

# Chris Vargas's *Consciousness Razing*

## *From Forgetting to Futurity*

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**Abstract** Chris Vargas's exhibition *Consciousness Razing: The Stonewall Re-Memorialization Project* commemorates the fiftieth anniversary of the Stonewall rebellion by smashing pervasive mythologies that erase transgender people from most retellings of the uprising and showcasing multiple artists' proposals for monuments that at least address if not remedy this absence. Stories of gay and lesbian civil rights victories that came out of Stonewall—like the dissolution of sodomy laws, the creation of employment nondiscrimination protections, and gay marriage—all tend to trace back to the rebellion, while the critical role that transgender women, many of color, played in these advances has slipped deep into unseen corners of historical memory. This forgetting is both a symptom and cause of the continued erasure of transgender people, especially transgender women of color, from contemporary LGBT activism, community, and discourse. As a gesture of amelioration, this monument implores us to reconstruct memories of Stonewall as a way of not merely supporting celebrating contemporary trans existence but ultimately shaping trans futurity.

**Keywords** Marsha P. Johnson, Silvia Rivera, *Museum of Transgender Hirstory and Art*, *Consciousness Razing*, trans futurity

Chris Vargas's exhibition *Consciousness Razing: The Stonewall Re-Memorialization Project* was on view at the New Museum in New York from September 26, 2018, to February 3, 2019. This collaborative work commemorates the fiftieth anniversary of the Stonewall rebellion by smashing pervasive mythologies that erase transgender people from most retellings of the uprising and showcasing multiple artists' proposals for monuments that at least address if not remedy this absence. On June 28, 1969, a riot erupted at the Stonewall Inn in response to one of the countless police raids of the popular gay bar in New York's Greenwich Village. This story is often heralded as the start of the gay liberation movement in the United States. Stories of gay and lesbian civil rights victories like the dissolution of sodomy laws, the creation of employment nondiscrimination protections, and gay marriage all tend to trace back to the rebellion, while the critical role that transgender women, many of color, played in these advances has slipped deep into unseen corners of historical memory.

The fiery speeches that Sylvia Rivera gave in the days, weeks, and years following the rebellion and Marsha P. Johnson's community leadership and activism amid the daily struggle that she and her fellow trans people faced in that era have been all but forgotten within dominant historical narratives. This forgetting is both a symptom and cause of the continued erasure of transgender people, especially transgender women of color, from contemporary LGBT activism, community, and discourse. As a gesture of amelioration, this monument implores us to reconstruct memories of Stonewall as a way of not merely supporting and celebrating contemporary trans existence but ultimately shaping trans futurity.

The stories of trans people from that night have been lost through both historical habits of ignoring their voices as well as the pervasive silence that came with the deaths of people who were there—deaths from AIDS, homicide, suicide, or, for the lucky ones, the mere passing of time. The unreliability of memory for those who have survived is yet another impediment to locating a cohesive truth of transgender centrality to the legacy of Stonewall. After all, even if there were enough people around to recount their personal experiences of the night, these recollections would surely be incomplete and contradict each other. Recent creative projects like Tourmaline and Sasha Wortzel's film *Happy Birthday, Marsha!* and Vargas's *Consciousness Razing* grapple with the reality that the truth of the Stonewall rebellion is hard to find in ways that suggest what might be the beginning of an artistic tradition of activating the power that imagination and inventive retellings have to readdress this history. *Happy Birthday, Marsha!* is a film shot in 2015 that imagines the life of Marsha P. Johnson in the hours before the rebellion in order to retell the story of Stonewall from a trans perspective and to centralize sidelined transgender leaders. This film incorporates historical footage with dramatic performances of both storied and imagined events that resist oppressive forgetting of the past within the creative remembering that trans futurity depends on. Vargas continues this creative remembering through *Consciousness Razing*, which is just the most recent installment of his larger project called the *Museum of Transgender Hirstory and Art (MOTHA)*.

*MOTHA* is an imaginary museum without a permanent site or collection. This fictional anti-institution is designed to bring together a visual history of transgender culture while critiquing institutional forces that keep transgender people invisible. Vargas uses *MOTHA* as a platform for an exhibition series he calls *Transgender Hirstory in 99 Objects*, which was modeled after the books *History of America in 101 Objects* and *A History of the World in 100 Objects* published by the Smithsonian Institution and the British Museum, respectively. Each iteration of Vargas's *99 Objects* is composed of a changing set of objects, many of which are imbued with fictional retellings of major events in transgender history—such as a shot glass that stands in for the one that some stories say

Johnson threw against a mirror at the Stonewall Inn, igniting the rebellion. A shot glass like this one appears in *Consciousness Razing* along with other objects that also activate the history of trans participation in the Stonewall uprising: among them are a stiletto-heeled shoe that conjures tales of trans women using shoes like these to defend themselves against police attacks and a replica of dog feces that represents the excrement that legend describes as having been hurled at police as they arrested employees and patrons of the Stonewall Inn that night.

However, these objects are not the focus of *Consciousness Razing*. In this manifestation of *MOTHA*, excerpts from *99 Objects* take a back seat to a large white replica of Christopher Park that fills most of the gallery space. The real Christopher Park is located just across the street from the Stonewall Inn, and on the tenth anniversary of the rebellion in 1979, sculptor George Segal was commissioned to create the first monument to the event (GLBTQ, n.d.). Segal's sculpture, *Gay Liberation*, consisted of two couples—one gay, one lesbian—and the natural brown color of its bronze material was covered over by a coat of stark white lacquer. The trans liberators who are said to have sparked the uprising at Stonewall were nowhere to be found in Segal's monument, effectively erasing them from this event while also literally whitewashing its history. The erasure of trans women and people of color that this monument enacts has long been the target of ire. Johnson herself noted the absence of people like her when the sculpture was finally installed in Christopher Park in 1992 by asking, "How many people have died for these two little statues to be put in the park to recognize gay people?" (Kasino 2012). On its surface, Johnson's question implores the acceptance of all people equally, but its subtext marks the persistent exclusion of transgender people from the commemoration of histories of gay liberation. Vargas's model of Christopher Park functions as a stage on which to reimagine a monument that does not collapse the history of Stonewall into an exclusionary and singularly monolithic object. The artists that Vargas invited to use this stage do so in ways that don't just place transgender people back into a fixed historical apparatus; rather, these artists activate the slippery relationships between abstraction and legibility, domesticity and public habitation, past stories and present experiences.

Chris Bogia's *A Sculpture for June 28, 1969* resists the clean and palatable representation of Stonewall that Segal's sculpture puts forth. This proposed monument is a full-scale version of the facade of the Stonewall Inn that has been tipped on its side as a signifier of the violence and upheaval that took place that night. Bogia has replaced the original brick front with wood paneling to highlight the emblems of struggle that fill the openings at the inn's door and windows. Disembodied arms delicately yet mischievously grasp at objects like teardrops, hearts, heels, bricks, and cocks that appear to have tumbled into these empty



**Figure 1.** Devin N. Morris, *A Seat for Sitting* (2018). Proposal sketch printed in exhibition takeaway material.

holes. The precarious balance that these objects hold within these frames reflects the vulnerability of queer and trans lives that night (and of course over countless nights before and after). The broken string of pearls that weaves through these objects signals the trauma of the evening while also presenting a persistent drive to keep fighting, day after day, pearl after pearl.

Similar to Bogia's sculpture, Devin M. Morris's *A Seat for Sitting* series doesn't replace Segal's cold, white gay and lesbian bodies with transgender versions of the same (fig. 1). More inventively, Morris creates sites where living, breathing trans people can exist and spaces where those who have passed can be remembered. For example, the luxury-inspired chaise longue that Morris designed for Johnson recalls her dreams of marrying a gay billionaire and the generosity of her spirit that she demonstrated by regularly giving away her last dollar to anyone who needed it. This proposed chair also fits two people comfortably, which renders this a space to revel in the friendships, sexual desires, and romances between queer and trans people that are so often foreclosed by the physical, emotional, and systemic violence that runs throughout trans history and into the present. Because Johnson—like so many of her contemporary trans sisters and those who have come after her—experienced homelessness and difficulty securing stable housing, the seat is long enough to offer a place to sleep for the night. Finally, this monument to Johnson also features a drop box where

visitors are encouraged to write notes to her and other trans women of color who have passed away and to record any information they might have to add to the transgender history of Stonewall.

While Morris's proposal offers sites of respite in the name of some of the most well-known trans women of color, Keijaun Thomas's proposed monument provides a raft for "#girlslikeus" to mount, not to float away from the hostility and violence that looms large in their lives but to remain in place and help each other "stay afloat" amid stormy seas (Vargas 2018). This is a monument to kinship and survival that Thomas described as "rafts on the front line" that carve "we are here!" "into the bark of herstory" (Vargas 2018). The wood beneath the bark becomes five wooden logs linked together by strings of hair beads that symbolize black sisterhood and produce a cohesive unit that keeps all of them afloat.

Another vessel within this collection of potential monuments is Sharon Hayes's *Stonewall Is Not Here Yet*. This proposal transforms a 1969 Bonneville station wagon into a mobile monument rigged with an announcement system that blasts poignant speeches from trans history as well as provocations by contemporary activists at each stop it makes around the United States. The words that blare from this station wagon are meant to point out just how "violently mis-written" the history of Stonewall has thus far been (Vargas 2018). Hayes stipulates that the first of these readings will always be a transcript of the speech that Silvia Rivera, Johnson's friend and fellow trans Stonewall pioneer, gave when she was invited to address the group Latino Gay Men of New York (LGMNY) in 2001. In this speech Rivera chastised her hosts for abandoning the trans women who helped them in the very beginning of their civil rights fight by saying: "You have acquired your liberation, your freedom from that night. Myself, I got shit, just like I had back then" (Vargas 2018). In Hayes's monument, Rivera's words replace Segal's cold figures with searing language that calls out contemporary gay and lesbian groups for their complicity in trans erasure.

The title of Hayes's monument references José Esteban Muñoz's already classic tome of queer temporality, *Cruising Utopia: The There and Then of Queer Futurity* (2009), which frames the relativity and aspirational nature of queerness as continually arriving and therefore never fully here. Because of the historical forgetting that has pushed trans people out of common Stonewall narratives and the continuously transforming apparatuses of racial, classed, gendered, and sexual oppression, the liberation that Stonewall has come to symbolize will not ever fully be here. Though Hayes is the only artist in this exhibition to explicitly cite Muñoz's idea, each of the proposals evokes it through their collective yet-to-be-seen-ness. Each piece is about leaving space for a future that is not yet knowable, and each exists as a proposal that will never be tarnished by the limitations of becoming fully realized public art. To pull these works out of the realm of

proposal threatens to fix them in space and time and to harden them in the face of a changing future. The power of their propositional existence is their collective declaration that, though this future is unknown, it did not emerge out of nowhere. Vargas's exhibition asserts that, though the future of transgender liberation is not yet knowable, it arrives and keeps arriving while reminding us that we can move toward it with the freedom to imagine a tailwind of history pushing us along.

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