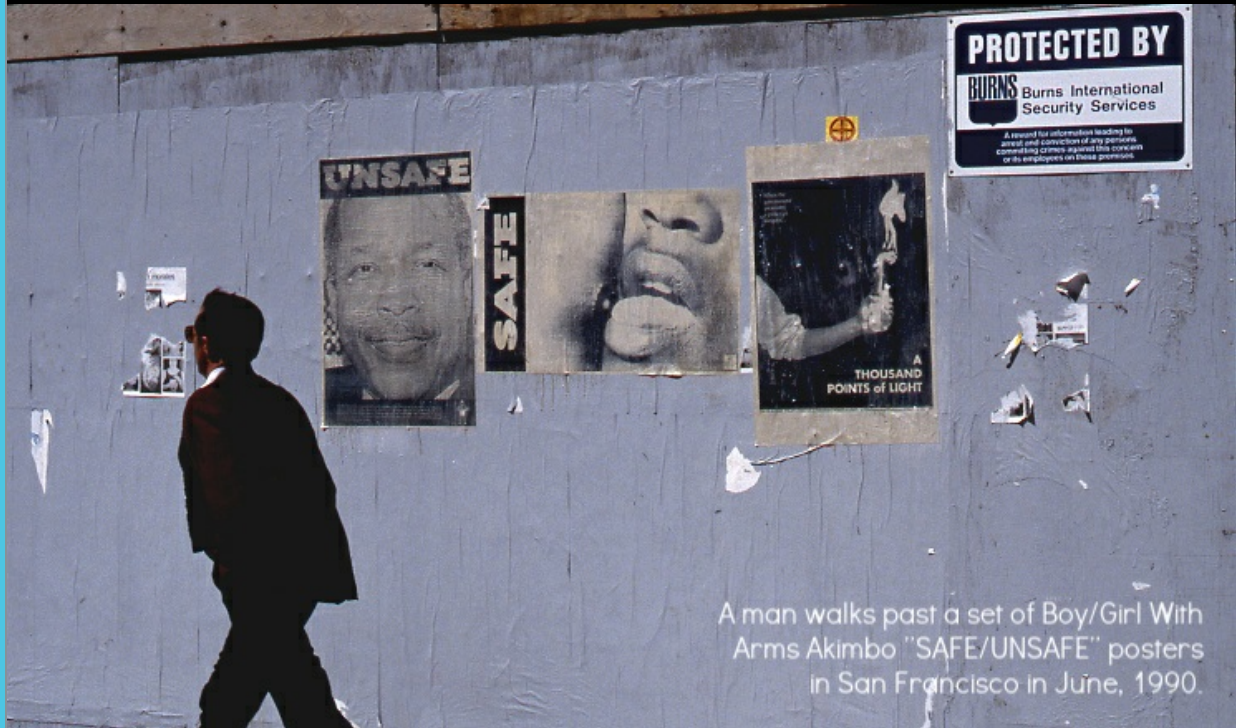


February 2020



A man walks past a set of Boy/Girl With Arms Akimbo "SAFE/UNSAFE" posters in San Francisco in June, 1990.

Standing With Arms Akimbo: Cultural Activism During the AIDS Crisis in 1980s San Francisco

by Mark Sawchuk

Thirty years ago, at the height of the AIDS crisis, the anonymous, San Francisco-based cultural activist collective Boy With Arms Akimbo/Girl With Arms Akimbo took a unique approach to AIDS activism. The group carried out street postering campaigns, media appropriation initiatives and other forms of visual intervention to promote queer pro-sex messages and respond to attacks by anti-sex reactionaries. Deploying posters, stickers and protest signs, Akimbo juxtaposed images of safe-sex acts with representations of political, religious and social leaders noted for their homophobia and AIDS-phobia.

Isabelle Alfonsi, a French researcher and gallery owner, consulted the Boy With Arms Akimbo/Girl With Arms Akimbo [collection](#) housed in the GLBT Historical Society's archives while researching her recently published book, *Pour une esthétique de l'émancipation* ("Toward an Emancipatory Aesthetic," Éditions B42, 2019). The book situates modern art in the context of LGBTQ activism and the formation of a radical feminist and anti-capitalist critique.

Akimbo is an important case study in the fourth chapter, which examines queer artistic representation during the AIDS crisis in 1980s San Francisco. *History Happens* interviewed Alfonsi to hear about her work with this collection.

How did you select *Boy With Arms Akimbo*/*Girl With Arms Akimbo* as one of your case studies?

I had received a grant in 2014 from the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs to come to Berkeley to do research in preparation for a series of lectures on gender and contemporary art. I came across a reproduction of one of Akimbo's posters and a few paragraphs about the group in art critic Douglas Crimp's seminal text *Boys in my Bedroom*, which discusses issues of appropriation in art and AIDS activism. I was drawn to the visual efficiency of their production and felt a proximity to their sex-positive, emancipatory tone. In 2016 I received a second grant from the French Ministry of Culture to return to the Bay Area and spent a few weeks studying the Akimbo materials at the archives and meeting with former members of the group.

What did you find in the Akimbo collection of the GLBT Historical Society's archives?

I found out how the Akimbo collective worked: there were sign-up lists of meetings (useful to grasp how many people were actually involved), budgets, drafts of letters to respond to journalists' inquiries, reports of discussions about the anonymous character of the group, and images and slides documenting the posters in different locations. It gave me a precise idea of their — pretty democratic — functioning, and also how the strategy of anonymity and "copyleft" helped them tailor their messages so effectively.

The most emotional materials for me are the original collages from the series *SEX IS/JUST SEX* and *SAFE/UNSAFE*, whose materiality are a testament to the pre-digital era. There is a form of fetishism that researchers are looking for when they go to any archives, and I wasn't disappointed!

How did your work in the archives shape the book? And why are LGBTQ archives, museums and collecting institutions important?

When you have access to an archives such as the society's, it does not feel like "dead" material. Touching the documents, the objects, made me feel history, almost as if I had lived those events with the collective. I was 10 in 1989, a bit too young for activism... but my generation's sexuality has been shaped by AIDS; we grew up alongside it and sex always meant danger for us. Spending time with the Akimbo archive gave me a direct understanding of what I had "missed" as a child and helped me "patch the holes" in my experience.

Visiting an archive is a unique cultural experience. It is important to keep a record of the voices of those who lived a specific history. You can't trust the mainstream media to take care of your history. Archives

preserve direct testimonies and complex relationships with *almost* no filter. It is about feeling as much as understanding. Everybody, not only scholars, should have this experience to understand how our families and chosen families, our friends of the past, lived.

Mark Sawchuk is the society's communications manager.

Isabelle Alfonsi is an art historian, researcher and gallery owner in Paris.

From the Staff

Expanding & Promoting Museum Access



by Leigh Pfeffer

Since taking over as the GLBT Historical Society's museum operations manager last July, I've had the exciting challenge of learning about the many moving parts involved in keeping the GLBT Historical Society Museum running smoothly. This has involved overseeing our long-term operations as well as managing our monthly programs and events that draw people

to the museum in the evenings after closing.

This year, we are prioritizing making the museum accessible to as many people as possible. Previously, the museum offered limited discounts; as of January 1, all children aged 12 and under are admitted free, and discounted tickets are available to youth (ages 13 to 17), students, senior citizens, teachers, active-duty military service members and people with disabilities.

We're also proud to announce that the museum has joined the [Museums for All](#) initiative, a national, branded access program that encourages individuals of all backgrounds to visit museums regularly and build lifelong museum habits. Through Museums for All, those receiving Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits gain free or reduced admission to more than 400 museums throughout the United States by presenting their SNAP EBT card. At the GLBT Historical Society Museum, EBT cardholders are entitled to free admission for four people per cardholder.

With San Francisco's rainy season upon us, there's never been a better time to visit the museum if you haven't been before, revisit if you haven't been in a while or attend one of our evening programs. We're looking forward to welcoming you.

Leigh Pfeffer is the society's museum operations manager.

At the Museum

Outspoken, Political & Fabulous



by Lena Heller

Last October, while interning at the GLBT Historical Society, one of my projects was to help put together a short booklet educating museum volunteers and docents about the upcoming exhibition “[Performance, Protest & Politics: The Art of Gilbert Baker.](#)”

When I began, I knew very little about Gilbert Baker, the artist, activist and rainbow-flag creator, but I was given free reign to research not only the objects on display but the man himself. Of course, I had seen the rainbow flag everywhere. I initially thought that I should focus on what is undeniably Baker’s most well-known design, but through my research and work with the GLBT Historical Society staff, I quickly found that there was so much more to learn. While choosing what to highlight in the booklet, I gained an appreciation for his entire body of work.

Uniquely Potent

One of my favorite stories was an article about Gilbert Baker’s 1987 meeting with the FBI — for which he dressed in full drag! Baker, along with the activist and fundraising group the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, of which he was then a member, were planning a peaceful protest of Pope John Paul II’s upcoming visit to San Francisco. Representing the Sisters, Gilbert met with FBI agents to discuss the logistics of the protest while wearing, as the official FBI report describes, “a black and white nun’s habit... [including] a rhinestone cowl, as well as long red tights and patent leather high-heel shoes.”

I think this story sums up Baker’s life and work so well. He achieved a uniquely potent combination of outspoken, political and fabulous.

My work drafting the exhibition booklet enabled me to share what I learned with all of the volunteers at the GLBT Historical Society Museum. As with the exhibition, my goal was to honor Baker’s life by educating people about the incredible depth and dimension of this extraordinary man’s work.

Lena Heller was the exhibitions and museum operations intern at the society in winter 2019. They are a senior at the University of San Francisco studying history and classical studies.

Upcoming Events

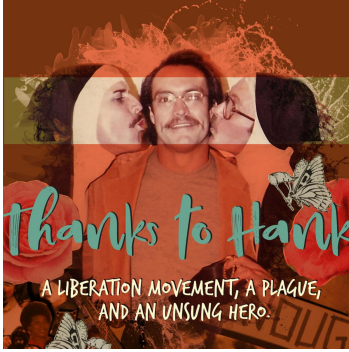
[Film Screening](#)

Thanks to Hank: A Movement, a Plague, a Hero

Thursday, February 6

7:00–9:00 p.m.

The GLBT Historical Society Museum



4127 18th St., San Francisco
\$5 | Free for [members](#)

In 1970s San Francisco, activist Hank Wilson (1947–2008) cofounded the first gay teachers' union, the first gay community self-defense project, the first gay comedy club and the first gay film festival. Wilson also worked to draw attention to the problem of gay youth suicide, and after the emergence of AIDS, he spent 20

years running a 150-room residential hotel as an informal hospice for homeless people dying of the disease. "Thanks to Hank" (2019) is a loving, cinematic portrait of this extraordinary man by director and composer Bob Ostertag, featuring gorgeous handmade scissor-and-paper animation by animator Jeremy Rourke and the music of the Kronos Quartet and the Tin Hat Trio. Following the screening, Ostertag and longtime activist and elected official Tom Ammiano will respond to questions from the audience. Tickets are available online [here](#).

[Author Talk](#)

[On Becoming a Man: A Conversation with P. Carl](#)



Monday, February 10

7:00–9:00 p.m.

California Institute of Integral Studies

1453 Mission St., San Francisco

\$10 online | \$15 at the door

For most of his life, P. Carl lived as a queer woman, building a career, a life and a loving marriage. After 50 years, he embarked on his gender transition amid the rise of the Trump

administration and the #MeToo movement. His intimate new memoir, *Becoming a Man: The Story of a Transition* (Simon & Schuster, 2020), describes how his transition reconfigured both his own inner experience and his closest bonds, from his twenty-year relationship with his wife, Lynette, to his already tumultuous relationships with his parents. At this event cosponsored by the GLBT Historical Society, professor Michelle Marzullo, chair of the human sexuality program at the California Institute of Integral Studies, will lead a conversation with Carl about gender, power and inequality in the United States. Copies of *Becoming a Man* will be available for purchase. For more information, click [here](#). GLBT Historical Society members receive a 20 percent discount off the admission price of advance tickets by entering the code "GLBT20" into the "promo code" box at checkout; tickets are available online [here](#).

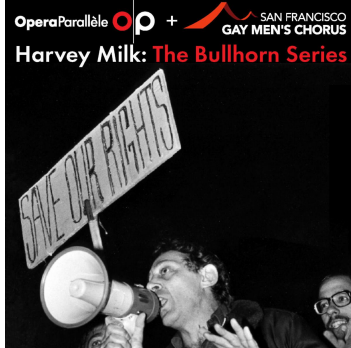
[Panel Discussion](#)

[The American Dream Starts in the Neighborhood](#)

Tuesday, February 11

7:00–8:00 p.m.

National LGBTQ Center for the Arts



170 Valencia St., San Francisco
\$25 | \$20 for members

Gay-rights pioneer Harvey Milk galvanized a community by uniting disparate groups, registering new voters and mobilizing grassroots support to address local issues and create change. This panel of San Francisco political leaders, activists and culture-makers will consider the lessons that Milk taught us over forty years ago and identify those people and organizations that continue Milk's legacy of community engagement. Panelists include Rafael Mandelman, San Francisco District 8 Supervisor; Cat Brooks, a community activist and playwright; and Aria Sa'id, the cofounder and executive director of Compton's Transgender Cultural District. New Voices Bay Area, a mixed voice choral ensemble for singers who self-identify as transgender, intersex or genderqueer will present a musical performance. Cosponsored by the GLBT Historical Society, this is the first in the Bullhorn Series, a set of responsive community conversations organized by the San Francisco Gay Men's Chorus and Opera Parallèle, an organization that presents compelling performances of contemporary opera. The series culminates in May with the revival of the 1995 opera *Harvey Milk*. For more information, click [here](#). GLBT Historical Society members receive a \$5 discount off the admission price of advance tickets to Bullhorn events by entering the code "GLBT" into the "discount code" box at checkout; tickets are available online [here](#).

Fundraiser

The Edge Cares: A Benefit for the GLBT Historical Society



Tuesday, February 18
8:00–11:00 p.m.
The Edge
4149 18th St., San Francisco
Free

The Edge is a longstanding bar in the heart of San Francisco's Castro district, right down the street from the GLBT Historical Society Museum. With a long history of supporting local charities and bringing communities together, the Edge has recently established the Edge Cares, a weekly initiative that earmarks a percentage of Tuesday night proceeds to local LGBTQ nonprofits. The GLBT Historical Society is honored to have been selected as the Edge's beneficiary on February 18. Join us for an evening of throwback music videos, vintage 1990s hits and two-for-one drinks.

Panel Discussion

"The Rainbow Did That": Remembering Gilbert Baker

Thursday, February 20
7:00–9:00 p.m.



The GLBT Historical Society Museum
4127 18th St., San Francisco
\$5 | Free for [members](#)

A panel of contemporaries and friends of the late Gilbert Baker, the creator of the iconic rainbow flag, will discuss Baker's artistic output, activism and legacy. Panelists will include activist Charley Beal, the manager of the Gilbert Baker Estate; Baker's friend Vincent Guzzone;

community activist Ken Jones; and Cass Brayton, better known as Sister Mary Media, a longtime member of the LGBTQ activist and fundraising group the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence. Swapping stories, spilling secrets and sharing memories, the speakers will recall the life and times of a complex and deeply passionate man. This program is being held in conjunction with the exhibition "[Performance, Protest and Politics: The Art of Gilbert Baker](#)," on display at the GLBT Historical Society Museum through April 5. Tickets are available online [here](#).

[Book Launch](#)

[Following Lou: Searching the Archives for Our Queer Past](#)



Thursday, February 27
7:00–9:00 p.m.
The GLBT Historical Society Museum
4127 18th St., San Francisco
\$5 | Free for [members](#)

Louis Sullivan (1951–1991) was a founding member of the GLBT Historical Society and a transgender gay man whose pioneering activism on behalf of trans men in the 1970s and

1980s helped shape the modern understanding of sexual orientation and gender identity. The society's archives hold Sullivan's extensive diaries, written between the 1960s and the 1990s, which chronicle his coming of age, coming-out as a gay trans man and work as a historian. Researcher Ellis Martin and poet and artist Zach Ozma have compiled selections from the diaries into a new book, [We Both Laughed In Pleasure: The Selected Diaries of Lou Sullivan](#) (Nightboat Books, 2019). In this discussion, Martin, Ozma and the society's reference archivist, Isaac Fellman, will read excerpts from Sullivan's diaries and will discuss the complex issues involved in queer historical storytelling. Copies of *We Both Laughed in Pleasure* will be available for purchase and signing. Tickets are available online [here](#).

[Community Event](#)

[A March to Remember & Reclaim Queer Space](#)

Saturday, February 29
2:00–4:00 p.m.
Harvey Milk Plaza
Market and Castro Streets, San Francisco



Free

A group of LGBTQ leaders, neighborhood organizations, activists and community members will gather at Harvey Milk Plaza and march through the Castro district, laying black wreaths at the sites of former queer spaces in this historic LGBTQ neighborhood. Join drag queen Juanita MORE!, activists Ken Jones and Cleve Jones, and San Francisco District Eight

Supervisor Rafael Mandelman at this event cohosted by the GLBT Historical Society, the San Francisco LGBT Center and the Castro LGBTQ Cultural District. Participants will call on elected officials, foundations and philanthropists, as well as residents and lovers of San Francisco, to both commemorate the city's LGBTQ past and take active steps to sustain the city's living queer heritage and culture.

Current Exhibitions

Community Gallery

[Performance, Protest & Politics: The Art of Gilbert Baker](#)

Open through April 5, 2020

[More information](#)

Main Gallery

[Queer Past Becomes Present](#)

Long-term exhibition

[More information](#)

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4127 18TH STREET, SF



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Sunday: Noon–5:00 p.m.

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CREDITS. FEATURE: Photographer unknown (1990); Boy With Arms Akimbo/Girl With Arms Akimbo Records (1996-41), GLBT Historical Society. FROM THE STAFF: Photo courtesy of Leigh Pfeffer. AT THE MUSEUM: Gilbert Baker presents President Barack Obama with an original, hand-dyed cotton rainbow flag on June 9, 2016; photo courtesy of the Barack Obama Presidential Library, used with permission. UPCOMING EVENTS. Film screening: Poster for “Thanks to Hank” designed by Ernesto Soprani; used with permission. Author Talk: Photo of P. Carl by Asia Kepka, used with permission. Panel Discussion: Harvey Milk on Orange Tuesday, June 7, 1977; photo by Jerry Pritikin, used with permission. Fundraiser: Detail from the Edge Cares poster; designed by Cheer SF, used with permission. Panel Discussion: Baker (right) wearing his international flags gown on a Golden Gate Bridge-themed float (ca. 1987); photo by Robert Pruzan, Robert Pruzan Papers (1998-36), GLBT Historical Society. Book Launch: Lou Sullivan in a snapshot included in his correspondence; photographer unknown, Louis Graydo Sullivan Correspondence With David Collection (2009-02), GLBT Historical Society. Community Event: 2018 Polk Street March to Remember and Reclaim Queer Space; photo by Bradley Roberge Photography, used with permission.

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Back Issues

