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In 1963, the young art critic Gene Swenson conducted a defining interview with Andy Warhol for ARTnews, as part of a series titled ‘What is Pop Art? Answers from 8 Painters’.1 Swenson’s Pop interviews instantly provided, in the words of his friend and fellow critic Lucy Lippard, ‘the source material for the movement. The artists trusted him.’2 It was in this interview that Warhol first declared ‘I think everybody should be a machine’ and ‘I think everybody should like everybody’—utterances that have, over the years, sustained many of our most rigorous arguments about Warhol’s practice, Pop, and postmodernism.

One scratchy audio recording of Swenson’s interview with Warhol has survived, only recently recovered, along with several other of Swenson’s Pop interviews, on a set of cassette tapes stashed away in a box among Swenson’s papers, which have been cared for by a friend since Swenson’s death in a car accident in the summer of 1969 at age thirty-five.4 On the tape, Swenson begins the interview by asking Warhol, ‘What do you say about homosexuals?’—a question Warhol goes on to answer with great care and complexity. However, this question, along with every subsequent mention of homosexuality, was expunged from the published interview. In what follows, I address those excluded discussions, to ask why, and to what ends the editorial decision to redact them from the printed version affected subsequent receptions of both Swenson and Warhol’s work.5

In a later recorded interview with artist Joe Raffaele, which Swenson appended to the end of the Warhol tape, Swenson tells Raffaele, ‘I asked Tom Hess if we couldn’t, I mean, you know, like… You see, in the interview I did with Andy, he cut out all those words.’ Raffaele responds: ‘And is he going to again?’ To which Swenson replies: ‘Well I don’t know. But I’ll fight for it this time.’6

While we do not know why Tom Hess, executive editor at ARTnews, ‘cut out’ Warhol’s words, and no paper trail has surfaced charting what happened in that final edit, ample evidence survives, both anecdotal and archival, documenting the many subsequent, protracted battles Swenson waged against publishers, curators, and institutions over their culpable willingness to abet injustice by suppressing disruptive social, political, and queer content during the 1960s. Evidence survives as well confirming that Hess had a troublesome reputation in the period among artists and critics for his interventionist editorial decision-making. For example, in an unpublished 1968 interview, Lippard says to Donald Judd, ‘I don’t understand how people can write for them [ARTnews] when that’s what they do. I mean Scott Burton said Gene Swenson—of course you don’t mess with Gene Swenson, but in those days you could mess with him a little more—they said that Hess would completely change the meaning of a thing. […] I don’t know how anyone in the world would put up with this. But people go right on writing for Hess.’7 Eulogising Swenson after his death in 1969, fellow critic Gregory Battcock reflects that ‘Swenson’s large and complex...
passionately held reformist views gave his own single-handed attempts to accomplish them a degree of pathos. Yet his brief career was exemplary in its pursuit of them at any cost—and the cost in friends, stability and financial security was great. When Swenson died, many of us felt as though we had lost our conscience. And Lippard writes, ‘He wasn’t listened to because what he said was said too strongly and it was too true.’ She continues,

His involvement in politics seemed natural because of the depth of his involvement in life—too heavy a burden, finally. [...] His hyper-critical sensitivity to and responsibility for remediating the ills of the world he lived in amounted to obsession [...] I didn’t see much of Gene in the last year of his life; he frightened and embarrassed me because he demanded of me as much commitment as he was willing to offer himself and I couldn’t meet his demands.

In what follows, I transcribe several extended excerpts from Swenson’s recorded interview with Warhol, tracing in detail the queer content that was excised from published statements such as ‘I think everybody should be a machine’ and ‘I think everybody should like everybody’—redactions that dramatically altered the meaning of those consequential utterances. This new evidence supports many of the important arguments scholars have advanced to establish and understand Warhol’s particular queerness. For example, as Jonathan Flatley and Anthony E. Grudin write, by way of introducing a special issue of the journal Criticism devoted to Warhol:

Almost twenty years after the editors of Pop Out: Queer Warhol (1996) decried ‘the de-gaying of Warhol that places whatever is queer outside the realm of critical consideration,’ the spell now seems to be broken. It is taken for granted, in these essays, that Warhol is not only gay, but a key queer icon, leaving the authors free to elaborate the modes of Warhol’s queerness without first needing to justify the legitimacy of such a critical enterprise. Where many of Warhol’s assertions distancing him from the expressive, creative self so energetically celebrated in the abstract expressionists—‘I want to be a machine’ or ‘just look at the surface’ or ‘I like boring things’—have been taken to indicate Warhol’s cynicism about art and feeling tout court, the essays here suggest that they were instead making room for alternative, queer ways of feeling and of being with others in the world.

The recording of Swenson’s conversation with Warhol affirms that Warhol’s statement about being ‘a machine’ was indeed bound up with his frank effort to imagine ‘alternative queer ways of feeling and of being with others in the world’. However, while scholars have done much to elaborate upon and debate the various ‘modes of Warhol’s queerness’, Swenson has all but vanished from the historical record and, along with him, the history of how Warhol’s early and explicit on-the-record statements about Pop’s relationship to homosexuality got suppressed from publication.

This article begins the work of mending the historical record: first, by submitting excerpts from Swenson and Warhol’s recorded conversation about Pop’s queerness—a conversation that was pointedly suppressed in 1963 and has lain dormant among Swenson’s papers ever since—and second, by restoring Swenson’s proper place within the historical account. (A further, important task, which I do not undertake here, would be to establish in detail how these editorial decisions were handed down at ARTnews, and to analyse how they fit within larger patterns of suppression and everyday censorship in 1960s-era art publishing, and how these patterns formed specific discursive parameters determining the kinds of art and artists that were given space in the period’s leading periodicals.)

In particular, I elaborate upon the modes of Swenson’s queerness. For, while Warhol successfully cultivated a laconic, impassive persona with which to
navigate all sorts of situations and institutions, Swenson, by contrast, was fiercely outspoken and frequently acted out and verbalised his ire. He ranted and raved, raged and protested. Lippard remembers Swenson’s ‘harangues on Castelli’s steps, before the Modern and the Metropolitan, in letters and phone calls to friends and enemies’. 12 Swenson shouted on street corners, disrupted parties and panel discussions, and in February 1968 he picketed alone every weekday outside the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), wielding only a giant blue question mark as a sign (Fig. 1). ‘There is anger in my tone’, Swenson noted of his solitary protest, ‘for they have treated the soul of art foully’. 13 For his behaviour, Swenson was maligned by the art world. He ‘frightened and embarrassed’ even sympathetic friends by demanding, as Lippard puts it, ‘as much commitment as he was willing to offer himself’, a demand Lippard, for one, ‘couldn’t meet’. ‘Cruelly’, Lippard writes, ‘we accepted his sacrifice of companionship and honored him only uneasily for his generosity’. 14 If, as Flatley states, Warhol’s ‘attempt to imagine new, queer forms of attachment and affiliation’ can ‘teach us about the possibilities of affectivity in late capitalist society’, then Swenson’s louder and angrier concurrent attempt to imagine, and then demand, new queer forms of commitment can likewise teach us about the possibilities, certainly, but also about some of the hard, painful limitations of affectivity—or ‘feeling’, as Swenson called it—in the late capitalist society of his day and, I propose, of ours too. 15

‘Feeling’ is a term that lay at the heart of Swenson’s critical project. In a lecture delivered at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia on the occasion of Warhol’s first museum show in 1965, Swenson explains that Warhol’s silkscreen paintings and objects are ‘mirrors of what happens to us without our knowing or realizing it’. ‘In a way they might be said to objectify experience’, Swenson continues, and ‘turn feelings into things so we can deal with them’. 16 Here, I place Swenson’s own embodied articulations of feeling, which ran the gamut from histrionic to gentle, from menacing to melancholy, alongside his analysis of how Warhol manages to ‘turn feelings into things’. Looking at Swenson through Warhol affords us a skewed slant on Pop. It permits an alternative view that extends to the frayed edges of the movement, where feelings butt up against the obdurate limits of possibility, and where things can begin to seem pathetic, frightening, and embarrassing but also funny and even hopeful. It is a view of Pop that looks not just at the cow-wallpapered interiors of MoMA but also outside the windows, to take in the view of one critic on the sidewalk below, picketing alone against the behemoth institution armed with only that single, oversized, and unanswered question mark (Fig. 2).

‘What Do You Say About Homosexuals?’

Swenson did not conduct his interview with Warhol one-on-one. Warhol’s then-new studio assistant Gerard Malanga joined in, along with another friend named John. 17 From the sound of things, all four of them are gathered close around the tape recorder, likely at Warhol’s second studio in an old firehouse on East 87th Street, before his move in January 1964 to the space that would soon become his foil-encrusted Factory. The interview gets off to a clumsy start, as Swenson begins by saying: ‘Now we have to start talking again’—apparently the machine was not recording when they commenced talking the first time. It is worth noting that Swenson recorded this interview the year before Philips introduced the Norelco Carry-Corder, the first mass-produced portable, compact cassette tape recorder, onto the American market. So, at the time of this interview, Warhol had not yet acquired his first tape recorder (a machine

17. The ‘John’ in question is likely either John Giorno, who starred in Warhol’s 1963 film Sleep, or the poet John Wieners, who appears in a 1963 photo-booth strip alongside Warhol and Malanga.
he would become so intimately attached to that he called it his ‘wife’). Nor had he invented the breathless, error-prone, type-up-everything transcription methods that came to define later projects such as *a: a novel* (1968). This recording thus represents one of the earliest examples of Warhol feeling his way through the possibilities of an emergent medium that he would soon come to master by exploiting the fact that the tape recorder ‘doesn’t make many choices about what is more and less important as it listens’—as Gustavus Stadler elucidates in his essay elaborating Warhol’s non-hierarchical, ‘queer ways of listening’.¹⁸ But here, Warhol’s performance for the tape recorder is tentative and uneven, as he and Swenson, along with Malaga and John, feel their way through how to talk to each other in the machine’s presence, and how self-consciously (or not) to perform the roles of interviewer and interviewee.

Here is how the interview starts:

*Swenson* Now we have to start talking again. What do you say about homosexuals?
*Warhol* Oh, you have to ask me a leading question.
*Swenson* Do you know a lot of closet queens who are homosexuals who are

[laughing] Abstract Expressionists?
*Warhol* Yes. [laughing] Uh... 
*Malanga* [laughing] Who are they? Who are these girls?
*Warhol* No, I’m, I’m... 
*Malanga* Michele Goldberg. [laughing]
*Warhol* Really? How fantastic. Who else?
*John* Al Leslie.
*Malanga* Norma Bluhm.
*Warhol* Norma Bluhm? [laughing]
*Swenson* [shouting] Ivan Karp!
*Malanga* [laughing] Eva Karp, that is. How bout, uh... no... uh... think... 
*Swenson* You’d have hours of content.
*Warhol* Yeah.
*Swenson* Is that what Abstract Expressionism is all about? [laughing] They’re


moralists, they really are. It’s inconceivable to me that somebody would say about a painter that he’s a homosexual, you know, as if it were a kind of criticism. You know, just inconceivable, as... as...
shoes?
Warhol Yes.
Swenson [laughing] Why did you like to draw women’s shoes? Did you see yourself
being put under the heel of one of them?
Warhol Yes.
Malanga It made a star? Do you feel like a star wearing women’s shoes?
Warhol [laughing] Oh, yes!

As John and Malanga ape pseudo-Freudian tropes laid down by a homophobic society, Swenson joins in on the fun. ’Like, uh, when you were drawing shoes, did you want to draw women’s shoes?’ he asks playfully. Warhol, however, pushes back, and when he is able to get a word in, he offers a thoughtful and strange, ’kind of different’ answer, as he puts it, to both big questions of the day: ’What do you say about homosexuals?’ and ‘What is Pop Art?:

Warhol No it can’t be like that, can it? Well it has to be something like the idea
that, uh, uh... that all Pop artists aren’t homosexual. And it really
doesn’t... you know... And everybody should be a machine, and
everybody should be, uh, like...
Swenson I don’t understand the business about—if all Pop artists are not
homosexual, then what does this have to do with being a machine?
Warhol Well, I think everybody should like everybody.
Swenson You mean you should like both men and women?
Warhol Yeah.
Swenson Yeah? Sexually and in every other way?
Warhol Yeah.
Swenson And that’s what Pop Art’s about?
Warhol Yeah, it’s liking things.
Swenson And liking things is being like a machine?
Warhol Yeah. Well, because you do the same thing every time. You do the same
thing over and over again. And you do the same...
Swenson You mean sex?
Warhol Yeah, and everything you do.
John Without any discrimination?
Warhol Yeah. And you use things up, like, you use people up.
Swenson And you approve of it?
Warhol Yes. [laughing] Because it’s all a fantasy...

It is now possible to trace the edits around Warhol’s famous proclamations in the published version of the interview. As it was printed in the November 1963 edition of ARTnews, and in every subsequent anthology and textbook, the exchange above is cut up so that it reads:

Warhol I think everybody should be a machine.
I think everybody should like everybody.
Swenson Is that what Pop Art is all about?
Warhol Yes. It’s liking things.
Swenson And liking things is like being a machine?
Warhol Yes, because you do the same thing every time. You do it over and over
again.
Swenson And you approve of that?
Warhol Yes, because it’s all fantasy.22

The removal of every word surrounding Warhol’s statements ‘everybody should be a machine’ and ‘everybody should like everybody’ transforms them into willfully ambiguous, blank statements about consumerism and serial production. But that is not what they were. These statements form the core of
Warhol’s specific response to Swenson’s pointed question: ‘What do you say about homosexuals?’

By asserting that his ‘whole interview [. . .] just on homosexuality’ should begin with an acknowledgement that ‘all Pop artists aren’t homosexual’, Warhol pre-emptively upends the notion that Pop constitutes a ‘homosexual’ rejoinder to the macho excesses of Abstract Expressionism. Warhol refuses to define Pop according to what it resists—refusing, in other words, to suture Pop into a dependent relationship upon the mainstream of high modernist artistic expression in the USA. In tandem, Warhol also refuses to define ‘homosexuality’ in pseudo-Freudian terms. He proposes instead to conduct a ‘whole interview [. . .] just on homosexuality’ premised on the confounding, provocative, ‘different than direct’ ‘fantasy’, as Warhol calls it, that ‘everybody should be a machine’ and ‘everybody should like everybody’. In Warhol’s ‘fantasy’, it does not much matter whether a Pop artist is or is not ‘homosexual’ because the stark division between homosexuality and heterosexuality falls away. And it falls away not because everybody celebrates his or her distinctness but rather because everybody does the same thing all the time: ‘you do the same thing every time, you do the same thing over and over again’, including ‘sex’ and ‘everything you do’. Warhol thus responds to Swenson’s question ‘What do you say about homosexuals?’ with a confounding, indirect, provocative queer fantasy that undermines the distinction between homosexual and heterosexuality, thereby making room for different forms of difference.

In his paper ‘Like: Collecting and Collectivity’, Flatley identifies a ‘utopian impulse’ at the heart of ‘Warhol’s self-avowed aim of liking things’—an ‘attempt’, as Flatley writes, ‘to imagine new, queer forms of attachment and affiliation, and to transform the world into a place where these forms could find a home’. Flatley begins his analysis from the published version of Warhol and Swenson’s 1963 exchange quoted above—or misleadingly quoted, as we now know. ‘The indispensable reference point for an inquiry into Warhol’s liking is of course his well-known 1963 interview with Gene Swenson’, Flatley states. Moving from Warhol’s claims about ‘liking’ in the published interview all the way through Warhol’s various, eclectic collecting practices, Flatley traces Warhol’s ongoing efforts to present ‘a particular and in some way an idealized or utopian version of the collectivity that took shape in Warhol’s Factory in the 1960s’; a collectivity in which ‘a range of misfits might find a place to experience their mis-fitting in common’. In his book “Our Kind of Movie”: The Films of Andy Warhol, Douglas Crimp analyses how Warhol’s 1966 film The Chelsea Girls engenders a comforting feeling of ‘misfitting together’, not only because the film celebrates a motley crew of misfits—a bunch of queers and junkies at a seedy residential hotel’, as Crimp writes—but also because of how the film is projected, with sound fading in and out on ‘two screens, side by side, but not fitting together’. Which is all to say, Warhol’s paintings, recording, boxes, and films have proven sufficiently suggestive for subsequent generations of scholars and critics to elucidate queer sensibilities permeating the work and Warhol’s words, even down to his statements about ‘liking things’, censorship be damned.

But censorship matters, of course. And it is worth noting that Warhol insists on three separate occasions during the interview’s first fifteen minutes that he wants his published interview to be about homosexuality, and that Swenson should ask the other Pop artists about homosexuality as well. About twelve minutes into the interview, Warhol pauses to ask ‘Is this still going on?’, Swenson replies ‘Yeah’—which leads to the following exchange:

It is startling to hear the question ‘Do you think Pop Art’s queer?’ asked in 1963 with such terse clarity. Startling because that question was never seriously posed outright in any published criticism or writings from the early 1960s. And that, of course, is the rub: Swenson did not actually ask Rosenquist, Dine, Indiana, or anyone else ‘Do you think Pop Art’s queer?’ It is all a fantasy. And the fantasy makes for a funny yet biting joke because Warhol, Swenson, Malanga, and John share knowledge that Warhol’s Pop is queer, and they share knowledge that those other artists—whom they poke fun at as square, repressed, not quite as smart or cool—would be unwilling to deal with the question, or unable even to understand what it means. So, what does it mean? If Malanga mocks Indiana behind his back ‘because he’d go, “Ooooh! That doesn’t make sense!”’ then what sort of sense does the question make to Swenson, Warhol, Malanga, and John? What understanding of Pop and of queer do these four friends share in 1963? At a moment when the question du jour is ‘What is Pop Art?’, Swenson’s fantasy question ‘Do you think Pop Art’s queer?’ positions the terms Pop and queer in reciprocal relation, so that the definition of one hinges on the other, both being worked out simultaneously.

On tape, Warhol does not provide a direct, pat answer to the question ‘Do you think Pop Art’s queer?’ Instead, he offers a much queerer sort of affirmative response by dint of his refusal to lock down definitions of the terms Pop and queer, or to offer an expository account of the relationship between Pop and homosexuality. Queer, I suggest, in the sense that Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick describes as referring to an ‘open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances, and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, of anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or can’t be made) to signify monolithically’.27 Warhol’s ‘fantasy’ that ‘everybody
should be a machine’ and ‘everybody should like everybody’ operates on an interpretive and signifying register that is ‘different than direct’ as it conjures new gradations of difference that have no space in the wider world structured by a sharp division between homo- and heterosexuality. Recall Warhol’s stuttering response to John and Malanga’s reductive ribbing following his professed desire to have a ‘whole interview [.] just on homosexuality’: ‘No, it has to be on a different, a kind of different... No, it should be a different... it should be a different, differently than you know just sort of like, you know, sorta...’

The new revelation that Warhol constructed his ‘fantasy’ about everybody being a machine and liking everybody explicitly as a ‘kind of different’ strategy to speak on the record about homosexuality in a fantastical way that could be generative, open, and ambiguous—or, in a word, queer—indeed confirms what scholars have long surmised: that even as Warhol’s work addresses consumerism, serial production, and modernist myths of authenticity and creativity, it is also and fundamentally about queer ways of feeling and being in the world. In Opacity and the Closet: Queer Tactics in Foucault, Barthes, and Warhol, Nicholas de Villiers describes this sort of shared understanding among scholars as a ‘queer intellectual solidarity’ that aggrandises rather than obviates his own analysis of Warhol’s ‘queer opacity’. ‘What I propose’, de Villiers writes, ‘is that we read with rather than against Warhol’s discursive tactics [.] that we take his word regarding his desire to be a machine or that if we want to know who Andy Warhol is we should look at the surface [.] and thus not reduce his opacity to a transparency, a comforting reflection with which we can identify, or a depth psychology’,28 ‘We must instead look at what happens on the surface of these texts’,29 de Villiers declares. And while this long-suppressed recording affirms de Villiers’s sense that Warhol’s statements about being a machine were indeed queer discursive tactics to resist ‘assumptions of authenticity, disclosure, and transparency’,30 it also reveals that what happens on the surface of the text we have received is deeply misleading in this case. The recording shows that beneath the surface of the published version of this particular (and particularly significant) early interview are archival traces of a fraught history of how the text came to be cut up and reconfigured against Warhol’s avowed desire to have ‘homosexuality’ ‘on’ his interview. It is a history that involves not just Warhol but Swenson and Hess too—a history that opens onto Swenson’s increasingly messy, public, and stubborn battles with the institutions that shape and constrain what can be said. Recall Lippard’s assessment from her 1968 conversation with Judd, ‘of course you don’t mess with Gene Swenson, but in those days you could mess with him a little more’.31

In the wake of this interview, Warhol developed his own, now well-theorised queer strategies with which to face the world: to navigate institutions and preempt interview situations that could leave him vulnerable. These strategies involved, among other things, maintaining an inscrutable façade drained of conventional affect; liking everything and collecting alike things; and saying almost nothing (certainly nothing censorable) to interviewers from official institutions while, at the same time and on his own terms, tape-recording and transcribing almost everything said at the Factory without any excisions. With these strategies, Warhol transforms his queer ‘fantasy’ about liking things and being like a machine into an ongoing practice replete with utopian possibilities for new, queer forms of feeling and being together—as scholars have convincingly established. For example, as Flatley writes, ‘When a problem becomes a tape, it stops being a problem, not only for those listening, but also for those performing for the tape. [...] By way of transference into the common space of

31. Donald Judd Interviewed by Lippard, Lucy R. Lippard papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.
the collection, what had been alienating or depressing becomes the source of a connection to other people.32

Working parallel to Warhol in the same milieu, Swenson developed his own queer strategies for navigating the institutions and situations that could leave him vulnerable. But unlike Warhol’s approaches, Swenson’s tactics cannot be so easily recuperated as structuring optimistic possibilities for alternative, queer ways of feeling and being together. Swenson remained vulnerable and largely isolated, although, as Lippard notes, ‘he always had Ann Wilson at his side’.33 His inscrutable displays of excessive emotion in response to a world that felt to him irredeemably cynical, complacent, and cruel rendered him lonely, and even landed him in the psychiatric ward of Bellevue Hospital on three occasions, rather than amid the humming whirl of film projectors at the Factory, where he could ‘misfit together’ with other queers. In Lippard’s estimation, ‘[Gene] left himself raw and open to a world all too ready to devour him and he was, consequently, hurt by it as a more “normal” person would not be. He saw the situation with the accuracy “madness” can painfully exact and “sanity” rejects out of instinctive self-preservation.’34 Eulogising Swenson for Village Voice two weeks after his death in August 1969, his friend and fellow critic Jill Johnston writes,

The last time I saw him he was Gene the Gentle, walking down the Bowery slow motion, fragile, transparent, not really there. And scared shitless. Trapped. [...] Not that anyone could keep up with his roles. The Village Priest, Poet, and Philosopher. The hippie revolutionary. The scholar and art historian. The home town boy from Kansas. And at last the reports would come in how he was barefoot on the streets with a bible and getting the number messages off the radio and he was becoming his Crazy Gene self and he was beautiful but it wouldn’t be long before they’d come to get him because he’d wreck his place or something considered unsociable and thus for the third time in June he was going into the recovery phase of a cycle that included being a prisoner of state and so forth the garbage everybody knows about.35

Swenson’s queer strategies, which could be angry and ‘scared shitless’ but also gentle and beautiful, in the end left him ‘raw and open to a world all too ready to devour him’, as Lippard remarks. As he explored possibilities for affectivity in the late 1960s, Swenson also exposed, time and again, the painful limits of what feelings can (and cannot) do when up against the recalcitrance of our institutions.

‘Feelings They Call Political’

For a few years after his interview with Warhol, Swenson focused his critical writing on expounding the possibilities that Warhol’s work presents for making the world a better place. Swenson focused his analysis on the series of silkscreen paintings Warhol referred to as ‘Death in America’, depicting car crashes, suicides, electric chairs, and so on; his wooden replicas of Brillo, Mott’s, Del Monte, Kellogg’s, Heinz, and Campbell’s boxes; and early films such as Sleep (1963) and Blow Job (1964). In an essay titled ‘The Darker Ariel: Random Notes on Andy Warhol’, produced in October 1964 for the international art magazine Collage, Swenson proclaims.

A great deal that is good and valuable about our lives is that which is public and shared with the community. It is the most common clichés, the most common stock responses which we must deal with first if we are to come to some understanding of the new possibilities available to us in this brave and not altogether hopeless new world. We not only can but must deal positively with the challenges Andy Warhol has given us.

32. Flatley, ‘Like: Collecting and Collectivity’, p. 94.
According to Swenson, Warhol’s work challenges us to deal with the ‘public and shared’ character of our feelings. And up until 1966, Swenson worked to elucidate, for various art world audiences, certain optimistic ‘new possibilities’ inherent in that challenge.

Several months before ‘The Darker Ariel’, in April 1964 Swenson authored a cryptic, provocative flier (Fig. 3) to advertise Warhol’s second solo exhibition at the Stable Gallery, in which the artist filled the space with boxes. On the flier, a full-bleed, diaphanous photo of an impassive, tuxedo-clad Warhol dwarfs a short but dense essay by Swenson, titled ‘The Personality of the Artist’. In the essay, after admonishing against the temptation to expect a straightforward statement from Warhol’s works (‘as for Warhol’s images’, Swenson writes, ‘we ought to be wary of reading any articulated philosophy into them’), Swenson proclaims that ‘paintings and boxes of Warhol are feelings’. He goes on:

‘I want to be a machine,’ the painter has said, misleading many; his work does suppress those symptoms of modern art—personality and creativity—which have been sanctified to the point of blasphemy. Art criticism has been as resistant to allowing the object to make feelings as most psychiatrists have been to allowing, for example, the head of government as a source for personal neurosis (except psychoanalytically through identification, a childhood fear of sexual authority, etc.) The paintings and boxes of Warhol are feelings, as much as paint in Abstract-Expressionist painting is paint; the artist’s works have almost nothing to do with his white streaked hair or his pale skin.37

In an extended version of the essay ‘The Personality of the Artist’, Swenson explains why it matters that the ‘paintings and boxes of Warhol are feelings’, in terms of their capacity to focus our collective attention on ‘that which is public and shared with the community’.38 In a draft preserved in his archive, Swenson writes:

Yet, in a way, abstract art tries to be an object which we can equate with the private feelings of the artist, the canvas being the arena on which these private feelings are acted out. Warhol presents objects which, in a sense, we can equate with public, communal feelings. [...] To my mind Warhol’s greatest works are the silk-screens which he showed in the Paris show called Death in America—the car crashes, the suicides, the electric chairs [...] These paintings are not mirrors of society. They are mirrors of what happens to us without our knowing or realizing it. In a way they might be said to objectify experience, turn feelings into things so we can deal with them.39

Rather than treat the canvas as an ‘arena’ for acting out ‘private feelings’, Warhol paints ‘the open sores in American political life’, as Thomas Crow has stated, writing thirty years after Swenson.40 According to Swenson’s analysis, by depositing on his canvases ‘public, communal feelings’ shared among those who witness atrocities in the media every day, Warhol supplants remnants of a modernist belief that individual creativity is fuelled by the artist’s ‘private feelings’—a belief ‘sanctified to the point of blasphemy’,41 in Swenson’s words. ‘Warhol’s repetitions are not at all like the repetition of similar and yet different terrible scenes day in and day out in the tabloids’, Swenson writes. ‘These paintings mute what is present in the single front page each day, and emphasize what is present persistently day after day.’42 And throughout the early to mid-1960s, Swenson mustered reasons to be optimistic that Warhol’s turn towards expressing ‘public, communal feelings’ rather than ‘private feelings’ could be understood as a harbinger of a wider, societal shift towards dealing with shared social ills and systemic injustice, rather than diagnosing each suffering individual as psychotic. In that period, if Swenson saw ‘new possibilities available to us in this brave and not altogether hopeless new
world’ in Warhol’s expressions of public, communal feelings, it was because he also saw those possibilities at work in the field of psychiatry, given the concurrent rise of a robust ‘anti-psychiatric’ discourse among such prominent leftist psychiatrists as R.D. Laing, David Cooper, Thomas Szasz, and Robert Coles. Indeed, in his essays on Warhol, Swenson mentions specifically the writings that ‘Dr Robert Coles, a Harvard psychiatrist’ published on ‘participants in the civil rights movement’. In these texts, which appeared regularly in popular magazines such as New Republic, Coles condemns the psychiatric establishment’s willingness to act at the behest of those in power to maintain the status quo by pathologising dissent.

Fig. 3. The Personality of the Artist, flier advertising Andy Warhol’s Stable Gallery exhibition, 21 April–9 May 1964. Photo and text by G.R. Swenson. Image courtesy of the Smithsonian Libraries, Washington, D.C.

44. For a cultural history of ‘anti-psychiatric’ and social diagnostic thinking in the United States, see: Michael E. Staub, Madness is Civilization: When the Diagnosis was Social, 1948–1980 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).


Swenson then emphasises that the psychiatrist had shown him these notes in order ‘to stress the changing focus of his work away from an interest in the merely subjective states of disturbed patients’. The moral of Swenson’s brief story, sandwiched between two ‘random notes on Andy Warhol’, is the psychiatrist’s newfound willingness to accept at face value the reality of those ‘feelings they call political’.

The year 1966 marks the high point of Swenson’s avowed optimism that we can ‘deal positively with the challenges Andy Warhol has given us’, and that the psychiatric establishment might start treating social ills rather than so many individual psychopathologies. That year also marks the acme of Swenson’s functional career as an art critic—the last year in which, as Lippard put it, ‘you could mess with him a little more’ because he was willing to make compromises for the sake of getting along and getting on with his work. Swenson’s major exhibition, ‘The Other Tradition’, opened successfully on 27 January 1966 at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia. To accompany the exhibition, Swenson published an essay that represents the culmination of his critical writing up to that point, including his work on Warhol. ‘The Other Tradition’ turned out to be, according to Anne M. Wagner, ‘one of the first—if not the first—pieces of writing to propose an alternative to modernist criticism’.

After 1966, facing institutions continuing with business as usual, and unwilling to deal with ‘feelings they call political’, Swenson began to develop alternative strategies to cope with the waning of optimism, as compromise for the sake of getting along no longer felt tenable from an ethical standpoint. In 1968, the National Gallery of Canada commissioned Swenson to write an essay on James Rosenquist, and which it ultimately refused to publish because Swenson would not acquiesce that he excise certain passages—a demand handed down directly from of Jean Sutherland Boggs, the museum’s director. In that essay, Swenson lays bare the despair and ‘utter confusion’ he felt in the early to mid-1960s, following in particular the assassination of John F. Kennedy:

Suddenly the optimism of the Kennedy years was gone with the crack of a rifle, never to be recaptured. Those who lived through those terrible November days (it was St. Cecilia’s day) and then on, trying to be whole again, have not found our national whole; its wounds seem deeper with each passing month. No, that optimism will never be recaptured. [...] In my memory I cannot separate a half-belief that the television would deny the reports—that sense of life with which he lighted that box could not possibly be snuffed out—and the hope that the television would make me believe that there was a fragment of hope and, in
truth, reality left in my world. I wept comfortless tears. ‘I suffered death but could not
die.’ I weep now as I recall the terror, the disbelief, the utter confusion I felt as the day
wore on, and my inconsolable grief as night fell around my heart.52

Swenson’s actual encounters with the psychiatric establishment after 1966
did not live up to his earlier, optimistic ideal of finding a psychiatrist willing to
think through with him the public, shared character of ‘feelings they call
political’. In an editorial from 30 May 1968 for the New York Free Press
titled ‘The Thought Police’ (Fig. 4), Swenson narrates the harrowing tale of being
hauled off by police and forcibly confined at Bellevue Hospital where, as he
writes ‘I was fed drugs, a practice which I most vocally protested’.53 He then
proclaims:

If a citizen disagrees, he is swept into a ‘mental hospital’ where the thought police have
complete control. ‘They’ cure anyone unfortunate enough to have been brain-washed by
idealistic socialism; by formula, ‘they’ dirty the mind with a passion for money, making the
patient like everyone else (and ‘them’selves). Do I exaggerate? [...] I have never been told
what particular incident led to my arrest, if any did.54

Several weeks before his arrest, on 25 April 1968, Swenson published a
scathing indictment of the art world, titled ‘The Corporate Structure of the
American Art World’, in which he minced no words in condemning ‘Henry
Geldzahler along with that powerful if squabbling former triumvirate—
Greenberg, Rosenberg and Hess’ for having ‘succeeded’, as he put it, ‘in
rooting out what they formerly called the “homosexual and drug addict
conspiracy” which, they said, would produce fagged art’.55 Swenson, let it be
said, made no secret of the fact that he perceived blatant suppression of
homosexual content, or ‘fagged art’ as he says it got called, from the highest
levels of the art world and on down.

As Swenson’s frustration and ire mounted, he came to see the whole art
world, at every level, as culpably complacent in the face of the nation’s grave
atrocities from Selma to Vietnam. And he came to rail indiscriminately and
with increasing ferocity at friends and foes alike. In an editorial published 20
June 1968, titled ‘Why Have None of my Fellow Artists Spoken a Word in
Behalf of the Revolution?’ (Fig. 5), Swenson declared:

We of the art world have been wearing our responsibilities too lightly these days. This
frivolity will live in the pages of history as The Shame of the Artists. Unfortunately I must
include myself in my roles as critic, poet, prophet, and revolutionary. None of us in any of
our capacities—except the Rev. Dr Martin Luther King—has done enough [...] Don’t our
artists understand what this fight is all about? Is that why they are all behaving like
cowards? [...] This then is a judgment and an accusation, in the form of a review of the
1967–1968 season in the ‘fine’ arts. This will, for all time, be remembered as the Season
of Shame.56

The louder and more emphatic Swenson got, however, the harder, it seems,
he became to hear—and not only because his message was drowned out in an
overabundance of angry noise spread too thin over too many issues. For a
handful of Swenson’s closest allies, those artists and critics most sympathetic to
his plight and willing to vouch for the veracity of his condemnations, it grew
too taxing and painful to keep listening. So they stopped, for the most part—
which became an avowed source of mournful regret after Swenson died in the
summer of 1969. In her eulogy for Swenson, Johnston describes a scene of her
own unwillingness to hear him: ‘The next to last time I saw Gene was before
leaving for Europe in June he was yelling at me behind an extended arm and

52. G.R. Swenson, ‘James Rosenquist: The
Figure a Man Makes’ (1968), p. 77. Published
posthumously in Gene Swenson: Retrospective for a
Critic (1971).
55. G.R. Swenson, ‘The Corporate Structure of
the American Art World’, New York Free Press, 25
April 1968, p. 9.
56. G.R. Swenson, ‘Why Have None of my
Fellow Artists Spoken a Word in Behalf of the
Revolution?’, New York Free Press, 6 June 1968,
p. 17.
Psychiatry has given us a new and unexpected insight into the "thought-policed society." Three points of the mind, like others points of yore,asion to the insatiable empire to which they owe us a profession and sociopaths (practical vs. moral questions inevitably solved in favor of the former).

If a citizen dissents, he is swept into a "mental hospital" where the thought police have carte blanche. They use anyone unfortunate enough to have been brain-washed by idealistic socialism; by formula, "They" force the mind with a passion for money, making the patient like everyone else (and "them" solve). Do I exaggerate?

Let me begin my story by admitting that, in late August of last year, I was mad. Love madness has given history many examples of confusion but never, I believe, has been punished as it is by the press of the mind. I am sure that I was behaving in a peculiar manner. Himnmag proved the same in a "A Wicked Miser," when he was at the height of his writing powers—but I have not been told what particular incident led to my arrest, if any did. Perhaps my crime, like those young people recently rounded up last night evening on Second Avenue, was that I was simultaneously happy and poor; a psychiatric impossibility and politically dangerous.

The police knocked on my door very early on Sunday morning, September 3. They asked if anything was wrong and I assured them everything was O.K. I couldn't get back to sleep and so I decided to watch the sun come up on the church steps and go to the early service. That afternoon the police had been seeing me, sounding, rather mysteriously, I reassured him and confirmed my appointment later that week. He seemed perfectly rational. Now I realize that I should have asked him if I could come to the country to see him, and return him to me, but that is all hindsight.

The next day, as I was about to go to bed (early because of my early awakening) there was another knock on my door. By then I was amused, treated the police to a little and was told in a similar vein that my doctor was at the station house. I thought it all somewhat overplaying, but nevertheless I asked if I had any choice in the matter. I was told I did not, whereas I formally requested a lawyer.

At the station, I waited over an hour. By then I was either suspicious. When told that I was going to be taken to Bellevue, I said I would prefer to spend the time in jail until I was able to consult with a lawyer. By that time, obviously, I had no choice but to go with the police.

At Bellevue I asked every official I met for a lawyer. The police were treating a young man with a bleeding hand in the waiting room, and I recommended the inattentive, effective. I was met in charge of matters. After a perfunctory examination involving several minor humiliations, I was relieved of my clothing and given the "blue armband" uniform as I called it—which I was to wear during my confinement.

My psychiatrist showed up a few days later, and urged me to go to N.Y.U. Hospital. I met that I be released. This discussion continued for the next few days, and I finally agreed when he told me that I could sign myself out of N.Y.U. (I did not want to appear irrational). After several more days of half-way in that fancy confinement, I decided that I had had enough of whatever was going on and signed myself out against the recommendations of the hospital, although I had been told it was a patient at any time.

During this entire period I was fed drugs, a practice which I most violently protested. I warned every nurse and doctor that, from previous experience, I was allergic to tranquilizers of the Thorazine variety. A week after I was released I became quite ill, and managed with difficulty to get to the N.Y.U. Hospital emergency room. During the week I tried as far as I felt to find out the circumstances of my arrest and confinement—although I was willing to drop the matter and forget it if I seemed unlikely to happen again. The mystery compounded themselves, however, and my mind was not very helpful. The emergency diagnosis: allergic hepatitis.

Once again I went to the hospital, this time Mount Sinai. My family physician saw me through and, in the course of the psychophysics, wrote me a note to protect me against similar treatment in the future. From the hospital I began once again to find the circumstances which had led to my original confinement. When I asked N.Y.U. Hospital to help, if necessary, with the bills contracted in pursuit of my malpractice, they told me that I had signed myself out and that so far as they were concerned I was still crazy. Since that time I have tried to do two things: get someone interested in investigating my complaints, and keep busy. The State Investigating Commission has written us.

We note that you have corresponded with many public officials regarding the contents of your letter. You do not state the circumstances under which several physicians allegedly came to your apartment last December. In any event, if you question the propriety of your confinement to the Psychiatric Division of Bellevue Hospital, we suggest that you consult with your doctor.

Once again I was told to eat cake. Bellevue, I write:

One medical record indicates that you were given an adequate examination. Your personal physician who was one of was examined by phone and not only examined but received you will be admitted to the hospital for your own benefit. All medical records involved will be maintained in normal physical form and not in the special medical records.

My former psychiatrist denied that he made such a request—and I would hesitate even to consult with a shrink again without a lawyer present.

I do not believe these incidents of September have anything to do with my present difficulties in the art world, although the Museum of Modern Art did not my parents, and I do not believe that "Time," "Newsweek" and the "New York Times" know about these difficulties (although I have tried to see Dr. Howard Risk and have talked with Charles Bennett), but I am sure that their reluctance to print my name even when such incidents continue to arise (with the National Gallery of Canada over the Rembrandt catalogue, the question mark pocket book) changes which continue to fly between myself and MOMA, etc., could not be in any way connected with the political decisions not to investigate this case. Art, John D. and Newton related?

I would, however, arm up this essay with another true story. A woman I know recently watched a production of "1984" on television. I asked her what she thought of it. She said that it reminded her a great deal of her own life and her difficulties with her stepfather. I was shocked, and completely unperturbed for what followed. She was particularly struck by the similarities between the thought police in the play and her own psychiatrist.

Anyone for tyranny?
Why Have None of my Fellow Artists Spoken a Word in Behalf of the Revolution?

by Gene Swenson

We of the art world have been wanting our responsibilities too lightly these days. This frivolity will live in the pages of history as The Shame of the Artists. Unfortunately, I must include myself in my roles as critic, prophet, poet and revolutionary. None of us in any of our capacities—except the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King—has done enough.

My petty quarrels with Gene d’Hannover (who still insists I am a danger to art) and Thomas Hoving, Henry Geldzahler, Clement Greenberg and others have been eclipsing their authority against too many people, including artists. They are the Guggenbergs, Kehrs and David Trumans of the art world.

But let us skip over these minor grievances. Why have none of my fellow artists spoken a word (in print at least) on behalf of the revolution? James Rosenquist and Robert Indiana are great many more who should have known better. I have taken ostrich positions. Even with my lack of prestige, I have succeeded in putting Hoving’s first purchase in the basement and keeping one curator from seeing so much of his brother the dealer, in forcing an apology out of NBC, and in being arrested twice. This is not much to contribute to this fight, but it is better than some. Even the least of us has something to give. Don’t our artists understand what this fight is all about? Is that why they are all behaving like cowards?

My sins—for I admit I am not in jail, where all men of virtue reside today—as an artist of 1968, and my eternal shame, are summarized in one word: complacency. Perfection is not enough, although our artists behave as if it were. They’ve all got style, all right—but most of it is in their foppish behavior, not in their art. Some high-ranking artists produce art which is not even worth doing—Castelli and Pace artists being outstanding leaders of this trend.

The art world doesn’t even know how much fun Broadway and the wider world has been having at its expense. When the history of these years is written, the theater world (with “Golden Boy,” “Cabaret,” and “Hair”) will be judged superior to the fine arts in more categories than politics.

A revolution, however, needs its artists, perhaps most of all. And none of us have been doing enough. Let there arise in our midst a cry for freedom of spirit, of person, of moral conscience. A few poets or artists have acted in noble tradition, taking up the cause of the poor and helpless. Leloi Jones has shamed us all with his great example, but even Allen Ginsberg and Robert Lowell have shown some sense of conscience. What painter has done the same? The degree of opportunism which was originally evident to a few about Angry Arts has been exposed for all to see. (Whatever happened to Baby Man?)

We have the “F-111,” but even its painter doesn’t come out and say what needs to be said. Some cynophilist painters may even now be saying, “What? What needs to be said?” As for their art, whatever needs to be said will probably never be said by them; as for the revolution, I have a few maxims designed for artists:

1. The upper classes are no damn good, in any society, ever, at any time.
2. The partial exceptions are those who follow the path of greatest virtue, to whom we must look for protection from wrongs—those is, justice for all. At the moment Kennedy represents the practical alternative and King the spiritual alternative.
3. The artist class is more responsible than any other when tyranny oppresses a nation, and when its minorities cry out for “Justice!”

Art not only always has the ear of the upper classes, but it can bring the passions of men to the side of justice, virtue, and compassion. That last word means suffering with, compassion. Cannot art, now that the time has come, be passionate! Justice, virtue and compassion need, and the artists should find for them, a new life.

In these times, when so many are suffering so much, can we not spend a little more time sharing in their suffering: that might affect our art, which in turn could affect men’s hearts and souls. (I’m not advocating Socialist Realism, although what could be more hollow than Neo-Modern?)

Just ten more minutes a day, even with the I-92 New York Times, could affect our lives: the ads for the parades and activities but just in getting the whole story of the Poor People’s Campaign, for example. Even the strikes at Columbia and in France, the new government in Czechoslovakia, the trial of President Liu (a mistake, if it ever takes place), and various other matters, might be followed both for intellectual profit and interest, during that ten minutes if humanitarian reasons are not enough. Artists should at least be able to invent reasons of the heart and soul, even if they can’t feel them, for being an artist in the new, post-revolutionary, Socialist States of America.

This, then, is a judgement and an accusation, in the form of a review of the 1967-1968 season in the “fine” arts. This will, for all time, be remembered as the Season of Shame.

pointed finger. I don’t know the content of his fury because I was making just as much noise in my own distress while cowering toward the exit.\textsuperscript{57}

But the content of Swenson’s fury is worth getting to know. I think, especially now—fury that led him at the end of the 1960s to act up and lash out in ways that could be at turns menacing and frightening, gentle and poetic. In the summer of 1967, Swenson sent a lavish funeral wreath to the Metropolitan Museum bearing the name ‘Henry’ (as in Geldzahler) to be delivered to ‘the foot of the great Roman statue in the south end of the Great Hall’,\textsuperscript{58} according to a write-up in the \textit{New York Times}. ‘Gene didn’t take this lightly and neither did Henry’, recalled James Rosenquist, who was a close friend of Swenson. ‘Henry was afraid, and Gene became more and more angry that his ideas were not getting across and he could not get a real platform to speak from.’\textsuperscript{59} In a letter to MoMA dated ‘March, 1968’, Swenson threatened to ‘embarrass the top brass of this museum and the speakers at the symposium by a surprise event, an act of high melodrama’,\textsuperscript{60} which turned out only to involve Swenson showing up alone with a tin beggar’s cup, wearing hand-scrubbed brown paper signs that read ‘Virtue is its own reward’ and ‘Have a heart’—tender objects still preserved among Swenson’s papers (Fig. 6).

In June of that year, he interrupted a panel discussion moderated by Robert Morris, titled ‘Dance and its Alternatives’, by screaming from the balcony. Jill Johnston (who was on the panel) describes Swenson as ‘basically a harmless democrat with excellent vocal projection’. ‘He could improve his style’, Johnston writes, ‘but what he’s doing is actively creating the kind of impossible situation that reduces all talking to zero’.\textsuperscript{61} By disrupting the flow of business as usual, Swenson suspended everyone in the auditorium—panellists and audience members alike—in a state of being unnerved and uncomfortable, without a clear protocol. ‘When Gene was up there on the balcony screaming quotes from Mao or Ho Chi shortly before ejection Yvonne [Rainer] was sputtering to me to do something because I’d promised I could “handle it” but I thought it was handling itself’, Johnston reflects. ‘Assuming authority is one kind of occupational hazard and Gene knows the price he can pay for being an uninvited bully.’\textsuperscript{62}

On the occasion of MoMA’s 1968 exhibition ‘Dada, Surrealism, and their Heritages’, Swenson organised a large protest ‘dedicated to the lost but not forgotten spirit of Dada and Surrealism’ whose ‘historical bodies are now embalmed at the Museum of Modern Art, beginning the week of March 25’, as he put it in a \textit{Village Voice} advertisement (Fig. 7).\textsuperscript{63} According to a report in the \textit{New York Times} the next day, Swenson’s protest ‘turned out to be a remarkably gentle demonstration outside the museum’ with ‘300 subdued demonstrators […] clad in quilts and waving gaily painted banners’, despite the presence of ‘a sawhorse barricade to contain the demonstrators’ and ‘helmeted members of the Tactical Patrol Force’.\textsuperscript{64}

In the month leading up to his large ‘remarkably gentle demonstration’, Swenson conducted his solitary protest every weekday from 11am to 1pm outside MoMA, clad in a dark jacket, scarf, and gloves, wielding only his giant blue question mark. Writing about Swenson’s protest in an editorial for the \textit{New York Free Press} (Fig. 8), Batcock, who was a careful and sympathetic observer, surmised, ‘The museum won’t let Swenson in, because they don’t know what to expect from him. They don’t know what he wants.’\textsuperscript{65} And Lippard remembered, ‘The whole Art Workers’ Coalition couldn’t match the courage of Gene, the year before it was founded, persistently picketing the Museum of Modern Art, alone, with a huge blue question mark on a stick.’\textsuperscript{66}
Fig. 6. Gene Swenson, handmade signs on brown packing paper, c. 1968. Reproduced with permission from Ann Wilson, Executor of the Gene Swenson Estate.

Fig. 7. Advertisement published in Village Voice, 21 March 1968. Clipping pasted into Ann Wilson’s journal. Reproduced with permission from Ann Wilson, Executor of the Gene Swenson Estate.
Picketing alone outside MoMA, Swenson reflects darkly the immorality of an art world complacent in the face of atrocity. He withholds the comfort of slogans and solidarity, of simple demands shouted in unison. With his question mark, Swenson suspends the popular protest chant in a state of unease at ‘What Do We Want?’ Only in his protest, the ‘We’ never materialises. No rallying cry rises up in response to his question mark. How could it? It is not meant to.

Rather than giving fellow critics, artists, curators, and museumgoers the chance to feel, if fleetingly, a sense of ‘suffering with, compasion’, so broken and absent from an art world unwilling even to speak ‘a word in behalf of the revolution’, Swenson instead stages that brokenness in a manner no one could ignore.

Or, more precisely, that no one entering or exiting MoMA on weekdays, between 11am and 1pm could ignore, which would have included primarily those associated with the art world: employees, curators, trustees, artists, and other invited guests leaving for and returning from lunch. Swenson’s big blue

question mark does not function like a protest sign in any conventional sense, like a thing intent on inciting the people’s emotions towards a common cause. By picketing alone, by dramatising a breakdown of reciprocity and foreclosing the possibility for collective response, Swenson’s big blue question mark functions as a mirror for the art world’s own culpable complacency. Indeed, Battcock interprets Swenson’s protest as a poignant gesture of surrender in the face of a nation’s depravity. Near the end of his editorial on Swenson’s protest, Battcock recalls a statement from the previous week’s *New York Free Press*, written by a soldier recently returned from Vietnam:

He had seen three babies, burnt to a crisp, being taken away in an ambulance. Very appropriately, and with profound existential humility, he concluded his article with:

- Nor could we find out where they had been taken from.
- Neither, really, matters very much.
- Nor, of course, does it matter when the mother died.

Battcock then concludes: ‘Alone Swenson pickets, itself an existential gesture as it provides confrontation in isolation. What does he want? Who could ever know. Will he achieve his goal? In as much as there is a goal, it has already been achieved. Equally, we have already lost the war.’ Which is probably right, but Swenson did not declare the war lost. Although it might have felt despondently like a lonely white flag to a sympathetic observer such as Battcock, Swenson’s big blue question mark was no simple sign of resignation. If nothing else, Swenson’s sheer tenacity belies any straightforward interpretation of his action as surrender, or as a purely negative verdict on the futility of reciprocity and collectivity. Day after day, Swenson showed up. Day after day, in the dead of winter, Swenson put his body on the line at the threshold to the art world from which he had been banned. With his question mark outside MoMA, Swenson demands an excruciating kind of commitment: to dwell in a state of unknowing, alert and ill at ease, even as the nation’s moral compass feels broken beyond repair, its institutions unmovable, and resistance futile.

**Postscript: Queer Demands**

Forty years after Swenson, in January 2008, the artist Sharon Hayes pickets alone outside the New Museum in New York City in the midst of another US war, likewise clad in a dark jacket, scarf, and gloves, although in this instance wielding not a question mark but a megaphone (Fig. 9). Into the megaphone, she speaks love letters from ‘a time of passionate, optimistic protest against the Iraq War in 2003’ intercut with protest slogans. And in this context, Hayes proclaims: ‘What do we want?... When do we want it?’ But, as Kris Cohen writes, ‘in the performances I witnessed, no one spoke in that interval (although they were free to), and Hayes quickly passed through it, rendering it a schematic beat, thereby underscoring the conventionality of convention, its promise as well as its threat of emptiness’. Cohen frames Hayes as ‘an artist of the broken genre’, which he defines as ‘a historical scene of everyday disorientation’ in which the promise of reciprocity ‘floats, but at the same time so does the possibility, maybe even the certainty, that nothing will be returned’. In her performance outside the New Museum—which, unlike Swenson’s protest action, was commissioned and documented by the Museum itself (though, in a queer twist of fate, the most comprehensive documentation of Swenson’s protest outside MoMA is now preserved inside MoMA’s institutional archives), Hayes presents love and protest as intertwined in their...
shared ‘faith and reliance on the promise of reciprocity, and on the fragility of that promise’, as Cohen writes. ‘In this narrative’, Cohen continues, ‘the disillusionment of failed protest deflates a key promise of liberal democracy: the idea that if a protest is allowed to happen, it will matter’.72

In a related series, titled In the Near Future (2005–8), Hayes pickets alone in various cities—New York, Vienna, Warsaw, London, and others—wielding protest signs out of time and place, with old slogans culled from past protests, or speculative slogans that address future possibilities: messages that scramble, bewilder, and thwart urgencies of the present (Fig. 10). In a 2009 conversation with Julia Bryan-Wilson, Hayes frames the questions that animate In the Near Future: ‘How does protest become intelligible? Why and how can my specific body—versus other bodies—make this sign intelligible?’73 Bryan-Wilson describes In the Near Future as ‘inflected by [Hayes’s] queer commitment to how history might warp or distort given different subject formations, different ideas about community, and different relationships one has to the sweep of normative or official history’.74 In a subsequent essay, Bryan-Wilson describes this kind of relationship to the past as ‘evoking what historian Carolyn Dinshaw has called a “queer desire for history”, that is, the “possibility of touching across time, collapsing time through affective contact between marginalised people now and then . . . [so as to] form communities across time”’.75

In Hayes’s performances, with her nearly identical scarf to keep out the same cold New York wind, in that uncanny extra question mark of her hand-scrawled sign ‘Who approved the WAR in—Vietnam??’, we witness a queer ghost of Swenson picketing alone with his question mark. This is not to say that Hayes conjures Swenson intentionally. Rather, in another queer temporal collapse, Hayes provides a contact point for thinking queerly in the present (or, nearer past) about Swenson’s protest actions. Like Hayes’s address outside the New Museum and her anachronistic protest signs, Swenson’s question mark makes demands that are deeply queer. Rather than speaking from a stable subject position, Swenson stages an ambiguous question that punctuates both his body and


Fig. 9. Sharon Hayes, I march in the parade of liberty, but as long as I love you I’m not free, performance at the New Museum, New York, 2007–8. Photograph: Andrea Geyer. Image courtesy of the artist and Tanya Leighton Gallery, Berlin.
the institution behind him, a question that cannot be mapped to urgencies of his present. Swenson’s question mark asks how protest becomes intelligible and suspends the possibility that it will not, that the promise of reciprocity is already broken; that our institutions, even liberal ones, will not budge; and that in our liberal democracy, protest will not matter even if it is allowed to happen. However, through his own conspicuous, unnerving example, Swenson demands that we show up anyway.

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Fig. 10. Sharon Hayes, In the Near Future, New York, 2005. Detail. 35mm multiple slide projection installation, 9 actions, 9 projections 223 original slides (729 in total). Image courtesy of the artist and Tanya Leighton Gallery, Berlin.