

I Do?!: A Panel Discussion on Queer Cultural Activism

The following panel discussion was part of the 22nd annual *ImageOut: The Rochester LGBT Film and Video Festival* and its related program, *ImageArt*, a juried exhibition of works by visual artists. *ImageArt*'s exhibition, *I Do?!*, was organized around the theme of marriage equality. Nigel Maister, artistic director of the University of Rochester's International Theatre Program, organized the panel for *ImageArt* in order to facilitate a discussion about the visual arts and activism around this subject. Moderator Jonathan D. Katz is the director of the doctoral program in Visual Studies at the University at Buffalo, and the author of *The Silent Camp: Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg and the Cold War*, forthcoming from the University of Chicago Press, as well as co-curator, with David Ward, of *Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture*, the first queer exhibition ever mounted at a major US museum, which opened at the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery in 2010. Panelist Douglas Crimp is the Fanny Knapp Allen Professor of Art History at the University of Rochester and author of such books as *On the Museum's Ruins* (1993), *Melancholia and Moralism: Essays on AIDS and Queer Politics* (2002), and "Our Kind of Movie": *The Films of Andy Warhol* (2012). Panelist Scott McCarney is an artist recognized internationally for bookworks addressing the intersection of personal identity and societal expectation through found texts and images, which are included in the library collections of the Museum of Modern Art, New York; the Victoria and Albert Museum, London; and the Yale University Arts of the Book collection, among others. Panelists Anne Tischer and Bess Watts describe themselves as "accidental activists," and are well known in Western New York as long-time LGBTQ rights advocates; Tischer, a retired social services worker, and Watts, principal library clerk at Monroe Community College in Rochester, New York, legally wed in Canada in 2006 after twelve years together.

MODERATOR JONATHAN KATZ: To begin, I sent out some queries to the panel and the panel has prepared some answers to those queries. We're going to start with Scott and then move down the line.

SCOTT MCCARNEY: I guess I should start by saying that I am married and I'm an artist, so that sort of qualifies me to be here. On the other hand, I feel I'm more of an art pacifist than an art activist. My activism takes its form, as many people's activism takes form, in the realm of becoming physically involved in collective types

of activity. My own art practice takes place in the studio in more conventional ways, which traditionally are considered a little bit more passive. Perhaps I like the idea of my art being more reflective than pushing forward. That said, my chosen form is the book, and much of my work is in multiples. In some ways it may seem like the most passive of media, especially compared with something like performance or film. In other ways, it is a quiet way of getting the word out there, since it has a one-to-one relationship with an audience.

I equate that process in some ways to the idea of coming out, of being honest—not only with one's self, but with the people in one's life—and building trust. Using forms that are considered more traditional works in a quiet way. The sense of humor that much of my work incorporates is a tool that tempers hot topic issues. I'm thinking of discussions about politics and religion and sexuality around a family dinner table. If we think of culture as a big dining experience—trying to get people together to listen to one another—humor can dissipate some of that edge.

My partner's and my decision to get married took a while; traditional marriage had been an institution of straight culture that seemed purely an exercise in assimilation for someone with a queer identity. The thought of bringing government closer into our lives was not a light or happy one. On the other hand, the activism around gay marriage seemed to emphasize the social contract, possibly giving lesbian and gay couples more of a voice within the broader culture.

JK: Thank you, Scott. So, we will now turn to Anne and Bess.

BESS WATTS: First of all, I asked Anne, why are we part of this panel? We're not highly educated; we really created what we did out of necessity. Several years ago, all I wanted was domestic partner benefits. We started getting involved and that turned into—help me, honey . . .

ANNE TISCHER: Every time a politician said no, we—

BW: We said yes.

AT: We incorporated another level of activism. The first thing we ran into was the problem of our community being in the closet. Our first job was visibility. . . . Our entire activist career over ten years has primarily been about visibility. We have used art as our chief organizing tool, largely because we are not historians, professional artists, or eloquent speakers. Art speaks for itself; it is very simple to convey ideas. If I show you a sign that has a heart with an equal sign on it, you and I have already had a conversation. You know where I'm coming from, you know what I want. Art is the simplest form of communication there is, and it was extremely effective for us.

BW: We also used art as a coalition-building technique. I'm part of the labor movement. If you're going to use protest signs, what better place for using art to build relationships? We provided signs to labor groups as we built awareness for marriage equality with them. You can't expect a group to support your cause if you don't support theirs. We used our talents as a way to build relationships with other organizations such as Metro Justice, the labor community, and the Motts Union Strikers. We never asked for anything in return until it really came down to getting

marriage equality. Everyone on the Rochester Labor Board was supportive of marriage equality because of the relationships we built through our art and our photography. We're part of the labor community because of that.

AT: If you analyze this, what was the need that we had to satisfy? First, we had to change the public narrative of what it meant to be LGBT. We had to change people's hearts and minds. We had to change politicians and legislators. We had to give them the political will to bring marriage to the floor successfully. Art was our chosen mechanism. We used it any way you can possibly imagine. Our wedding in 2004 was performance art.

We were married in public. . . .

It was completely staged before the media arrived, because we wanted the outcome to be the perception that we are the same as any other couple getting married: very ordinary. Getting into the media has been Job One with us, always. If you organize a rally and there are thirty people there, and one hundred cars go by, you've touched 130 people. If you have someone holding a sign that says, "It's about love," and the Associated Press takes a picture of it—we have seen that photograph in fourteen different publications across the country and around the world—then you have touched many thousands. That has been our activism; as we needed things, we would hold events, and if we needed educational pieces, we would create images like that "Congratulations on your marriage!" poster. Need drove our growth. Need drove our activism.

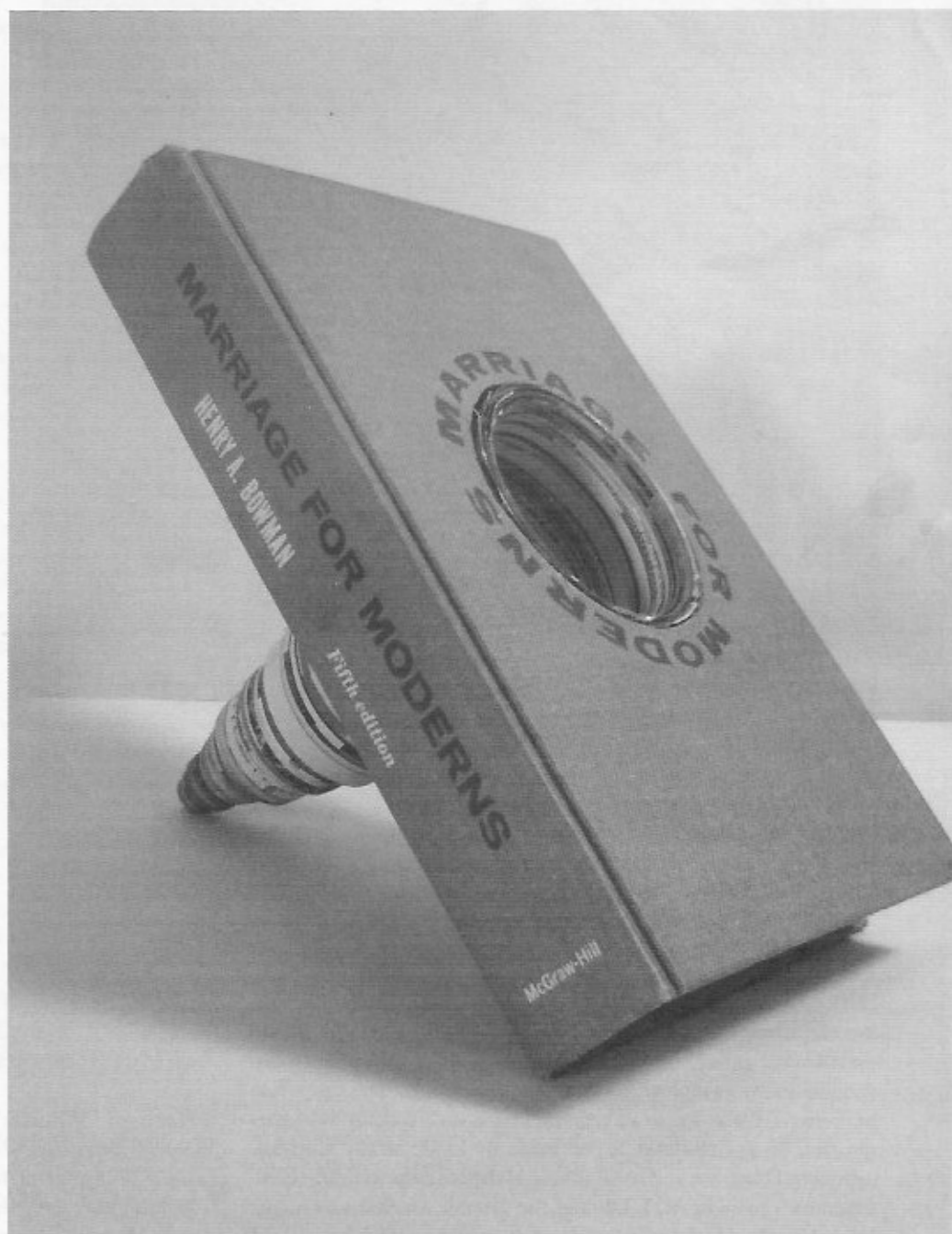
BW: It's important to note that we are married. We believe in the institution of marriage. We believe it is the foundation of society. It's a currency that society recognizes. We also believe that, because of marriage, the psychological impact for the gay community is that there's not so much internalized homophobia now. We're not quite one hundred percent equal—but we're getting there. Marriage is one part of that.

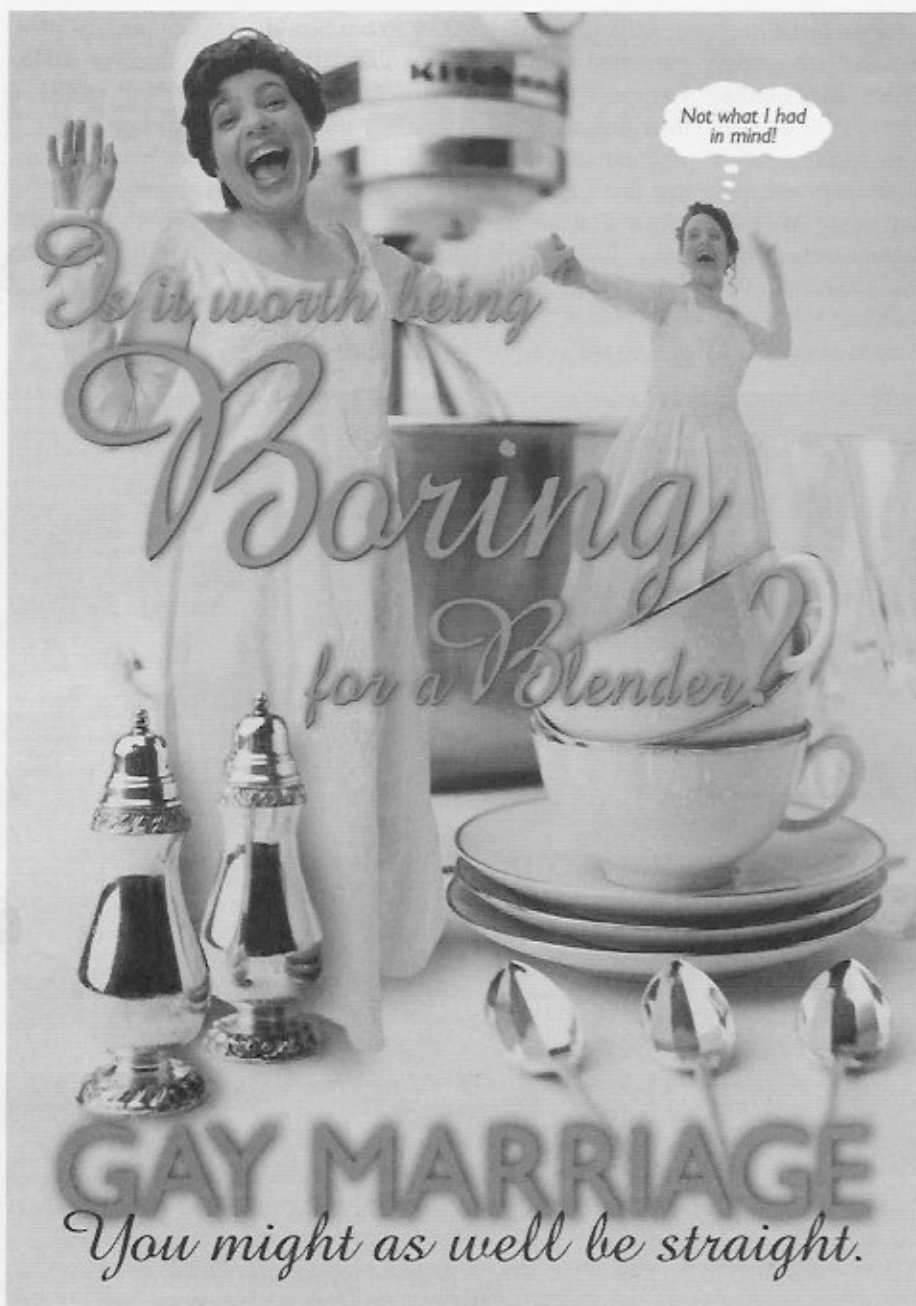
JK: Lovely; thank you. Douglas?

DOUGLAS CRIMP: I guess I'm destined, with ImageOut, to be a dissident voice, as was the case ten years ago when I was invited to respond to *The Other Side*

of AIDS [2004, directed by Robin Scovill], a "documentary" that purported to make the case that HIV is not the cause of AIDS. I equated the filmmakers with Holocaust deniers and said that their arguments were therefore unworthy of discussion. What I was unprepared for was that HIV deniers are something of a cult and that a group of them from Toronto, knowing that I would be speaking about the film, would come to Rochester to shout me down. It was a demoralizing experience, to say the least.

Marriage for Moderns (2013) by Scott McCarney; courtesy the artist





Gay Marriage: You Might As Well Be Straight (1997) by Dyke Action Machine; from the artists' website: http://www.dykeactionmachine.com/steal_this/stealthis.html

Because I'm an academic, I have written my remarks for this evening. ImageArt's exhibition is titled "*I Do*, question mark, exclamation point"—but the question mark gets pretty short shrift in the work shown. It's not what I expected. The first work of queer art that I can remember that dealt explicitly with the question of gay marriage is one made by Dyke Action Machine (acronym DAM; the reference to dental dams attests to this lesbian collective's roots in ACT UP and the graphic art that was made by and for the AIDS activist movement, including work by, among

many others, Victor Mendiola, Donald Moffett, Gran Fury, and Fierce Pussy). DAM's poster dates from 1997, when the gay marriage movement was gaining steam. DAM's ability to be so flippantly dismissive of the gay marriage question says something about how far we've come. But is this progress? Are other questions foreclosed when we pose the question simply as "Gay marriage: pro or con?" One question that is certainly foreclosed by posing the question in this way was foundational for the women's and gay and lesbian liberation movements: that is, not "Gay marriage: pro or con?" but simply "*Marriage*: pro or con?" Here, for example, is part of what Carl Wittman said about marriage in his gay manifesto of 1970:

Marriage is a prime example of a straight institution fraught with role playing. Traditional marriage is a rotten, oppressive institution. . . . Gay marriages will have the same problems as straight ones except in burlesque. . . . People want to get married for lots of good reasons, although marriage won't often meet those needs or desires. We're all looking for security, a flow of love, and a feeling of belonging and being needed.

These needs can be met through a number of social relationships and living situations. Things we want to get away from are: 1) exclusiveness, propriety attitudes towards each other, a mutual pact against the rest of the world; 2) promises about the future, which we have no right to make and which prevent us from, or make us feel guilty about, growing. . . .

We have to define for ourselves a new pluralistic role-free social structure. . . . It must contain both the freedom and physical space for people to live alone, live

together for a while, live together for a long time, either as couples or in larger numbers; and the ability to flow easily from one of these states to another as our needs change.¹

Some of Wittman's language seems very much of its historical moment—the obsession with assigned roles, for example. But some of his ideas are still entirely pertinent.

Around the time that DAM made their anti-gay-marriage poster, Michael Warner published his important book *The*

Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life (1999), with its carefully argued chapter "Beyond Gay Marriage." He, too, argued that the question "Gay marriage: pro or con?" had, as one result, amnesia about the feminist critique of marriage and about earlier queer activism, which, he wrote, "rested on these principles":

- It called attention to the mythology by which marriage is idealized.
- It recognized the diversity of sexual and intimate relations as worthy of respect and protection.
- Indeed, it cultivated unprecedented kinds of commonality, intimacy, and public life. . . .
- It especially resisted the notion that the state should be allowed to accord legitimacy to some kinds of consensual sex but not others, or to confer respectability on some people's sexuality and not others.
- It insisted that much of what was taken to be morality, respectability, or decorum was, in practice, a way of regulating sexual pleasures and relations.
- It taught that any self-esteem worth having must not be purchased by a disavowal of sex; it must include esteem for one's sexual relations and pleasures, no matter how despised by others.
- It made itself alert to the invidiousness of any institution, like marriage, that is designed both to reward those inside it and to discipline those outside it: adulterers, prostitutes, divorcees, the promiscuous, single people, unwed parents, those below the age of consent—in short, all those who become, for the purposes of marriage law, queer. [emphasis added]
- It insisted that any vision of sexual justice begin by considering the unrecognized dignity of these outcasts, the ways of living they represent, and the hierarchies of abjection that make them secondary, invisible, or deviant.²

I was twenty-four years old and living in New York City when the Stonewall rebellion took place. The queer culture that developed in the wake of the women's and gay liberation movements was the culture that formed me. I found my identity and my happiness in its ethos and in the communities that came together around that ethos. Young queers today have little access to the ideas of the movements for liberation, which have been displaced by the all-too-familiar narrative of love, marriage, and living happily ever after.

In 2006, a group of activists, some of them my friends, attempted to widen the scope of discussion about gay marriage. They produced a document called *Beyond Same-Sex Marriage: A New Strategic Vision for All Our Families and Relationships*. They wrote:

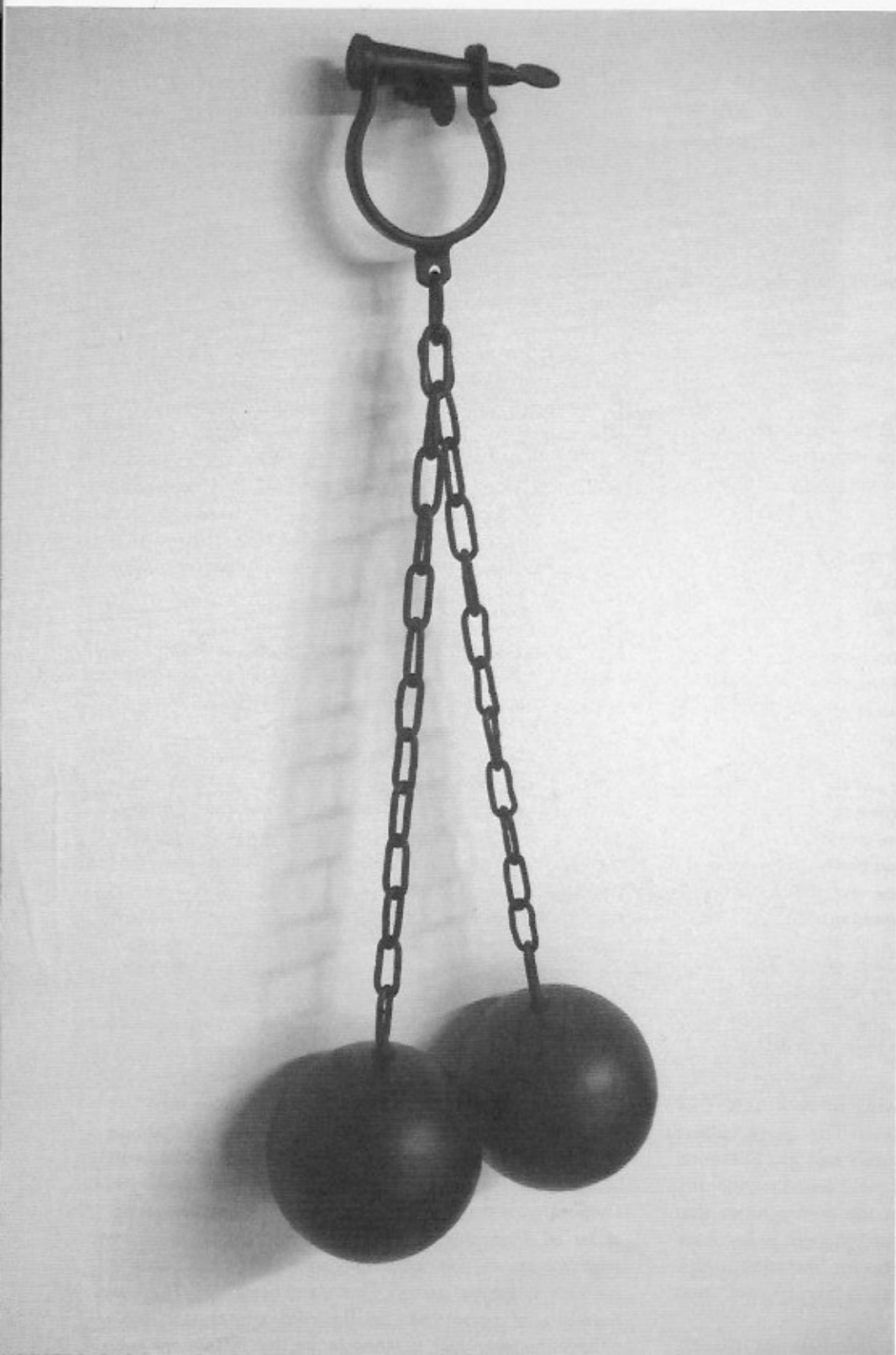
We reflect and honor the diverse ways in which people find and practice love, form relationships, create communities and networks of caring and support, establish households, bring families into being, and build innovative structures to support and sustain community. . . . Marriage is not the only worthy form of family or relationship, and it should not be legally and economically privileged above all others.³

Three friends sent me the draft document and asked me to become one of its signatories when it was released to the public. I refused. In an email to my three friends I wrote:

I'm sure you know that I support an alternative to the hijacking of queer politics by the pro-marriage movement, so of course I support your endeavor. But to me, this is still a "family values" statement. It is explicitly about "families, kinship networks, households, and relationships." It is significant to me that the statement's bullet-point list of possibilities of these households does not include people who live alone—as one way to work against privileging or hierarchizing their multifarious relationships according to "family" or "conjugal" models, however broadly these might be understood.

My friends seemed to think I was arguing for some kind of absolute autonomy and that in all likelihood my position stemmed from my class privilege. So I wrote again, to elaborate:

This is not, for me, a question merely of living alone or of asserting autonomy. Needless to say, I, too, have many relationships with many people. They involve, variously and in varying combinations and degrees, love, care, companionship, sex, dependence, money, intellectual sustenance, consolation, and so forth. I would characterize a great many of them as "committed." But I oppose labeling any one of these relationships as "partner," "family," or "kin." Some of them actually are with members of my biological family. But most aren't, and I make a point, insofar as I can, of not designating any one with a particular nomenclature that would privilege that person above all my other relationships. For legal purposes, I have a health-care proxy, a literary estate trustee, and beneficiaries of a will. Fixing these legal relationships was a difficult task for me, one that still feels unresolved, because my (non-legal) relationships constantly change, and shift in relative importance, and because I often form new ones. My position is that we would all benefit most by separating, as far as is possible, legal rights to and recognition of our relationships and sex lives from such ideologically fraught concepts as spouse, partner, family, and household. The legal questions of parent/child relationships are perhaps more difficult, but even here it seems to me that institutions such as marriage, family, and kinship have often worked against, not for, the realities of these relationships.



Balls and Chain (2013) by Scott McCarney; courtesy the artist

JK: Thank you. So let's get into it, then. Douglas, I want to pose a question, and I think then I'll ask the panel to respond to your remarks. It seems to me that one could object that an underlying assumption of what you have presented is that marriage, as we are now advocating it in the queer community, is to inhabit a structure that's been defined by a dominant heterosexual culture and is somehow rock solid enough that it won't change. Is it not possible that, by virtue of queers being married, we "queer" marriage, and fundamentally engage its structures to make them much more available to contemporary life, and change the way so many straight people have to lie about their own relationships and marriages as a consequence?

DC: Obviously marriage is an institution that changes. Throughout history it has changed drastically. One of the strengths of Warner's book is that he makes this very clear; he provides a synoptic history of the different things marriage has been. For example, a marriage license is a relatively recent phenomenon. Even recognition by the state is a relatively recent phenomenon; before that it was recognized by the church, or simply by the two people marrying each other.

Of course, I think that the institution of marriage will change again with gay people entering it. But my point is that marriage is an *institution*—an institution you are either inside or outside of, and there are some kinds of relations (for example, my own) that it either won't help with or will seek to exclude. I said that for legal purposes I have a health-care proxy, a literary estate executor, and beneficiaries of a will; these are different people. The institution of marriage cannot encompass that range of relationships. It requires essentially that we privilege one relationship above all others.

As Michel Foucault explained a long time ago, the state is invested in reducing the number of possibilities of intimate connections among people, as well as in regulating sex. "Society and the institutions which frame it," he wrote, "have limited the possibility of relationships because a rich relational world would be very complex to manage. We should fight against the impoverishment of the relational fabric."⁴

It's hard to imagine a notion of marriage so capacious as to include, for example, relations between people who pay for sex and those who are paid for sex. Now, you may disapprove of such relationships, but they are very widespread in our society, and they are relegated to an "outside" by marriage and indeed criminalized by the state, as are all kinds of other relationships. Marriage reduces the vast numbers of possible affective relationships to one acceptable one. All others are suspect.

I have a close friend who is married and has a child; his is thus a conventional heterosexual marriage, but he also has two ongoing, long-term sexual relationships with men. For him, they are all precious intimacies. I can't imagine the institution of marriage becoming capacious enough to include such a complex variety of intimacies. I think gay marriage will do what marriage has always done, which is the reason conservative politicians and pundits across the country have jumped on the gay marriage bandwagon—people like David Brooks of the *New York Times*. Brooks celebrated gay marriage in a column titled "Freedom Loses One," in which he praised gay men and lesbians for agreeing to restrict their freedom. His column was—contrary to his intention, but from my point of view—one of the clearest articulations of the reason we should question gay marriage. He wrote, for example:

Whether they understood it or not, the gays and lesbians represented at the [Supreme] Court committed themselves to a certain agenda. They committed themselves to an institution that involves surrendering autonomy. They committed themselves to the idea that these self-restrictions should be reinforced by the state. They committed themselves to the idea that lifestyle choices are not just private affairs but work better when they are embedded in law.⁵

So I don't see marriage changing enough to suit the sense of liberation that provided me with a more experimental and, I believe, egalitarian understanding of intimate connections, which I think needs to be reclaimed for contemporary queer politics.

JK: Strategically speaking, then, you would argue that it is more powerful, in terms of producing social change, to resist marriage entirely than to inhabit that category and elbow it out in all sorts of different ways?

DC: What I would like to revive is a critique of the state's regulation of our intimate relationships. It is surely not for nothing that the state grants what is written on the protest placard sitting on the side of this room: "1,138 federal rights." We should ask ourselves, what is the state's interest in attaching 1,138 rights and obligations to the institution of marriage?

BW: I did want to say that if you want to change the law, we can help you with the signs.

DC: [laughs] I'll come to you.

AT: One of the points that you were making I have to agree with. From the time you're born, the state or society sets up this test: you are a winner if you find someone to love and get married; otherwise you're always second class. So I have probably carried that sort of mentality into marriage in a same-sex couple. For me, though, I need the distilled simplicity of being able to focus on one person and say, "This is my life." Then I can concentrate on other things. I take comfort in the familiarity and in the possible security of knowing that we will be together forever, whether that's delusional or not. So it is, to me, so basic. That is what I wanted from marriage; I think love is our deepest need. It's a universal need. It's recognized and, for me, putting the label on it is kind of important. It does the very things that you find possibly offensive—and, in some ways, I do too. It does assign status.

DC: I think you're absolutely right, and this is certainly one reason that so many people marry. (I'd like to point out that statistically, however, there are as many single adults as there are married ones in this country.) But you said something that I think is really important, which is that we are all born into a society that socializes us to want to find the love of our lives and marry that person. The gay liberation and feminist liberation critiques were not exclusively about the state and its regulations. They were also about discourse. I grew up in a period when there wasn't such a thing as a visible image of a homosexual. It was illegal in films to depict a homosexual openly. I grew up in a little town in North Idaho, which—well, to give you some idea: my former brother-in-law was the best friend in high school of Sarah Palin's father. It wasn't easy to be queer there in the 1950s. I didn't even know what queer was. I had no image for it. I didn't know the word for it, even though I knew that I was attracted to boys and that I was supposed to be attracted to girls. So I'm well aware of how images and discourses shape us, teach us what we're supposed to be, and supposed to want. I learned very well that I should fall in love and marry and live happily ever after. That's why I value so much the fact that I eventually came to maturity with the ethos of the sexual liberation movements. They gave me a whole new perspective on life. Now that perspective is being lost. But throughout the 1970s and into the '80s, queer culture was largely a culture of liberation. Although the dominant narrative about AIDS was that it was the price we paid for our liberated behavior, the AIDS activist movement was quite consciously a movement that learned from and revived gay liberation. It was a fundamentally sex-positive movement, among many other things.

For most of my adult life, there has been an alternative discourse that supported the choices I made. But that discourse is far less available to young people now. If you read the *New York Times*, for example, the narrative is all about marriage, whether it's pages devoted to wedding announcements on Sunday or the Thursday Home section, which usually has a feature about two

ESSAYS & FEATURES

wealthy gay male designers and their trendy country home on Long Island or upstate.

SM: I agree that marriage is fundamentally a conservative institution, although it has been expanding with changes over time, and perhaps this extension to gay marriage will make it a bit more fabulous. But I wonder if it's really just gay people who have a problem with the structure. There are already prenuptial agreements, open marriages, and other augmentations to traditional marriages. There is a quote in one of the [ImageOut festival] films by a guy who was making a point that straight people shouldn't be afraid of us destroying their marriage—they'd better solve their problems by outlawing divorce. The rights granted same-sex couples by a marriage license mean a lot, in that they simplify many legal relationships with different people. That was a major concern for me and my partner.

DC: Yes, of course they do.

SM: They really help with that sort of stuff. So I kind of take the good and . . .

DC: Leave the rest of us out in the cold.

SM: No, no. I don't think so. Though problematic, it comes down to issues like doing taxes.

AT: As activists I believe we hammered *marriage, marriage, marriage* because it was commonly understood, and you had to keep the message narrowed to something that people can wrap their minds around. Studies have been done by the Freedom to Marry Coalition assessing the efficacy of different messaging to sway the public, and it is true today that if you want to sell LGBT equality, you don't just demand "rights" or some kind of generic equality . . . you talk about your family, you talk about love, and you talk about the structures around marriage. So if there is an uptick in the emphasis on marriage, it's because we had a goal to achieve and kept hammering the same nail.

BW: What are the arguments that we always talk about? In marriage, all those rights and benefits that you need are often only needed in a time of crisis when concern for your spouse trumps "fairness." As bad as it is, access to those rights through marriage is the law of the land and my offer still stands to support changing that. It doesn't mean it's the only thing Anne and I are addressing in our community, because now we are being active in the community for GENDA, the Gender Expression Non-Discrimination Act. You can still be fired in twenty-nine states for being gay, and thirty-three for being transgender, including New York. There is still a lot of work to be done and marriage, to me, really was not about marriage at all, but how we feel about ourselves and fit in society. I'll be quite honest: Douglas's position is still a little too radical for me. You know, I'm not an academic, obviously, but I don't see that selling in Peoria.

DC: No, listen. As I said, I grew up in Idaho.

BW: I grew up in Utah. I beat you.

DC: Actually, the only state that is more regressive than Idaho in terms of voting is Oklahoma.

BW: Oklahoma?

DC: Oklahoma, Idaho, and then Mississippi. Your home state is well down the line.

BW: Well, you have Larry Craig.

DC: True. Now, there's an example of how alternative intimacies get punished! One of the things I'd like to emphasize is that marriage allows for a zone of privacy with regard to sex. Outside of marriage there is no such zone of privacy, and the result is that extramarital sex is what is regulated. I was interested to learn in a *New Yorker* profile that Edith Windsor—the woman who brought the case that resulted in the decision to overturn the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA)—is a bawdy lady. She likes to talk about sex, explicit stuff about her and her partner's sex life. They had to get her to shut up about that. Her story had to become one of love, commitment, and self-sacrifice, even though what was actually at issue was the obvious wrong regarding the taxation on her inheritance.

All of the people to whom I will leave my estate will be fully taxed. Marriage won't help me, because I don't have only one beneficiary. I think what we should be fighting for is an uncoupling of rights and obligations from the institution of marriage. I'd like to see us work to unbundle the rights that are bundled together by the institution of marriage in such a way that all people, no matter what their intimate relational lives are, will have access to the same sorts of rights as anyone else.

JK: Let me try something out, because aspects of what you're saying, Douglas, remind me of the way butch family relationships were viewed in the 1970s and '80s and in the heyday of lesbian separatism. There was often the claim, as you well know, that butch family relationships were a kind of constrained model of relationship; that it was actually that these poor women were stupid—one wanted to be a man and one wanted to be a woman. The relationship was therefore consigned to failure. What was lost in that understanding was that these were people who had fundamentally queered that sexist model. They were two women. So my question, then, is whether, by virtue of the fact that queer marriage is for people of the same sex, isn't it inherently the case that we are going to change that institution? I know a couple in San Francisco, to speak to your example, who have "hustler night" once a week. They're married, but their vision of marriage includes spicing up the bedroom with hustler night.

DC: But hustlers are never going to be included in the legal arrangements.

JK: Well, I would dare say that most people don't include hustlers in their legal arrangements.

AT: I don't include mine. [laughter from audience]

DC: Look, I think I already answered your question. I think that marriage will change, but I don't think it will become capacious enough to include complex and newly imagined relationships. One of the great achievements of the gay liberation movement in the '70s was that it rejected not only marriage but also the form of the couple. That left us basically with a kind of *tabula rasa*. This didn't make things easy, but it made them fun. It was a challenge to try to figure out what were the relations between the friends you had sex with and those you didn't, the sex partners you were friends with and those you weren't, your

vanilla sex partners and your kinky sex partners, the person you spent most of your time with, the person you went to the movies with, the guy who was your disco buddy, the guys you had crushes on, the girls you had crushes on, the people you had deep intellectual conversations with, the ones you had superficial gossip conversations with. . . . You were constantly juggling all of these people and changing their places in your relational scheme and trying to figure out how they all fit into your life. And of course the idea of love and marriage persisted. I knew lots of guys who fell hopelessly in love at least once a day.

It wasn't easy, though. Marriage simplifies things. I understand the will toward simplicity, but it clearly doesn't work for everybody. But I believe the more inventive we are and the more open we are, the less judgmental we are toward other people's choices and, therefore, the more potentially democratic is the society we live in.

BW: As an activist, I respond to what you're presenting. Single people should have exactly the same rights as married couples. There's absolutely no reason why a single person shouldn't inherit a lobster license in Maine. This is one of those 1,138 rights that will come to a spouse, a married spouse. The activist in me says that's another movement waiting to happen.

DC: It actually *is* a movement that *did* happen.

AT: Is it moving anymore?

DC: In my writing on AIDS I worked to counter the dominant narrative that arose about gay liberation and AIDS. The narrative goes like this: gay liberation was our adolescence, a time when we were immature and irresponsible. Then AIDS came along and we grew up. We recognized the folly of our youthful ways and became responsible adults. AIDS civilized us. And being civilized, we now want to marry and raise children and be like everyone else.

I just saw a film at ImageOut called *Test* [2013, directed by Chris Mason Johnson]. It is set in San Francisco in 1985, when

the HIV test, or what was then called the HTLV-3 test, first became available. It's about two buddies in a dance company, who have a sisterly but competitive relationship. Unknown to each other, they both decide to take the test, and they both test negative. Until this point they've both been fucking around but have shown no sexual interest in each other—and in their euphoria about having tested negative they decide to have sex together. In their post-coital conversation they resolve to become a monogamous couple in order to stay safe. "This will



Married (2013) by Scott McCarney; courtesy the artist

ESSAYS & FEATURES

be a real test," one says to the other, and the film ends, and we are of course meant to imagine them living happily ever after. It's another version of the narrative: adolescent promiscuity, AIDS, maturity, monogamy.

What is wrong with this narrative? Clearly missing in the film is any sense of a gay community in which these two characters exist. The main character learns of the HIV test from his doctor. But where did most of us learn about the test and have discussions about whether to take it? In the community—in bars and bathhouses and community centers and at activist meetings. The film leaves these things out—leaves out the gay community, even though it's set in San Francisco in 1985! The dominant narrative about AIDS leaves out the fact that there was a strong, caring community in place when AIDS struck—a community strong enough to form the institutions of care that nevertheless represent our "maturity" in this narrative. When people began getting sick, who cared for them?

AT: Your community.

DC: Your straight friends, your gay friends, your community. There was a *community*. We've lost that. That conservative narrative, that phobic narrative about gay liberation, has sadly won the day. Gay liberation has been trivialized and demonized as our undoing.

JK: I have to disagree, Douglas. It seems to me that we also see, for example, the rise of Grindr, as evidence of the fact that maybe promiscuity is taking different forms these days, but, thank you, it's alive and well.

DC: You call Grindr a community? A social space where you interact with others and find out about safe sex?

JK: It's no more or less a community than a bar or a park or a restroom, or any of the other modes by which we met in the old days. It's what you do with the structure, not the structure itself.

DC: It seems to me that by its very nature, there is a kind of privatization involved in going on the internet and seeking somebody else as a one-to-one thing, rather than being in a room full of people who have multiple conversations and potential relations. Bars were not just about sex. I think meeting through internet sites is a fundamentally different situation. I don't think Grindr makes for a community. I don't think it's about talking about HIV status either.

JK: If I can ask one other question, I just want to get to the idea of activist art and ask whether you think that activist art is in some sense defined by the fact that it's working against an enemy. Will there be a moment when activist art for the queer community dissipates and is no longer needed? Will there always be activism? What happens to activism when the traditional measures of social equality are achieved?

SM: I'm really pessimistic that they will all be achieved, certainly not in our lifetime. I think activist art is not necessarily just for queer concerns. Many of us who do activist work in our community are also trying to work with other communities. There are plenty of issues to work on; we're not going to run out any time soon.

We talked a bit about social media, and I'm wondering if it has significantly changed our sense of community, as Douglas

was saying, as it has affected the broader activist movement. I see social media used as an effective tool for the exchange of information, but that's different from physically coming together.

DC: Social media have clearly been shown to be essential to contemporary advocacy and activism. I just got an email today from John Greyson, who you may know is a queer filmmaker who was jailed in Egypt for fifty-one days along with Canadian doctor Tarek Loubani. They were on their way to Gaza. Dr. Loubani had been doing volunteer work in Gaza, and John was going to film him as he worked there. They got caught up in the attack by the military regime on a demonstration in Cairo, during which many people were killed. Dr. Loubani immediately began helping people who were shot, and John was shooting film. They were eventually arrested. As a result, there was a large international protest, on social media, of course, which finally got the Prime Minister of Canada to act to get them released. The petitions included Hollywood movie stars and other well-known people who wouldn't have heard about the situation if it weren't for social media. It's ironic, because the Arab Spring was actually spread by social media as well. Social media clearly have enormous potential for activism. But that is different from their constituting a sense of community.

Scott, I was really struck by your sense that you're not an activist but a pacifist. I too am a pacifist. This suggests to me a question about how art works in relation to social issues. I don't think the political efficacy of artwork is easy to measure. It's not always easy to understand where the politics lie, but I think that the requirement of your work that the spectator engage in a particular kind of intellectual labor is a way to make us think politically. So, I'm all in favor of your pacifism.

SM: Thank you.

DC: I also very much appreciate your work and images, Anne and Bess.

NOTES 1. Carl Wittman, "A Gay Manifesto," in *Out of the Closets: Voices of Gay Liberation*, eds. Karla Jay and Allen Young (New York and London: New York University Press, 1992), 333–34. 2. Michael Warner, *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 88–89. 3. Katherine Acey, et al., "Beyond Same-Sex Marriage: A New Strategic Vision for All Our Families and Relationships," 2006, http://beyondmarriage.org/full_statement.html. 4. Michel Foucault, "The Social Triumph of the Sexual Will," in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow, vol. 1 of *The Essential Works of Michel Foucault* (New York: The New Press, 1997), 158. 5. David Brooks, "Freedom Loses One," *New York Times*, April 1, 2013.

subscribe
online today!

vsw.org/afterimage