than all of us that are keeping some of us down have done this. You're like, no, this is my personal failure. It's like, whoa. You're hard on yourself.

Babette ([03:31](#)):

I guess so. I guess it's also just like, yeah, no, I guess I am. Anyways. No, I think at a certain point it's like I think about systems of power so much and if I reflect on them too much, it feels all consuming in a way. So I love the idea of I made myself, and I feel like that's a really queer thing. Kind of relates to what we're talking about today, which is building things up. I am building myself up. I am in charge of my own destiny type thing, but I think the reality is it's somewhere in the middle.

Ally ([04:03](#)):

I think so too.

Babette ([04:03](#)):

It's somewhere in the middle between my roommate and I. It's like, oh yeah, I am in charge of myself. And what prompted this was because I went to Mexico City and I just noticed how much easier it was to live. And I am so hard on myself about food choices and not going to the grocery store. And it's like the grocery store is 20 minutes away from me here. Whereas in Mexico City, there would be a taco stand right out in front of my house with delicious tacos, or there would be a fruit stand five minutes away. Oh no. There are actually things out of my control in the US that make my life hell and bad and hard to live. And I was like-

Ally ([04:03](#)):

Food deserts.

Babette ([04:47](#)):

Food desert. And I was like, oh, that's what prompted this, where I was just like, oh, actually, I can't build myself up out of systemic, all of these shitty things or whatever.

Ally ([05:02](#)):

Oh, totally. That makes a lot of sense too. I think having your own sense of personal power is super important. And being kind of, I don't know, the person pushing yourself to get things right makes a lot of sense. I don't think it's full control freak or something like that. It's just like, no, I know what I expect from myself.

Babette ([05:24](#)):

What side of the spectrum do you feel like you are more on? Me or my roommate?

Ally ([05:28](#)):

I don't know. I do feel sometimes I zoom out. This is how I'm a boomer. I zoom out too far and I go, okay, it's just slow, incremental change. All of this stuff that feels really hard right now, I'm looking for the small moments in it that are different than it was a decade ago. And I'm like, okay, I can have peace. But I'm also kind of like, no, I'm accepting too much that is unacceptable in that moment and being like, this is okay. It's like, no, maybe everything is not okay.

Babette ([06:02](#)):

Yeah, no, but my roommate and I were talking about it. It's like, no, it's not complacency, but I think I do have friends who are just like, "This is just how it is and we have to work through it and figure our life out." And I think my roommate's a little bit more like that, and I'm like, "Every moment is a possibility for [inaudible 00:06:20]." It's just like, I don't know. It's very interesting. It's so funny. I was skipping class when we were having this conversation and my roommate and I, we've just known each other for so long that these kind of conversations would just come up really casually and it's like, this is the class, this is the learning. You know what I mean? We're learning. We're looking at each other. It's like two dumb bitches nodding and saying, "Exactly. Exactly. That's it." We just are just like an echo chamber for each other. I love them so much.

Ally ([06:03](#)):

Oh my God.

Babette ([06:54](#)):

Am I even queer?

Ally ([06:55](#)):

I think I want to take testosterone. I mean, I'm wearing men's underwear right now.

Babette ([06:59](#)):

Is that a boy? Is that a girl?

Ally ([07:00](#)):

Man, woman? Cisgender, transgender. Like we're born into language.

Babette ([07:04](#)):

Butch femme, T-girl.

Speaker 5 ([07:05](#)):

Decolonized.

Babette ([07:06](#)):

Queer, trans, BIPIC.

Speaker 5 ([07:08](#)):

Neurodivergents.

Ally ([07:09](#)):

Cisgender, heteropatriarchal capitalist girl boss.

Babette ([07:11](#)):

Queer femme lipstick every day.

Ally ([07:14](#)):

[inaudible 00:07:14] like fag boy relationship.

Speaker 5 ([07:16](#)):

Butch, boyish, like sprightly.

Babette ([07:18](#)):

Softer, more [inaudible 00:07:20]. Oh, but you're so feminine. You're so feminine.

Speaker 5 ([07:22](#)):

Attraction to a hot T boy.

Ally ([07:24](#)):

I used sexuality to try to understand my gender.

Babette ([07:27](#)):

What does it look like for non-binary people to "transition"?

Ally ([07:31](#)):

I was a boy. If I was looking down at the memory, I was a boy.

Babette ([07:35](#)):

It's really difficult to look at gender identity head on.

Speaker 5 ([07:39](#)):

Wait, I think I'm trans.

Chris ([07:52](#)):

I am Chris Vargas. I'm an artist. I also am a professor, and I do a project called The Museum of Trans Hirstory and Art. My pronouns are he, him and I do a lot of line dancing.

Babette ([08:16](#)):

Oh, let's talk about that. That's so fun.

Ally ([08:17](#)):

Do you go to Stud Country?

Chris ([08:17](#)):

I do. I work the door on Thursday.

Ally ([08:21](#)):

I've bought a sweatshirt from you.

Chris ([08:22](#)):

Oh my God. Hello. Nice to officially meet you.

Ally ([08:29](#)):

So fun.

David ([08:30](#)):

Oh my God. Amazing. Well, my name's David. I'm behind the times on the line dancing. I still haven't gone, which is very shameful. Given that I think line dancing has kind of brought Chris through this book journey. It's been your release.

Chris ([08:44](#)):

Totally.

David ([08:45](#)):

So I desperately need that and we're going to do that soon, but I'll do a proper intro. So my name's David Evans France. I'm a curator in Los Angeles and a lot of my projects look at queer archives and histories that are often omitted or haven't received a lot of attention or recognition. And I worked with Chris previously on the first iteration of an exhibition series with MOTH, so I am so lucky and honored to be a collaborator on this project. My pronouns are he/him. I'm a cisgender gay man and I'm delighted to be here.

Babette ([09:19](#)):

Amazing.

Ally ([09:20](#)):

We're happy to have you. I'm actually just so excited to ask about trans history.

Babette ([09:28](#)):

Let's dive into it.

Ally ([09:28](#)):

In 99 Objects.

Chris ([09:31](#)):

Let's do it.

Ally ([09:31](#)):

Can we kick it off? I'm not familiar with history. Would you want to talk about that?

Chris ([09:39](#)):

Sure. Hirstory is a take on the feminist reclamation of history as hirstory, but using the gender-neutral hir possessive pronoun, that is now a little bit hirstorical itself. It's less in popular usage, but thinking about a trans history, of course, I had to do a little work play.

Ally ([10:12](#)):

Amazing. I love that.

Babette ([10:14](#)):

What was the impetus for the project? How did it come to be, and what was the process like for you?

Chris ([10:23](#)):

Yeah, MOTHA itself, the Museum of Trans Hirstory and Art, I started it in 2013, so a full decade ago. And I began it as a poster, and the poster was just meant to advertise a museum that was never going to exist, but would plant the seed of imagination for people to fantasize, imagine, speculate about what such a place could contain. What art would be shown, what history might be exhibited, and I did so at a moment of it was pre or just at the start of this huge wave of trans visibility in all these institutions that have been historically exclude trans artists in history. So mass media, of course, lots of trans representation began 2013 thinking about Laverne Cox in Orange is the New Black. That felt really revolutionary and exciting at the time, even though Orange is the New Black is silly at best.

Ally ([11:32](#)):

Well, ultimately they're all still in prison.

Chris ([11:37](#)):

And it centers a fish out of water, white woman's encounters with all these wacky whatever. But arts, institutions, academia, this is a moment that trans was all of a sudden included, and so in these historically exclusionary institutions, and so I was like, what is this? The project was a way for me to investigate what's lost and what's gained and what's lost mostly in this process of assimilation really. So when I designed this collage poster that included over 250 transgender icons, I just started to imagine what I could do as this project, and MOTHA was born from there.

Ally ([12:28](#)):

Wow. That poster actually hangs up in my gym.

Chris ([12:35](#)):

At Everybody?

Ally ([12:36](#)):

At Everybody, yeah. Above the scale next to a sign that says, "Don't take personally the number that you see on the scale. Be easy on yourself."

Babette ([12:45](#)):

So funny.

Ally ([12:46](#)):

It's a dreamy gym.

Babette ([12:47](#)):

I forgot that you went to a fun queer gym and I thought this was just in a Planet Fitness or something. I was like, wow, L.A is really with it. That's great.

Ally ([12:56](#)):

Yeah, it's so cool.

Babette ([13:01](#)):

Oh, that's awesome.

David ([13:01](#)):

Allies are everywhere.

Ally ([13:03](#)):

That's so fun to make a speculative museum. That's a really fun use of imagination.

Chris ([13:12](#)):

Thanks. I'm not the first for sure, but I'm not even the first speculative trans museum.

Ally ([13:20](#)):

Oh my God.

Chris ([13:20](#)):

I know. Unbeknownst to me, there's an artist that we feature in the book, Trans History [inaudible 00:13:26] and Objects, which is about to be released. We include an artist, Giuseppe Camposano, who is a Peruvian artist who did a project pre-MOTHA that has so many beautiful ties. But I just want to say I did not know about it when I started, and of course I pay all the homage.

Ally ([13:46](#)):

We all know you were biting Giuseppe. Wow, that is so cool. I really liked how you kind of phrased, you wanted to explore what is lost in the trans assimilation to mainstream. What are some of the things that you found that were really surprising to you while doing this project?

Chris ([14:09](#)):

Well, first I think I was just concerned about how narratives have to be simplified and palatable for a larger audience, and all the kind of nuances of trans culture and identity and experience would get watered down. But I think over the last decade, it's been a little bit different than that. While I think

conversations about trans and non-binary experiences and journeys can contain so many more nuances than I saw that I feared would have to get swept under the rug. Simultaneously, there's obviously this giant political backlash to this moment of visibility. And so I guess my fear there too is still that, but I don't know. I don't think I need to be that fearful. I think at least some people in queer culture can embrace all of the nuances of the experience. I don't know. Does that make sense?

Ally ([15:18](#)):

I wonder. No, it really does. It's making me think about, because the actor's strike is still going on, and I think that with streaming and this explosion of opportunities for different people to create what we would now look at as mainstream, that's really interesting. I do feel like a lot more stories were able to be told that are maybe a little less cookie cutter because there are now 50 shows premiering on a night instead of 13 or whatever the original channels were.

Chris ([15:50](#)):

Right. David, I saw you make a face.

David ([15:56](#)):

When did I make a face? I never make faces. I'm stone cold. What are you talking about?

Babette ([16:03](#)):

[inaudible 00:16:03] best friend, you lip twist a little bit right now. So funny.

Ally ([16:10](#)):

Yeah. Do you have anything to add, David, or how would you answer that same question? Was there anything surprising that you found during this project?

David ([16:17](#)):

Maybe I could talk about how I got to here and what I think is so important and interesting about MOTHA. So I was previously a curator at the One Archive, which is an LGBT archive in Los Angeles. It bills itself as the largest LGBTQ archive in the world, which I think is very true. It is a huge collection of materials and a really important resource. I started there around 2010 as the archive was becoming a part of the University of Southern California, so a massive bureaucratic corporatized kind of university. And so this was an institution that dates back to the 1950s. It was first a magazine for the gay community and had existed through as an educational institute and became an archive. So it had deep community resonance, particularly within a somewhat narrow community of older white men who kind of built the collection and were really instrumental in saving this collection and caring for it.

([17:13](#)):

This was a moment when community institution was becoming a part of this big university and was going to potentially feel the pressures of assimilation that Chris examined or already kind of talked about in relationship to trans narratives going into the mainstream, queer narratives becoming part of a larger thing. And I kind of was able to create a space to do different artist projects with incredible people like Chris to provoke questions about what it means for a community-based archive to become a part of this larger institution. What are the kind of histories that remain obscured or lost or were never

collected by the archive because of the biases within the members at the time or community functions? What was lost, and what also fell through the cracks and is actually in the collection too? Because there are these incredible rich histories of trans activism and community building that are a part of the collections of the One Archives that they needed to be discovered.

[\(18:08\)](#):

They were less recognized, they weren't really heralded as these linchpin histories that we all need to know about like queer history of Los Angeles. So Chris made this amazing video early on about Reed Erickson, who is a trans millionaire and an important funder of One in the 1960s and seventies and eighties, and was an eccentric individual in his own in all amazing ways that I'm going to leave Chris to explain about. But that was my first introduction to Chris and how he uses humor and speculation to really critically examine trans history and kind of bring out these potentials in history and archive that aren't necessarily there for people that just see a box or a stack of dusty papers. Those are some of the things that MOTHA as this speculative free roaming institution that will never be built but can live in our minds can do, and it's possible.

Babette [\(19:03\)](#):

Wow. Well, firstly I'm like, maybe we need more trans millionaires. Obviously joking, obviously joking, but I was like, oh, I've never really heard that because you were like, oh, black billionaires. Like Jay Z. A trans millionaire, like maybe that's what we need.

David [\(19:23\)](#):

Yeah. I want to see Elliot Page on a yacht.

Babette [\(19:24\)](#):

Yeah, exactly. I have two questions that come to mind, which is I'm so curious about what the research, what was your process for researching for this book? Like you said, so many of these histories aren't preserved in the archive or something. So what were the methods and tools that you had to use for that? And I'm only priming you for the second question, which is our listeners might not have this book right in front of them, so I want to hear about your favorite objects from either of you, but maybe that first question of what was that process like for you, and what was the research process like?

Chris [\(20:06\)](#):

Well, the book came out of a series of six exhibitions, the first of which was that one invited by David. That was the first time we really worked together. So that was each, I thought I would be building towards 99 in this exhibition series. So the first one was at the One, the last one was at the Oakland Museum in this great show that our other collaborator Christina Linden curated called Queer California: Untold Stories. And MOTHA had its own mini installation, mini museum within the museum. But I thought when I started the exhibition series that it would build toward 99, and it didn't only because it was very limited. I mean, the exhibitions were limited to the opportunities that were given to me, and most of those were on the coasts. Most on the West Coast. One iteration was at the New Museum in New York, but there's nothing in the middle of the country or in the south or even extending beyond what are now the US borders.

[\(21:21\)](#):

So we first looked at what was exhibited at all the shows and saw these huge blind spots, but also thinking about the book as its own extension of the project and its own thing, what could be included that possibly wasn't able to be exhibited or shown in the gallery. So the methods that we took were kind of expansive. So the book contains art and archival objects, but that doesn't mean archival objects that have any kind of material presence. So some things lost to history or maybe unrepresentable for various reasons, like gatekeeping. In the case of the baptismal register, San Jose, the Mission San Jose, they wouldn't let us reproduce an image of their book, their register. Things like that are represented by drawings I did.

(22:21):

There's other aspects of history that we contain that just didn't have anything that we could show, or we wanted to work with artists to creatively and expansively engage with an aspect of history that we thought would be great, rather than showing something maybe not that interesting or maybe interesting in its own right, but it's an opportunity to engage with other artists. What else, David? What other methods, what am I missing?

David (23:00):

Another thing that we did for the book were there were a number of objects or individuals that had objects that we wanted to include, but we didn't have documentation of yet. So one is the guitar of Beth Elliot, who was a folk singer who was set to perform at a very important lesbian feminist conference in Los Angeles in the 1970s. And a group of lesbian separatists protested her inclusion as a trans woman, but she's an incredible folk singer. So we commissioned an artist, Marcel Pardo-Arrisa, to photograph a number of objects in the show and sometimes with the individuals they're related to. So we had this incredible moving experience where Beth came to Marcel's studio, performed for us and shot with their guitar that they've had since the 1970s. So those are really special moments. And also speak to, I think all the affect, all feeling that exists around some of the objects particularly for some of the people, and then also all the collaboration with the individual and the artists and the writers and all these other folks that really made this book possible.

Chris (24:08):

Another person that Marcel photographed was Patricio Manuel, a trans boxer, one of the first boxers to compete professionally, and so he brought his original boxing gloves, so it was so wonderful to meet him and also spend some time as Marcel photographed him in his gloves.

Ally (24:32):

Oh my gosh, that's so cool. He's been on my list of people to try to interview for this, because I'm just like, oh my gosh. What was that like? That ascension. Oh my gosh. That's really cool. Do you guys want to talk briefly about when this book comes out or where people can find it?

David (24:48):

So the book is on press right now. It's being co-published with an arts publisher called Hermer. So you can go to Hermer Publishers, and they have information about pre-ordering the book as well as when it will be released. I think maybe we'll see books hitting the stock in November, perhaps, so it feels it's very eminent.

Ally ([25:12](#)):

Wow. Great. Okay. Chris, I'm wondering, can you please tell us about this billionaire video?

Chris ([25:17](#)):

Oh, yeah.

Ally ([25:19](#)):

What was this called? What is this?

Chris ([25:22](#)):

It's a video called One for All that was commissioned for an event at the One when David was working there, and it was other artists engaging with the archive in various ways. And so I made a video about Reed Erickson, who was this millionaire philanthropist, one of the early funders of the One Institute when it was a magazine, when it was, it's a homophile organization in Los Angeles in the fifties, right? Sixties. When did it start?

David ([25:52](#)):

It started in 1952, but Reed got involved in the sixties through the eighties.

Chris ([26:00](#)):

Thanks David. He was this amazing weirdo who had access to a lot of money. It was family money that perpetuated further wealth for him in his life. And he was an early funder of the One Archive or One institute, but he was also really interested in all these other things. He funded trans social service organizations and medical service and studies, but also he funded more esoteric things like dolphin communication research and psychedelic mushrooms and sleep and full moon sleep, in full moon research. He was super eccentric and a real storied, dramatic individual actually. But the video was my speculating about what if, so the One had was a good conservative homophile organization, conservative in that it was interested in, what's the word, positive image issues or palatable delivering-

David ([27:23](#)):

Respectability.

Chris ([27:24](#)):

Yes, respectability politics. Sorry, I could not grab that in my head. So it was like everybody, they encourage people to show up at their protests in perfectly gendered clothing. So if you're a woman dressing like what a woman would wear at that time, same with men. But Reed I imagined in the video would have steered the direction of the organization in much more interesting ways, possibly in ways that intersected with some of these psychedelic animal communication studies. And so that was my kind of re-scripting of a history that could have been, that never was, but maybe is now.

Ally ([28:16](#)):

Wow, that's so crazy. I think I know it's that study that they made that movie about with the Dolphin.

Chris ([28:23](#)):

Yeah. John Lilly was the researcher that he studied.

Ally ([28:27](#)):

Yeah, totally. Okay. Yeah. Can you tell us also, now that we're going through the archives of your videos about Criminal Queers?

Chris ([28:36](#)):

Oh, yeah. Criminal Queers I made with my collaborator Eric Stanley, and that was a sequel to a film we made called Homotopia, and Homotopia was our response to the fervor around the right to marry movement, and it was our radical queer critique of the institution of marriage. We'd showed this film a lot, and people would get kind of pissed off and be like, "Well, if you think that the right to marry is not a legitimate cause that we should be throwing all our millions of dollars at, what do you think would be a legitimate way?" Because the critique is that at that moment in the aughts 2006, that the critique was that the right to marry was eclipsing all these very important more pressing issues and covered over that queer and trans people need access to healthcare and housing and education and citizenship and all that.

([29:43](#)):

And so we're like, well, if not the right to marry, how about prison abolition? That would impact a great number of the most marginalized among us. And so we made the film Criminal Queers, which was our prison break story, using the same characters that appeared in the first film. One of them is in jail awaiting trial for blowing up a pile of wedding presents at a gay wedding. And so characters organized around a large prison break. We took almost 10 years to make it. It was super DIY. We barely had a script. We would have access to actors, and we would just write them into the script, like Angela Davis, who's not an actor, but who appears as herself, who explains just the basics of prison abolition to one of the characters in the film. But yeah, it's a 60-minute romp.

Ally ([30:48](#)):

Yeah, I'm so bummed I missed seeing the whole thing, but maybe one day. Is it going to show up anywhere?

Chris ([30:56](#)):

I know. We don't have it online, but we always share it with people who reach out to us.

Ally ([31:05](#)):

Oh, fun. Well put me on the list.

Chris ([31:05](#)):

Sure.

Ally ([31:08](#)):

David, can you talk a little bit about your move since working at One to this project?

David ([31:20](#)):

Sure. Yeah. I think for me and Christina Linden, our co-curator for Chris, we all have different institutional jobs. Like Chris teaches at a university, Christina works at a museum in the Bay Area. I work for a museum here in LA. But I think we all have different relationships to thinking about and coming to our deep interest in creating really critical and inventive and new queer histories, and thinking critically about what it means to function within institutions primarily of learning or academia, but also public facing institutions. And want to see more fuller and richer queer narratives at the forefront, and how to kind of navigate that within these structures.

([32:01](#)):

These structures are inherently imperfect, if not also exploitative or terrible, or just really troubling or problematic depending on where you are and what your job is and what kind of institution you're working in. Culture institutions are no different. So that's where I think my deep, deep love for Chris's project is. It's about imagining and speculating and manifesting a more rigorous, inclusive, fun, critical, complicated history, but then also finding ways to navigate through the present and the conditions that we have to function within. So I think Chris's MOTH is the best way to have your cake and eat it too in some regards.

Babette ([32:49](#)):

Totally. As someone who's like, I'm a PhD student, and it does seem like the best of both worlds to be able to choose how you want to engage with these institutions rather than having to be within them and figuring all that fun stuff out.

Chris ([33:10](#)):

Yes. This project attracts a lot of disgruntled academics and cultural workers. Because yeah, I mean, disillusioned thinking. We go into on these paths thinking that we could do all this great creative work, and you run up against all these limits of the institution.

Babette ([33:35](#)):

Totally. And you can just do it outside of it, which is what you did.

Chris ([33:41](#)):

Exactly. I mean, the project exists within institutions. I'm invited to project to museums and some galleries like the One, and it's also a way to extend opportunities to other artists, trans artists and writers. And so it was a way to kind of leverage the opportunities that I was getting for this project that appeared at kind of a perfect time in the world, because institutions are all of a sudden, we need a trans project. We need a trans in our museum. So rather than fully accept that as mission accomplished or the end goal being included, thinking critically about what that inclusion means.

Ally ([34:31](#)):

Yeah, totally. It seems like you got to really take your super power of expertise of operating within these worlds and then have a fun playground to just really do the work that you've been wanting to do. That's so cool.

Chris ([34:44](#)):

Yeah, thank you.

Ally ([34:45](#)):

Was it hard to pare it down to 99 items? Or it kind of sounded like you were looking for more than what you had originally. But yeah, you're shaking your head. It was hard to pare it down.

David ([35:01](#)):

Chris, you should explain why the 99 too, and then how we got there.

Chris ([35:06](#)):

Yes. 99, so the book itself, *Trans History in 99 Objects*, is a take on the Smithsonian's history of America and 101 objects, which is like a one ups men gesture on the British Museum's history of the world in 100 objects. A lot of what *MOTHA* does is mimicking what other institutions do, and so engaging with an imaginary collection like that doesn't exist. I wanted to create this book and 99 signals like an incompleteness. Knowing that doing this project is important, doing this work and this kind of bringing out, pulling out of history is very important, but also it's a fraught project within itself. It'll never be complete. And also to create a cohesive trans narrative is counter to the expansive fluidness of this history in general, and pointing to the stakes that one always has in history. Looking from the present back, there's always these biases and limits to that. So the 99 signals all of that.

Babette ([36:25](#)):

Can you give us one or two more objects? I just want to really paint out a picture for listeners. Maybe one or two objects that you really like or that come to mind for you.

Chris ([36:36](#)):

Just to talk about how it's organized, the book, we have nine different sections. And so that was a kind of difficult feat and organizing objects in different sections, whereas they could have been in many different sections of the book. But it starts with refusal, then transformation, hyper visible, sensation, deities, discovery, restage, traces, and spaces are the nine different sections.

Babette ([37:10](#)):

That's so cool.

David ([37:12](#)):

And each of those sections kind of weaves together different artist projects, historical objects, like a hat or even a document or a magazine. And then, as Chris already alluded to before, some of these things are drawings because the object no longer exists, or we didn't in at least one case get the rights to reproduce it. So it really is a weave of all these different types of materials. And one thing I think is also really important about the 99 too is to recognize not all of the included participants would necessarily identify as trans or non-binary or gender non-conforming. One example, Chris and Christina experienced this when they organized the show in Oakland, is they included these blazers that belong to Sylvester,

who of course was an amazing singer and entertainer and gender transgressor, but did not identify as trans or as a drag queen either.

(38:13):

But because of everything that the ways in which Sylvester's performance and music pushed against gender binaries, it made sense for the project. But that also was not without controversy. Chris and Christina recounted this story where they overheard a friend or someone who knew Sylvester speaking out loud in the galleries, like, "Well, why is Sylvester here? They weren't a trans person." So it's really about the MOTH also is meant to also capture this broad spectrum of gender transgression, and especially also because terms that we use today or people identify with today didn't exist in the past, and we can't also impose them onto the past, but we can imagine kinship and connection.

Ally (38:57):

Yeah. Are there a couple more objects that you would love to highlight in this, or?

David (39:03):

One object I think is really beautiful is Tuesday Smiley's banner that recreates this photograph of Silvio Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson and other trans activists from Star, which was a street transvestites action revolution, an organization in 1970s New York. So Tuesday, he was a textile artist, recreates the banner as if it appears in the image showing its shadows through the shadow across the banner with different sequins and stuff. So it's like this really textural, evocative kind of reimagining of a history of this one iconic image that only kind of exists to represent that moment in their action.

Chris (39:49):

Also, an object that is included, which is not quite an object. So we approach that term loosely, is the Brooklyn Liberation March that took place in Brooklyn in June 2020. Just that as a really important moment, a huge response to the killing of George Floyd and in alignment with Black Lives Matter movement. And that as an object, but not quite an object as a really important piece of trans history. Each object is paired with a writer or a text that connects. And so pairing that object, the Brooklyn Liberation March, is a text by Andrea Jenkins, a black trans woman in Minneapolis who reflects on this moment as the city council woman of the district that included the area where George Floyd was murdered and saw a lot of huge protests and moments of uprisings. So her reflecting on that moment in Brooklyn from her place in Minneapolis.

Babette (41:06):

Oh, that's so cool. Then you kind of get to situate these objects within certain contexts. That's awesome. That's so cool.

Chris (41:18):

Yeah. It was fun and difficult trying to find writers and pair them perfectly with the objects in the book.

Ally (41:28):

Yeah, totally. 99.

Chris ([41:30](#)):

It was a lot of writing.

Ally ([41:30](#)):

A lot.

Babette ([41:33](#)):

Well, it also makes me think of in an actual, well, no, I don't want to say actual. In a physical museum, because that's the point. This museum is actual, but there's the text or whatever the exhibition text on the side of it that contextualizes it. But I find that it's often so fraught. It's like, who's our audience? Who is this for? Why are we writing it? And so I can imagine in a similar way, it's like, well, who's going to speak on these objects? Who can even say anything about these things? You know what I mean? So I can imagine that could be difficult, but still so cool.

Chris ([42:08](#)):

That was the challenge with the Oakland Museum show that MOTHA had the installation in, which was the conventions for the wall texts were geared towards school-aged children, which is wonderful, but that's such a tight parameter.

Ally ([42:25](#)):

Totally. Wow, yeah.

Babette ([42:30](#)):

It's so tough. I am from Oakland, so Oakland Museum is my museum. I love it. It's so cool. But a couple years ago, I did this speculative kind of podcast about this black curator in the Bay Area in the sixties and seventies. Her name is E.J Montgomery. She's still alive, but there's just a letter where she is just so mad with the Oakland Museum because she's like, "Y'all fucking suck. You exclude black artists," all this stuff. Because I think she was fired or something. I can't quite remember the details, but it's like I'm like, oh, it's such a cool, progressive museum, yada, yada, yada, whatever that means. I love the Oakland Museum.

([43:11](#)):

And then still, the point of the podcast was these institutions have been giving marginalized people problems for now generations and decades and all of this stuff. So it's like MOTHA is such an amazing experiment. The question for the podcast was, oh my God, what was it? What are your most ideal black art spaces outside of museums? And so I feel like similarly, MOTHA is such a cool experiment of what our ideal museum space look like, and maybe it's something that doesn't have walls, because when those walls go up, so does the exclusion. This is what it seems like the vibe is.

Ally ([43:53](#)):

Oh, totally. I love how it's existing kind of in thought and imagination and fantasy. Do you see a physical show for it or a lecture series, or do you see something like that coming in the future for this 99 Objects book?

Chris ([44:14](#)):

Well, we're going to do a bunch of book launches upcoming, probably because the book itself is coming out around holiday season, which is [inaudible 00:44:26] events. A lot of them will take place early next year.

Ally ([44:30](#)):

Oh, cool.

Chris ([44:31](#)):

Yeah. So an event in LA, one in the Bay Area, one in New York.

David ([44:39](#)):

Anyone listening who would like to host events, we're ready.

Chris ([44:46](#)):

Wait, that's perfect. I'm sure.

Babette ([44:47](#)):

Yeah. I have one last question that maybe we'll bring in some, we're talking about in some ways queer objects. And Chris, I'm thinking about your practice of video work. Is there a queer or trans object that, and I'm thinking about your work specifically, Chris, and something that is speculative. You really have to not suspend disbelief, but really hope that something that you don't see yet is possible. And I guess I wonder if there's an object or a piece of media that gives you that feeling that something is possible or that maybe unlocked something for you when you were younger?

Chris ([45:33](#)):

Oh my God, that's such a big question.

Babette ([45:33](#)):

Yeah, I know. Well, I just am, for me, it's like Cheetah girls or something. Is there a movie or something that was this like, wow, this is really giving me some feelings about what the world could be?

Chris ([45:42](#)):

Well, okay, this is really dystopian and trashy.

Babette ([45:46](#)):

Perfect, perfect, perfect.

Chris ([45:48](#)):

When I was growing up, I went to video stores, and that was one of my ways to access culture. And I ran across a John Waters movie called Desperate Living, and Desperate Living is so trashy, but there existed this world that was parallel to the regular world called Mortville, where people have to go because

they're running from the law and have to live outside society. And it's run by a terrible queen who abuses her power. But it was like this queer world that I saw, and my first image of trans masculine person whose gender I really identified with, and they go and get a "sex change" from the Johns Hopkins Gender Clinic in, it was this time where there's politics roped into the movie. Where this is a time where those services were first available or more widely available.

[\(46:50\)](#):

And yeah, [inaudible 00:46:52] was this, and Mortville was this dystopian fantasy that I wanted. The bars were super fun and trashy and raucous and also terrible, but also just the practice of John Waters filmmaking at that time was really inspiring to me. You can make something out of nothing with all your friends larger community. And that was forever inspiring to me, and obviously still is inspiring to me.

Ally [\(47:25\)](#):

Oh, totally. That's definitely what I thought of first with seeing your video work and Harry Dodge or this kind of Bay Area. I'm making this with my friends. Wow, that's really cool.

Babette [\(47:38\)](#):

I looked up the poster and it says a true piece of trash art. Feels like it encompasses it.

Chris [\(47:44\)](#):

It's great.

Babette [\(47:44\)](#):

I've never seen it before, so I'm excited to watch it.

Chris [\(47:48\)](#):

It's terrible. It's not terrible, but it would not be made.

Ally [\(47:55\)](#):

It's incredible. It should be illegal.

Chris [\(47:56\)](#):

Yeah, there's no attempt at positive representation. Literally, the person who gets a sex change gets a dick, and then the partner doesn't like it, and they cut it off and throw it out the window and the dog eats it. But the humor in that, I identified with so much.

Ally [\(48:20\)](#):

Yeah, totally.

Babette [\(48:21\)](#):

How long has the book specifically been in, I guess, production maybe is a good question?

Chris [\(48:26\)](#):

How long have we been working on this, David?

David ([48:27](#)):

I mean, it feels like a good three years now, right?

Babette ([48:33](#)):

Wow.

David ([48:33](#)):

You've been working on it longer because you and Christina were working on it before I joined, but it was really an early pandemic thing, wasn't it?

Chris ([48:43](#)):

Yeah. I don't think it really coalesced as us three as a functional working group until the summer of 2020.

Babette ([48:53](#)):

Wow.

Chris ([48:56](#)):

I don't know, two to three years. And it's been quite a road. It's a lot of work.

Babette ([49:02](#)):

I'm sure.

David ([49:04](#)):

And the idea for the book has been embedded with MATHA kind of since the early days. Right, Chris?

Chris ([49:11](#)):

Yeah.

David ([49:12](#)):

So it's been a long time coming. And was it last month was the 10-year anniversary of MOTHA?

Chris ([49:22](#)):

Yeah. Well, June 2023 is MOTHA's 10th anniversary, and I made a new 10th anniversary poster that will be out in the world soon. There it is.

Ally ([49:36](#)):

Oh, cool.

Chris ([49:38](#)):

All new figures. Many, many more. Yeah. Takes a similar humorous, expansive approach to trans figures in hirstory.

Ally ([49:47](#)):

Wow. Cool.

Babette ([49:51](#)):

Awesome. Amazing.

Ally ([49:53](#)):

Yeah. Thank you so much.

Babette ([49:55](#)):

Thank you. It's so exciting.

Chris ([49:57](#)):

Thank you.

Ally ([49:57](#)):

Yeah, I'm really, really excited about this project, so thank you so much for giving us these little previews and behind-the-scenes explanations.

Chris ([50:06](#)):

Thanks for having us. This is so nice.

Ally ([50:09](#)):

David, do you have anything you want to plug, ways to reach you or anything like that?

David ([50:14](#)):

I'm also working on a show that opens at the Vincent Price Art Museum on October 21st, and it's a retrospective of a queer Chicano artist named Teddy Sandoval, and it's a co-curator with a scholar I've worked with before, Cian Dean Chavoya. This show is called Teddy Sandoval and the Butch Gardens School of Art. And it has a lot of resonance in some ways with MOTH in that Teddy created a fictitious imagined school of gay artists in the 1970s and distributed his own artwork as the Butch Gardens School of Art, even though it was just him. So clearly there's some deep-rooted needs that I have about speculative imagined queer futures in the past. So that's another one that I hope people can check out.

Ally ([51:02](#)):

Yeah, totally. Well, thank you so much to both of you.

Babette ([51:07](#)):

Yeah, thank you.

David ([51:08](#)):

Thank you so much. Thank you.

Babette ([51:14](#)):

I feel like Chris is such a good model for this practice of imagining. Imagining and speculating about something that doesn't exist yet and bringing it into fruition through experimentation. And yeah, I'm just so inspired by the fact that he built this thing on his own without kind of worrying about institution and things like that. It's so inspiring.

Ally ([51:41](#)):

Yes. Yeah. I think one of the strengths that I love about him is he's so playful. A lot of his work, a lot of his video work is really funny. And making this kind of speculative museum, to me, it kind of feels like when Twitter accidentally gave a bunch of people who weren't the company's check marks and people were pretending to be craft, or you know what I mean? There's kind of this online jokester ethos in being like, "No, I'm just going to make a thing and put all of this professional formatting around it and make it look real." But without the slapstick jokey side of it. It's like, no, this literally should exist and I'm going to make it.

Babette ([52:27](#)):

And because of that, it literally does. It is real, and it does exist. Just because it's not a physical institution. It's so cool. I feel like I feel kind of jealous of him because I am someone who's been stuck in, I mean, not stuck. Okay. I think-

Ally ([52:44](#)):

Yeah, let's get into this. I was going to say, what's your relationship to institutions?

Babette ([52:49](#)):

Well, I was going to say stuck, but then I think it's also a very real privilege to be the kind of spaces that I've been in. But essentially, I've been in predominately white institutions since I was literally five years old. And right now I'm a PhD student at [inaudible 00:53:05] University. And so because of that, I feel like I'm always just trying to fight my way out of these spaces. That's my identity as someone who... My friends all know me as someone who hates it here, I never go to class. I don't care. That's my identity. Kind of like a slacker ish identity where I'm just like, I hate this place. I'm not going to become of it kind of. And I'm basically just always dreaming of my ideal space outside these institutions. So a couple years ago, I did a podcast with SF MoMA, basically fantasizing about ideal black artistic spaces outside of museums.

([53:42](#)):

But what's so ironic about that is that it's an anti-museum podcast at a museum. And so I have been thinking about-

Ally ([53:43](#)):

Paid for.

Babette ([53:53](#)):

Yeah, I got paid by SF MoMA to make this thing that's bringing the very institution into question, which it has got me thinking. Who would I be without these institutions? Would I actually be okay without this institutional validation? I think it's very easy to sit here and be like, "Oh, I hate it. It's horrible." But actually, who am I without these spaces? And could I live and be validated and secure in my work without getting grants or getting things like that?

Ally ([54:22](#)):

Cold hard cash. The card hold cash-

Babette ([54:24](#)):

The card hold cash.

Ally ([54:27](#)):

...is not nothing. And it's so interesting that these institutions have so much money and can make or break. It's really cool that they spent that money on a museum critical podcast. Yeah, I think that that's very cool. And I think that this book was also, Chris was able to get institutional backing for it, right?

Babette ([54:51](#)):

Totally. I think it was a creative capital fund award project, which is amazing and sick. And it's like, this stuff is funding people's ability to live. And then I'm also like, oh, what would it look like to make things outside of this? I don't know, outside of these spaces, it feels so hard.

Ally ([55:13](#)):

Yeah. Well, I mean, is speculative institution making the answer? It's like it has all the positives of an institution, but it doesn't have any employees and it doesn't have any donors. So it's like [inaudible 00:55:29] ideal institution.

Babette ([55:30](#)):

You can't exploit employees if you don't have them.

Ally ([55:34](#)):

If you don't actually exist.

Babette ([55:37](#)):

If they don't exist, you can't exploit them. Maybe that's the move. Ally, do you feel like you have this relationship with institutional validation and comedy and stuff like that? But I feel like your stuff is so much more DIY that it's not quite as, I don't know. Tell me about it.

Ally ([55:55](#)):

Totally. Yeah, I would say so too. I think a lot of the stuff that I found myself in is a little bit more outside of institutions, although there's still kind of a hierarchy, and it does feel really good when an institution reaches out to you and is like, "You. We had over 500 applicants and we chose you." There is something

evil about getting the validation of institutional approval. So I think that's definitely not something I've worked out of my own psyche. I'm like, "Yes, amazon.com picked me."

Babette ([56:37](#)):

Totally. Why wouldn't you feel that way? It makes sense. Gender Spiral is an original podcast from Audiation. This episode was mixed by Matt Noble, and music is composed by Chanel Critchlow with art by Joey Han, and graphics by Honey Hodges. The show is executive produced by Ireland Meacham, myself, Babette Thomas, and my co-host, Ally Beardsley, and Sandy Smollins. With additional story editing by me.

Ally ([57:12](#)):

Thank you to our guests Chris Vargas and David Frantz. Their book *Trans Hirstory in 99 Objects* comes out later this fall. You'll find a link to pre-order it in the show notes. If you like the show, please head over to patreon.com/genderspiralpodcast to support us.

Babette ([57:28](#)):

You can also check us out at genderspiralpod.com where you'll find a link to leave us a voicemail to ask us questions, tell us who you want to hear from and what you want to hear about on the show.

Ally ([57:39](#)):

And follow us on Instagram. It's [@genderspiral](https://www.instagram.com/genderspiral). We have a couple more episodes left this season, so subscribe wherever you get your podcasts to stay tuned. And tune in next week to Gender Spiral.

Babette ([57:49](#)):

Where you never have to spiral alone. Exactly.

Ally ([57:59](#)):

That's Clem Solo.

Babette ([58:01](#)):

Aw.

Speaker 5 ([58:01](#)):

Audiation.