Several months ago I was invited to read a poem in a small alcove on the second floor of the gay community center in NYC—along with my girlfriend, Leopoldine, and many others, all of us as live adjunct to the Rainbow Book Fair. A rainbow, I should point out, isn’t really such a good symbol. Such a goodie goodie symbol. Not in Mayan culture anyhow. A rainbow is a dirty bent bunch of colors, a bow. It’s a troublemaker. And even as we entered the building we ran into some of our gay friends who had just read and they were grumbling on their way out. Ugh, really bad. Well too bad cause Leopoldine and I were just opening the door, getting on the elevator all ready to give it our gay best. When you are queer, gay, transgender, lesbian, fag, butch, you are routinely invited “in” to perform your queerness. To be it. Being gay is like joining the rodeo. It’s a vague invitation, though the person inviting you never seems to think so. They think it’s great that you agreed. You wind up wondering awkwardly which part you are willing to send out into the world. It’s a little like dressing your kid. This show invites a similar associative act, which is not so much here about being gay, but in light of the giant civil rights question we are all facing, what will the participating poets and visual artists and pundits and scholars be placing today next to that question? And of course the people in The Air We Breathe aren’t all homosexuals but it is fun to search them on the Internet: is Ann Hamilton gay? She looks gay. If she were alive would Susan Sontag have put something in here? The show is simply asking the question if all these people, if Ann, if Susan, if Eileen, if Leo, if Colter and Bob have the right to publicly announce their love and get answered: You do. You go girl. Here’s a blender. It’s so nebulous, this “gay” state. Have you seen the Tarkovsky film Stalker? In it a very butch-looking man regularly leaves his wife and kids to go to this other, toxic-looking land where he can have thrilling adventures. It’s a gay thing, I believe, to respond to such inner promptings, to go to a place where the wild
things are. It could be a women’s golf tournament, or a sleazy little bar over a bridge on the wrong side of town where reproductions of sad clowns in frames are hanging over by the bar. These wobbly singularities, the journeys to such places, are the shapes homosexuals participate in that begin explaining our oddness to us while it is forming and we are still deciding how gay our lives will be especially when we are young and confused.

At the Rainbow reading in the tiny alcove most people had sorted out the ironies of their gay performance, it was not a big problem, and some clearly had no ironies at all, they were screaming gay right out loud. For others it was a question of poetic lineage or the newest thing they wrote that had something to do with pussy, or dick. Or even being female. There was glee, elbowing and pronouncements and beauty. It was deliriously good. It had camaraderie. It was mixed.

I remember in the nineties when this gay writing conference occurred in San Francisco. Out Write. It happened for several years but that first time was really exciting. And the famous gay male playwright was asked to come and take part in our event. To be the keynote. He got up to the microphone and he said I don’t consider myself a GAY playwright. I’m not a GAY writer, I’m a writer. And then he looked out at the room. All those ordinary fags and dykes staring back at him. I’m sure they knew what he meant. He was being encouraged to pollute his specialness with his deviance and he said uh no, thanks. Unbelievably this same gay playwright was invited this spring to be honored at a gay literary award ceremony and he did it again. And you know—I get it. I understand Edward Albee’s dilemma. Don’t you. Here is a famous great man and he’s being asked to, you know, roll in the mud with the other pigs. I mean come on, did modernism ever hang a gay show. And what is this museum doing? So the homosexuals of 2011 invited the big man again and there he stood and pulled a sock over his head and he went into a closet by himself in his
slippers and made a cocktail and turned up the teevee. He put his feet up on the chair. And he grinned. Boy did he ever grin. He did it all in the name of greatness. Greatness is not just gay he said. He wasn't just gay. Like us. That's what he did. And if someone had videotaped the entire thing and put it in a show and called it “Edward Albee” it would be beautiful and sad. And that's what I just did.

Cause SFMOMA is inviting us to put something else in the room. I'm looking at Elliott Hundley's dirty cowboy shirt, all old and salmony with little men standing about. It's a rectangle. It's a vista. It's an artifact. It's actually a collage pinned together with red thread and pearls. The Air We Breathe is the name of his piece and it's fitting that this beautiful sexy rag is the name of the show. It's like a book torn open, but organdy.

You know, it just seems to me that visual artists have permission to do anything. I mean anything good. Poets have it harder so I'll write about them first. Poets are smarter than visual artists so we get punished for it. Every journalist on the planet (the quitters!), for instance, they like to mock us. But in me these poets have a friend. Someone who understands the difficulties in producing or composing a poem for a show about gay marriage. It's like watching the procession of poets (in time) each standing up next to the president-elect one cold day in January. How can a poet not be wreathy with a job like that. How do you not make a speech.

Robert Frost, at Kennedy's inauguration, was wise enough to use a marionette. (“My little horse must think it queer …”) His poem was a readymade. Here watch George Albon perform a postmodern solution—he makes a speech for sure, an enquiry on the topic of gay marriage, but he also allows us to ramble with him as a way of picking the political up (like the little horse) and examining sex, love, the color of the light on the day when such a bond might successfully enter the world, and he ends his poem like one's honey going to work: “I am off to the world.” George's shards are beautiful because he circumscribed his topic, got distracted, lost, but never abandoned the general area, which is a poet's job. Albon knows how to climb a mountain. Look at the clouds, but keep moving.

Re: John Ashbery, I'll just say that any poem in which the word “monstrance” appears, I like. In Catholicism the monstrance is the host dressed for show. It, like poetry, only gets work at certain times of the year. And then the abbreviated feast, the host, turns into a peepshow. What does John mean here. His poem is called “Undeclared.” And I think his poem is dragging its sorry butt through history, through the pain and abandonment of homosexuality past. He's not dwelling, but he's been, or as he says, Capisce? His poem insists on the experience of the communicant, and reminds us that if you look close the whole thing falls apart, here, the case against gay marriage. He ends this poem with an odd address to spruce up the view: “brilliant bun.” I respect Mr. Ashbery's privacy, so I won't ask, whose? And why is only one bun available for inspection. It's less lonely to be two. Exactly my point, says John.

Ariana Reines often starts her poem at the highest pitch of too-muchness. In “I Do” she claims to have as thick a dick as Evo Morales. She's committing the terrible crime of alluding to the dick of a man, a world leader in fact, and also she cites the existence of her own dick, and not only that but invokes its fatness too and at this level of giddy absurdity she has managed to make us comfortable with what's possible in the world of her poem. Which begins high, like I said:

Why shouldn't Kevin Killian
Be able to marry the Bolivian President Evo Morales if he wants to, and still stay married
To Dodie Bellamy too, why not? Evo Morales has a coke-can cock we used To say to each other after watching Democracy
Now together, an old love and I….

So we've got Ariana and her lover, we've got Kevin and Dodie, a married couple (of
queer writers), we’ve got Evo and his sister, a pairing that implies he’s gay by the absence of another woman—wait, is gayness, like femaleness, defined by lack? Ariana girds herself with authority by installing her dick both in her myth about herself and in the poem. What she’s asking of course is the great question, why is marriage between two people at all. The numbers, the very essence of both poetry and marriage, legal marriage, the numbers are themselves wrong. And she’s right and now all the rest of it is just bouncing on the mattress.

I would suggest that Will Alexander be the next inaugural poet, or at least poet laureate. Will is like the windmill of American poetry. I read with him once and he went on for an hour and a half. Maybe not that long but really long. And he’s great. I think he turned his force in the direction of passion here in the poem “On Osmotic Attraction.” He asks “& so / how can the extrinsic regulate the feral?” That is the point. I applaud this incredible (I am not being facetious) example of Will’s caring. He is not a gay man. But he understands the simple fact that sex cannot be regulated by the state. Neither can poetry but both come to us in peaks and valleys and he has constructed an elegant peak mid-poem in order to honor the occasion. If he were standing out there on a January day he would make the whole country pay attention, get sleepy, go in and out of the kitchen, snacking, while communicating that poetry is a right, and is with us all the time, the human need to, once we’ve got language, dream in it, eat in it, sleep in it, work and stand and make trouble in light of the time of our being.

Kevin Killian and Dodie Bellamy are married (they are the queers in Ariana’s poem) and they both used to and could be or are at the flip of a coin or the bending of a blade of grass, gay. Kevin is a onetime poet who went the long way around and now he writes them again and good ones, and Dodie is a fiction writer and a onetime poet who wouldn’t bother to return I think because her fiction and her essays are such fellow travelers of poet society that for her to actually write a poem would be like stepping off time to ask it a question. I think it’s not going to happen and if it did it would be bad for all of us. “Behold the Bride/Groom” is the title of their poem. Which reminds me of John Ashbery’s monstrance. It reminds me of what Martha Nussbaum says about “the middle piece,” the emotional reason for why anyone wants marriage perhaps being the most important one. We declare our vows publicly and the world says you do. We (humans) need that echo. Kevin and Dodie’s piece asks close to its end: Can marriage make anybody straight. Their question is indeed about them. It’s a coy performative. They actually had their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary this summer. That’s a lot of something, though I don’t think it’s straightness. “I’m getting to thinking if she’s coming at all” is their final question. And now I must ask: who is she?

On to the artists! Robert Gober’s piece (and Gober is famously queer, huge!) is like a giant Post-it. I’m not supposed to have a favorite piece here but this is it already. I’m shooting my lesbian wad right now. It’s like me, like everything I stand for. It seems really tossed off:

---

The Air We Breathe
Artists and Poets Reflect on Marriage Equality
It's like that old Haiku
First they came for the gays
But I didn’t know I was gay
So who gives a shit

It’s hard to write about such a piece as this because it’s all context. Bob is essentially sticking a Post-it on a museum but he provides context, explaining in a note that he is responding to Jon Stewart (I don’t think he’s gay) on The Daily Show, who was laughing at the hypocrisy of Ken Mehlman, the Republican National Committee chairman who worked AGAINST gay marriage during the Bush Administration but now today he’s working for it. Let’s face it. Ken Mehlman’s just a hardworking gay man. Bob wrote the note originally so he would remember to tell his lover, who was away, about this. Let’s look at that Reader’s Digest windup: “First they came for the gays …” Don’t you feel tired just to hear this wheezing platitudinizing cranky machine begin. Oh yeah Mr. Prairie Home Companion. All oppressions are similar. That’s nice and safe. We are so grateful when the cliché takes a turn: “But I didn’t know I was gay / So who gives a shit.” That hairpin turn is so mad, so disgusted, so helplessly stoopid. It’s watching the news alone when you really need someone to laugh at it with. That’s what a gay marriage is. And this show is a gay marriage. Together you put enough things in a room that it alters the essential alkaline, the ions in the room. Edward Albee wasn’t alone. He didn’t forget he was gay. He just couldn’t forget he was Edward Albee. I prefer the sadness and disgust of Bob Gober, the giant gay man, a boy, a child, who felt alone on the couch watching teevee—suddenly to find yourself in an empty institution, your apartment, the building, this town, without your gay marriage. Alone in America. Gay people don’t want to be like everybody else. They want to be just like themselves. They want to be home for instance. I should go home. I’m working in my studio but I am supposed to be moving this week with my girlfriend and here I am up very late, in my old studio, worrying, writing about art, about gay marriage. Which is kind of an honor.

And I think Martha Colburn’s battle landscape is the history we deserve. Black swords, decapitated horses, Tony Oursler mask heads on sticks, and a pair of medieval nurses dead center kissing. It’s all patchy, stabby, arrows jutting from a horse’s butt, but something else is won in this painting, a kiss between women that’s at the center of no other fake old painting I know. Leopoldine pointed out when I showed it to her that this is our history. It’s just that it hadn’t showed until now. So it’s more an uncovering than a drawing. D-L Alvarez has made a drawing of “Dykes on Bikes” into a techno banner. Curly-haired woman in glasses stares right through her time into ours and the plastic speed of abstraction on the right of the piece is erasing anything else the original photo might have meant. There’s a celebration and an anti-ism. The title You need a civil rights bill, not me is spoken to us from the mindset of her thighs tightly clamped around a Honda with her pal on the back. Two times facing each other, it seems. To quote a poem here, George Albon’s in fact: “as the surface crazes.” That’s what’s answering her grin.

All of which reminds me of that four-way conversation I just heard on MSNBC about FEAR. It was a great new idea. Suddenly now that Osama Bin Ladin is dead we notice that we’ve been manipulated into The United States of Fear. Everyone’s grinning. Four news guys. Finally it impacts on advertising, they conclude. We’re even manipulated here. In America, in the media, they seem gleefully shocked to admit. Afraid your hands aren’t soft, they begin incanting. Afraid you stink. All the men now are smiling. Suddenly you realize they aren’t going to say afraid you’ll lose your job. Afraid you’ll lose your erection. No they are smiling about women’s fears. This is the absolute lack of queerness. The absence of gay marriage. Until America can actually begin talking about his own gender well I think we will always be in a constant state of
fear. We’ll always be losing. It’s how empires go down. In a state of total dishonesty.

I want to go home. So these are the wedding guests. Catherine Opie and Andrea Bowers in a photograph in suit and dress, both beaming. They’re performing as a married couple at Barack Obama’s inauguration but I also believe they are declaring their friendship. A light declaration or else a message of survival. We can’t know. We have to look at their portrait with openness.

Robert Buck’s “Mr. & Mrs. Richards” is funny. Two chickens strutting on their grid. It’s never easy. That we slay animals without a thought. But to marry these two is comically holy. One chicken’s having a thought. Maybe these are their vows: If it’s art are we safe? “Mr. & Mrs. Richards.” Their names, their eternal chicken names. It’s no joke.

I could write a bible about Amy Sillman. Look at these. Pages and pages of them. It kills me! These are like phonemes, secret cells, peephole porn, strips of film, wild growth of organs, ‘staches, muscles, and blobs. These are hieroglyphs. These are animated jean ads that suddenly scream foot, lung. There’s kissing and noodling, eyes bleeding, ass-view bendings, product placement, semaphores, the knees of the Indian maiden on butter, heads in a porn theater kissing in front of the screen. These are big giant generous sheets, these are exhaustive, Kathy Acker–like, tiny bulbous sagas of life in all its radiant undying cartoonness. It reaches, it tugs, it pulls, it sings. Embracing, it bled. Ah-choo!

Laylah Ali’s quick hug reminds me of how delicate genitals are. In the simple hues of this drawing the wet spilling nipples and spreading crotch fan out quietly, yet wildly like energy does. Eyes hold us, nostrils regulate us, but nipples and genitals communicate. When Nicole Eisenman does a portrait of her friends’ relationship (Celeste and Ulrika) it’s clear that one of the partners is a work of art. There’s miscegenation here between maker and thing. I know that the two (Ulrika and Celeste) are part of a group that meets regularly and takes turns drawing one another, so objecthood is always a temporary position, or just a few weeks away.

No one minds if these people breed. When a child is born we will sell it! Nayland Blake’s tree is not real. If you look closely its needles are too regular, more like screws. The tree is a double: as above, so below. The frost behind them reads like the treads of a wheel. I think of Pier Paolo Pasolini getting run over. Nayland’s work always has more than one thing going on—back and forth, back and forth.

Carlos Motta’s fonts go up and down, initially it was hard for me to wrap my mind around the meaning of what his all-text pieces are saying—“descralize democracy”? “Demoralize the judiciary”? Yet that is exactly what we need. We don’t want to depress them, we want to get them out of the goodness business—though a big part of me thinks: if ever! If ever the goodness business wasn’t utterly linked to the money getting moved behind the scenes. It’s a plea. The tiniest bit of all in his work, un milagro, one teeny mid-point heart, is my very favorite part.

My friend Elinor, a Jew, tells me she judges people like this: would they hide me. The question I might ask about art is would I put it on my wall. Some drawings manage to exude a vibe and dailiness mainly. Even being a little anthemic, but not too much. Lily van der Stokker’s drawing is not what you’d put in the kitchen over the stove, but high up on the wall in your office over your desk. This is spiritual art: RuPaul, Annie Sprinkle, La Cicciolina, Dolly Parton, Brigitte Bardot. This is her list. These are my friends. This is my house. This is my work. Come on in.

Colter Jacobsen’s Boys’ Book of Magnetism is elegant, found-seeming, placed. It is the perfect wedding gift. Colter’s illustrations are six pieces of redly yellowing paper, the first being a magical tree practically spelling with its branches as it invites you into its (cough cough) gay world. For men (and a lot of dykes and transmen) “boys’ stuff” does the task of reconnecting them to a lost Eden or to an emerging sexual place the way a box atop a dresser holds special things from “a time.” The language of magnetism is so nineteenth-century naïf and laden with sexual innuendo. It’s props. You want to gasp, go jerk off to the primness of these prompts. Come on.

The Air We Breathe
Artists and Poets Reflect on Marriage Equality

141
up, climb my tree. Next one reads STRANGE BLOCKS FROM STRANGE WOOD. One world opens from another, the blocks fitting, the fingers holding. Since when is eros geometric. Well, when it’s queer. On the back of this sheet there’s just a bit of script, in quotes: “if the only prayer / you ever said was / Thank You / it was enough.” The quotation marks at the end of the sentiment have the quiver and the excitement of exclamation points. The misspelling is him, whoever, at his best. He means it. There’s a strange white diamond on the surface of the paper that you don’t entirely see but you struggle to read the script against. Then, you turn the page and two male profiles are facing each other. Their eyelashes are so pronounced in silhouette. That’s dirty. Speaking of which there’s a tiny vertical stain on one of the faces from about the bottom of the eye socket to the lower cheekbone. Almost a scar, gray in the honey of the brown paper. Just a little butch. Imperfect. And what if Colter’s straight? It’s just not possible. Now we have a larger piece of unfolded paper, a faded neighbor I guess of the silhouettes, and these profiles are framed by the bright white lines of paper unexposed to sun, so here it’s time/fold/time/profiles. Cumulatively, one gets involved in the objectness of the men represented, and our own relationship to seeing them, who they were, and the inevitability of everything precious getting lost eventually. Not my love! Now we get an open book with two men’s faces, young men from the past. The face on the right’s scarred by an embossed crest. That crest screams “family” in all its grotesquerie. Followed by two branches tied together oddly. The paper behind them is not only oranging but on its left edge it bleeds a red trim. That trim makes me groan with pleasure. Colter’s piece is in effect a paean to “the closet.” Layer upon layer of the love that dare not speak its name. Was Abraham Lincoln gay? We’ll never know. But the question arouses us. And touches us deeply, if we feel safe enough, if we allow it.

I thought these buoys were Ann Hamilton’s molars but in fact they are steel balls. Along with them she threw in one of her “concordances.” I saw piles of them in St. Louis and now I realize I have ON MY BOOKSHELF AT THIS MOMENT the exhibition’s takeaway kit!! From it I learn that a concordance is “a composition combining and harmonizing various accounts.” It seems Ann and I are in the same business. We’re like wedding planners. Her concordances represented “the poetic and physical presence of the project within the walls of the Pulitzer Foundation for the Arts.” Poetic here means these are source words, chosen for this occasion, that form the basis for a search for phrases in the newspapers of the world. Democracy, education, equal, equality, free, freedom, future, gay, giving, government, happiness, humanity, inequality, inheritance, institution, intimacy, justice, law, laws, legal, life, love, loves, marriage, mutual, open, out. She’s gay.

I think Matt Keegan’s allegorical work reveals the falling leaves from the tree of equal. Doug Ashford offers pandemonium. Color; news. It’s a place where there’s no place to be. In Dan Perjovschi’s cartoons there’s a whole lot of penetration. I mean charts and icons that will help you get into the bathroom correctly and also the persistent penetration of rings by fingers. I think the problem of the state has eluded him and he must put that in his drawing. How to fuck it? Or is it fucking us. Or won’t!

Simon Fujiwara’s Dir América makes a kind of funeral monument to a dream of sexual liberation turned into an orgy in which he, the dreamer, was killed. I’ve had to sit with this one a while and it seems to offer a certain history of homosexuality and even a utopia of unbridled
lust that has never been properly mourned. If the AIDS crisis and the whole history of violence towards homosexuals and transpeople in America is being put behind us by the acknowledgment of total citizenship that marriage, by implication, is offering, we still need a real funeral for all that was nonetheless lost. The people who are gone, the wasted divine sexual energy, unrealized, or punished or just stomped into submission. I love this bad-English dream of this wrong being righted. That someone in Mexico would transcribe this shattered dream for Simon (and us) is both poetry and the monument of it.

Allison Smith’s puzzle ring just feels good. It looks sewn—is it? No, it’s a collage. It’s handsome interlocking rings of modulated rainbow colors—more native or earth-dyed than flashy corporate rainbow—and should be the folded textile invitation everyone receives in the mail for this show. Her piece is a communal wedding ring. I want to live in this land.

Jennifer Bornstein’s alphabetic list of countries tells us where homosexuality is illegal: Ghana, Grenada, Guinea, Guyana, sometimes interrupted by a second status account in red type: female/female = legal or female/female legal in certain regions or = unclear, all of which turns out to be about women’s right to marry each other in some of these places. My sense was that in much of the world, like say in Russia (also not listed here), male homosexuality was always a crime until maybe recently whereas female homosexuality just never existed, though lesbians when they do exist are sent to mental hospitals. So to me, a lesbian, this list represents good news. Jennifer’s like the wedding guest who “made” something. A female presence.

Erica Vogt’s Instructions, directions is a bright watery purple marked by what feels like a jailhouse tattoo—a piratey diamond on a map is pointing towards a wobbly ancient N. Or N = X marks the spot. Here. It’s this magical world that practically illuminates your face when you open it. And beneath its arcane surface are stealthily scratched “Spirit Duplicator Instructions,” which are dull and intriguing in their literalness: set the dial to zero … tape the mascot to the drum / press the feed button / distribute. Can’t even read it all but I’m ready. Are we in the machine? Erika’s is such a great response to this show. To create yet another world. Like a hatch, a secret doorway into it.

Erika and Shannon Ebner’s (and p.s. they’re married) LOVEREVOLVER is kind of an imperfect palindrome like homosexuality. It isn’t the same. The way “love” and “revolve” and “evolve” get echoey and subsume in each other materially. Their piece is totally word marriage. Erika drafts in (or probably they began with) a multidimensional set of lines: instructions for unfolding something, but then Shannon draws letters on the surface of the drawing actually defeating their own spatial illusion while creating a great ungay plaything. Or you could play it gay. Either way. One wants to push and prod and pop their piece. Sharon Hayes types up two bright documents in which she proclaims her love and is loved like an American woman who is continually told what to do, what not to do, who knows she is desired, is told she isn’t, is told that her beloved does not know who she is, has told her mother to say she’s not home, to leave no messages, is not to give any information out, and yet this woman who has felt all that cannot stop loving. It’s a monumental piece and an ordinary one; in fact this whole damn book is just that. Like that reading in the alcove with Leopoldine was like being inside a strange and loving bell. It felt good. It was mixed. And that kept us paying attention. This is one brave show, because of its pulsing variety, not just some ornery rainbow.

The Air We Breathe
Artists and Poets Reflect on Marriage Equality