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‘Do you think Pop Art’s queer?’ Gene Swenson and Andy Warhol

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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',³—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

1. See: G.R. Swenson, 'What Is Pop Art? Answers from 8 Painters, Part I', *ARTnews*, vol. 62, no. 7, November 1963, pp. 24–7, 60–4, and 'What is Pop Art? Part II', *ARTnews*, vol. 62, no. 10, February 1964, pp. 40–3, 62–7.

2. Lucy Lippard, contribution to 'Gene Swenson: A Composite Portrait', *The Register of the Museum of Art, University of Kansas*, vol. 4, no. 6–7, 1971, p. 16. Special edition published to accompany the exhibition *Gene Swenson: Retrospective for a Critic* (24 October–5 December 1971).

3. Swenson, 'What Is Pop Art? Answers from 8 Painters, Part I' (1963), p. 26.

4. These papers remain in the private possession of Swenson's friend, the critic Henry Martin, who generously allowed me to consult them in March 2016.

5. An extended transcript of the tape of Swenson's interview with Warhol is included in this issue of *Oxford Art Journal*. See: "What is Pop Art?" A revised transcript of Gene Swenson's 1963 interview with Andy Warhol', transcribed and edited by Jennifer Sichel, *Oxford Art Journal*, vol. 41, no. 1, March 2018, pp. . Excerpts from the tape recording can be heard online as part of a lecture I delivered at the Smithsonian American Art Museum. See: Jennifer Sichel, "Do You Think Pop Art's Queer?": Gene Swenson, Andy Warhol, and the Other Tradition' [online video], 18 May 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yh1Z41WeMOU> (accessed 19 October 2017).

6. In the late 1960s, when I suspect Swenson might have transferred his Pop recordings to the cassette tapes that are currently preserved in his archive, Swenson was thinking actively about how to organise his papers and recordings for posterity. In a letter dated 10 May 1968 to Brett Waller, director of the Spencer Museum of Art at the University of Kansas, Swenson writes: 'I have a number of tape recordings of conversations with the artists, as well as other original documents (letters, pencilled suggestions regarding copy, etc.) which might be of interest for your library or archives [...] I have organized my collection in such a way that I doubt you could find a better one for your study purposes, of this size and quality.' Swenson published an edited version of his interview with Raffaele in 1966 in *Arts Magazine*. See: G.R. Swenson,

'Paint, Flesh, Vesuvius: Joe Raffaele discusses the eruptive nature of his Post-Freudian art with writer G.R. Swenson', *Arts Magazine*, vol. 41, no. 1, November 1966, pp. 33–5.

7. Donald Judd Interviewed by Lippard, 10 April–2 June 1968, corrected transcript. Lucy R. Lippard papers, Box 36 Folder 39. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. I am grateful to Danielle O'Steen for bringing this interview to my attention and sharing the transcript with me.

8. Gregory Battcock, 'The Art Critic as Social Reformer—With a Question Mark', *Art in America*, vol. 59 (September–October 1971), pp. 26–7.

9. Lippard, contribution to 'Gene Swenson: A Composite Portrait', pp. 17–18.

10. Jonathan Flatley and Anthony E. Grudin, 'Introduction: Warhol's Aesthetics', *Criticism*, vol. 56, no. 3, Summer 2014, p. 421. Note scholarship on Warhol's queerness that predates the publication of *Pop Out: Queer Warhol* including Patrick Smith, *Andy Warhol's Art and Films* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1986) and Jonathan D. Katz, *Andy Warhol* (New York: Rizzoli, 1993).

11. One notable exception to Swenson's near total absence from the art historical record is a 2002 *Artforum* article by Scott Rothkopf, which provides a substantial account of Swenson's career and curatorial achievements. See: Scott Rothkopf, 'Banned and Determined', *Artforum*, vol. 40, no. 10, Summer 2002, pp. 142–5.

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.⁸ 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 remediying 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.⁹

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.¹⁰

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.¹¹

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

12. Lippard, contribution to 'Gene Swenson: A Composite Portrait', p. 18.

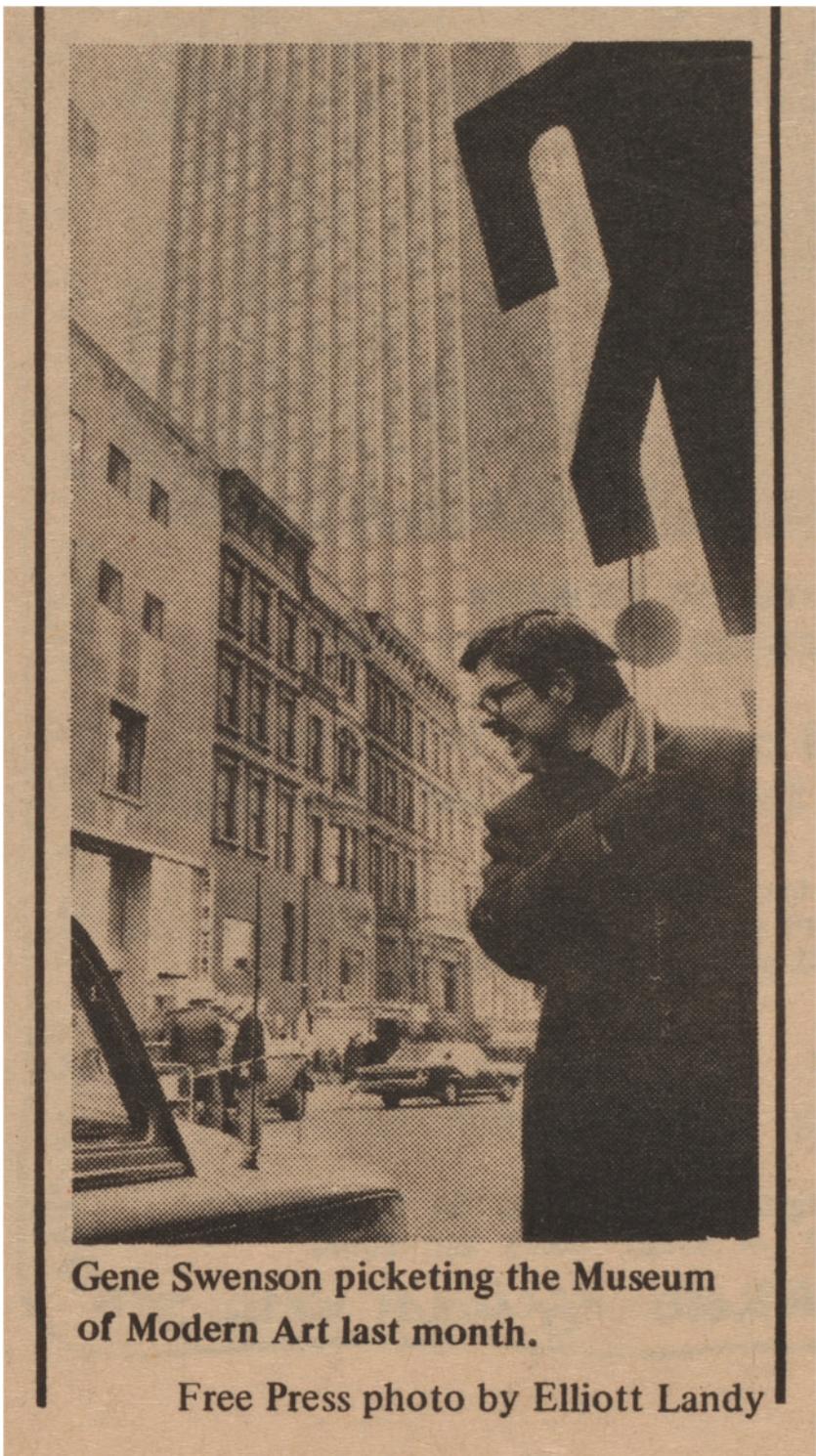
13. G.R. Swenson, 'An Art Critic's Farewell Address', *New York Free Press*, 28 March 1968, p. 8.

14. Lippard, contribution to 'Gene Swenson: A Composite Portrait', p. 18.

15. Jonathan Flatley, 'Like: Collecting and Collectivity', *October*, vol. 132, Spring 2010, p. 72.

16. G.R. Swenson, 'The Personality of the Artist', 1965. Unpublished draft of a lecture delivered on the occasion of the exhibition *Andy Warhol: Works from 1961–1965*, Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania (10 September–8 December 1965). In his major essay titled 'The Other Tradition', published in 1966 to accompany his exhibition at the ICA in Philadelphia, Swenson reiterates this claim, extending its scope. See: G.R. Swenson, *The Other Tradition* (Philadelphia: Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, 1966), p. 28.

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.



**Gene Swenson picketing the Museum
of Modern Art last month.**

Free Press photo by Elliott Landy

Fig. 1. Gene Swenson picketing outside the Museum of Modern Art, 1968. Photo by Free Press photographer Elliott Landy to accompany an editorial by Swenson titled 'An Art Critic's Farewell Address', New York Free Press, 28 March 1968. Clipping from the Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York. Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, NY.



Fig. 2. Gene Swenson picketing outside the Museum of Modern Art, 1968. Black and white snapshot pasted into Ann Wilson's journal. Reproduced with permission from Ann Wilson, Executor of the Gene Swenson Estate.

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

18. Gustavus Stadler, "My Wife": The Tape Recorder and Warhol's Queer Ways of Listening', *Criticism*, vol. 56, no. 3, Summer 2014, p. 440. Stadler notes that Warhol procured his first tape recorder 'sometime in 1964'.

19. Jonathan D. Katz, 'The Silent Camp: Queer Resistance and the Rise of Pop Art', in Hans-Jörg Heusser and Kornelia Imesch (eds), *Visions of a Future: Art and Art History in Changing Contexts* (Zurich: Swiss Institute for Art Research, 2004), pp. 147–58.

20. Douglas Crimp, 'Getting the Warhol We Deserve', *Social Text*, vol. 59, Summer 1999, pp. 61–4.

21. Gavin Butt, *Between You and Me: Queer Disclosures in the Art World, 1948–1963* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), p. 109. Emphasis original.

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...

Warhol

I think that the whole interview on me should be just on homosexuality.

I pause here (about a minute and a half into the conversation) to register, first of all, how utterly surprising it was to hear Swenson begin his interview with Warhol, an interview conducted under the heading 'What is Pop Art?', with a different question entirely: 'What do you say about homosexuals?' Swenson's blunt opening gambit in the role of interviewer affirms, right off the bat, that whatever Warhol says 'about homosexuals' might become an integral, defining part of his answer to the overarching question of the day: 'What is Pop Art?'

Second, note the particular, heightened homophobic environment surrounding Swenson's incredulous dismay that 'Abstract Expressionists' are willing 'to say about a painter that he's homosexual [...] as if it were a kind of criticism', and Warhol's desire to produce a 'whole interview [...] just on homosexuality'. At the time of this 1963 interview, the wounds inflicted under 'a savagely policed, McCarthyite America', as Jonathan D. Katz calls it in an essay on Pop's queer origins, were freshly reopened in advance of the 1964 World's Fair in New York, with brutal crackdowns on queer life in the city.¹⁹ As Douglas Crimp reminds us in his essay 'Getting the Warhol We Deserve', it was amid police raids on underground film screenings and *New York Times* headlines such as 'Growth of Overt Homosexuality in City Provokes Wide Concern' that Warhol and his friends managed in the early 1960s to make 'a world that devised innumerable means of resisting the forces of conformity and repression with radical hilarity, perverse pleasure, defiant solidarity—a truly queer world'.²⁰ In the context of this upsurge in real, state-sanctioned violence against homosexuals in New York City, the willingness among certain 'Abstract Expressionists' to continue lobbing petty insults at gay artists would have been all the more reprehensible, and Warhol's professed desire to conduct a 'whole interview [...] just on homosexuality' all the more defiant. For, as Gavin Butt has demonstrated, it was 'around 1962' after being 'subjected to malicious art-world gossip about his "private" life, and in particular his homosexuality', that Warhol made 'a decidedly queer move', as Butt puts it, 'by embracing and renegotiating his alienated and effete image as a defining strategy of his postmodern persona building'.²¹

Immediately after Warhol proclaims 'I think that the whole interview on me should be just on homosexuality', John and Malanga jump back into the fray. Staging a mock interview of sorts, they begin to imagine on the fly what form a 'whole interview [...] just on homosexuality' could possibly take:

John	Okay, well then let's start. What do you know about homosexuals? Andy, have you ever met a homosexual?
Malanga	Does your can represent a penis? [laughing]
Warhol	No, it can't be like that.
John	I understand that... I understand that... New York is homosexual, is slightly homosexual...
Malanga	The crust of the middle class.
Warhol	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...
Swenson	Different than direct?
Warhol	Yeah.
Swenson	Like, uh, when you were drawing shoes, did you want to draw women's

Warhol shoes?
Swenson Yes.
[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!

22. Swenson, 'What Is Pop Art? Answers from 8 Painters, Part I', p. 61.

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.
Swenson I think everybody should like everybody.
Warhol Is that what Pop Art is all about?
Swenson Yes. It's liking things.
Warhol And liking things is like being a machine?
Swenson Yes, because you do the same thing every time. You do it over and over again.
Warhol 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 wilfully ambiguous, blank statements about consumerism and serial production. But that is not what they were. These statements form the core of

23. Flatley, ‘Like: Collecting and Collectivity’, p. 72.

24. Flatley, ‘Like: Collecting and Collectivity’, pp. 72–3.

25. Flatley, ‘Like: Collecting and Collectivity’, p. 93.

26. Douglas Crimp, “*Our Kind of Movie*”: *The Films of Andy Warhol* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012), pp. 102–9. Emphasis original.

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’.²³ 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.²⁴ 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’.²⁵ 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’.²⁶ 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:

Warhol Well, we didn't say anything, Gene, did we?
Malanga Be quiet, listen.
Swenson Well, I'm not going to copy it all down.
Warhol Oh. Oh, but uh...
Swenson But I'll keep the tape, and use it against all of ya! *[laughing]*
Warhol But, I think it's uh... I think you could really... I, I would want that on my interview, you know that. You know what we were talking about...
Swenson What?
Warhol You know, the homosexuality, and... and...
Swenson You want it in your interview?
Warhol Yeah. But it should be on somebody else's too, just to, uh...
Swenson Oldenburg?
Warhol Yeah.
Swenson Who would be the best one?
Warhol Uh... Rosenquist.
Swenson Rosenquist?
Warhol Yeah.
Malanga He's too gentle!
Warhol Yeah, he's so gentle. No, no, he's just... no, I mean, he's sweet.
Swenson *[pause]* Do you think Pop Art's queer? *[laughing]* I'll ask Rosenquist that.
Warhol Yessss! That would be fantastic!
Malanga And so this time next Sunday for the Rosenquist interview on the same tape...
Warhol Oh, that's really marvellous. And Jim Dine too, just to get his reaction.
Malanga No, Bob Indiana! Awww, are you kidding me!
Warhol No, well you can't do it on everyone's.
Malanga No, but Bob Indiana should have that question asked to him... because he'd go, 'Ooooh, no that doesn't make sense...' *[laughing]*

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

27. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), p. 8.

28. Nicholas de Villiers, *Opacity and the Closet: Queer Tactics in Foucault, Barthes, and Warhol* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), p. 92. Emphasis original.

29. De Villiers, *Opacity and the Closet*, p. 116.

30. De Villiers, *Opacity and the Closet*, p. 116.

31. Donald Judd Interviewed by Lippard, Lucy R. Lippard papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

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...'.²⁷

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 pre-empt 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

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.³⁶

32. Flatley, 'Like: Collecting and Collectivity', p. 94.

33. Lippard, contribution to 'Gene Swenson: A Composite Portrait', p. 18.

34. Lippard, contribution to 'Gene Swenson: A Composite Portrait', p. 18.

35. Jill Johnston, 'Dance Journal: Like a Boy in a Boat', *Village Voice*, 11 September 1969, p. 17.

36. G.R. Swenson, 'The Darker Ariel: Random Notes on Andy Warhol', *Collage*, vol. 3–4, December 1964, p. 106.

37. G.R. Swenson, 'The Personality of the Artist'. Essay printed on a flier to advertise Warhol's exhibition at the Stable Gallery, 21 April–6 May 1964. Emphasis original.
38. Swenson, 'The Darker Ariel', p. 106.
39. G.R. Swenson, 'The Personality of the Artist' lecture (1965). Swenson incorporated most of the content of this lecture into his essay 'The Other Tradition'.
40. Thomas Crow, 'Saturday Disasters: Trace and Reference in Early Warhol' (1996) in *Andy Warhol: October Files*, ed. Annette Michelson (Cambridge, MA: MIT press, 2001), p. 58.
41. Swenson, 'The Personality of the Artist' flier (1964).
42. Swenson, 'The Personality of the Artist' lecture (1965).
43. Swenson, 'The Darker Ariel', p. 106.

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

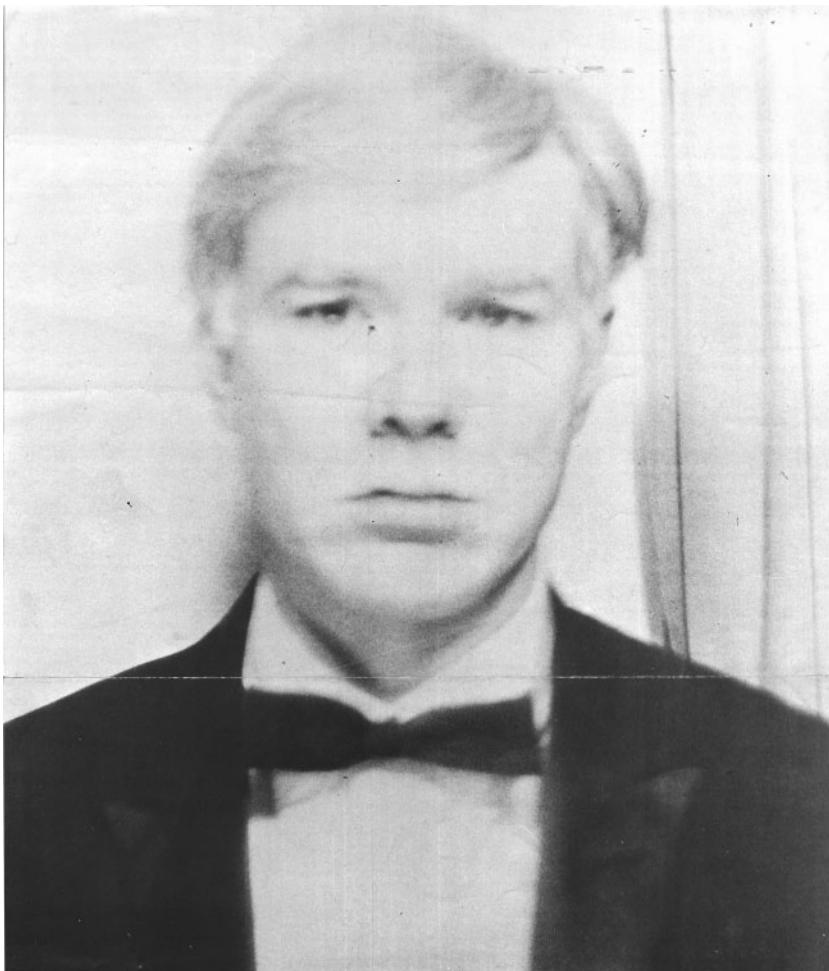


Photo & text by G. R. Swenson

THE PERSONALITY OF THE ARTIST

An understanding of the works of Angus Sinclair, the Scottish painter, can best be helped in understanding the paintings and life of Andy Warhol, although the artist might deny it. As for Warhol, he has been influenced by Sinclair's very articulated philosophy into them. If anything, these objects are curious and strange speak the "language of Sinclair". (See also the language Hofmannsthal's Lord Chadas wanted to hear). "I want to be a machine," the painter has

said, misleading many; his work does express those streams of modern art — pessimism and despair — which are attributed to the Sinclair point of bluesomeness.

Warhol has as resistant to allowing the object to make feelings as most psychiatrists have been; he is allowing, for example, the hand of Sinclair to speak through him. In "The Language of Painting, Emotions and Thought" (classics of Existence), states that "expressing things and feelings through painting is not always accepted psychoanalytically through identification, i.e. childhood fear of sexual authority, etc.). The

paintings and poems of Warhol are feelings, as much as pain in Abstract Expressionist painting is a form of pain. Warhol's paintings are almost like Sinclair's — which are attributed to the Sinclair point of bluesomeness.

With a touch of presence, Warhol's specific art is a touch of presence. Warhol's art is holding a place (things) which we have not seen and probably have not sensed before.

APRIL 21 - MAY 9 OPENING 5-7, APRIL 21

STABLE GALLERY 33 EAST 74TH STREET, NEW YORK

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.

world' in Warhol's expressions of public, communal feelings,⁴³ 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.⁴⁴ 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'.⁴⁵ 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.⁴⁶

In 'The Darker Ariel: Random Notes on Andy Warhol', Swenson makes explicit this parallel between the possibilities of Warhol's work and those of the

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).

45. Swenson, 'The Darker Ariel', p. 106.

46. For a recounting by Coles of this 'anti-psychiatric' turn in his thinking during the early 1960s, see: Robert Coles, 'A Fashionable Kind of Slander', *The Atlantic*, vol. 226, no. 5, November 1970, pp. 53–7.

47. Swenson, 'The Darker Ariel', pp. 105–6.

48. Swenson, 'The Darker Ariel', p. 106.

49. For a detailed review of this exhibition, see: Lucy Lippard, 'An Impure Situation (New York and Philadelphia Letter)', *Studio International*, vol. 10, no. 5, May 1966, pp. 60–5.

50. Anne Wagner, *Three Artists (Three Women): Modernism and the Art of Hesse, Krasner and O'Keeffe* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), pp. 255–6.

51. Drafts of Swenson's essay, along with letters and telegrams from Swenson's dispute with Jean Sutherland Boggs, director of the National Gallery of Canada, are preserved in the Gallery's institutional archives. See: National Gallery of Canada fonds, Exhibitions in Canada, James Rosenquist, Box 509, 12-4-360, vol. 2.

'anti-psychiatric' discourse. He begins the fourth of his five 'random notes' by reproducing in italics the following quote from 'the notebooks of a patient in a mental hospital, written several years ago', which Swenson claims were shown to him by an unnamed psychiatrist friend:

Why am I here? For private reasons they say. The doctors always want me to probe my thoughts, my past, my childhood—everything that could only happen to me in my mind . . .

Communication between me and the world has broken down. They probe me to discover why I have broken down. And nothing public, nothing shared is of any interest to them. They know Eisenhower is President, and they are not interested when I talk about him. They want to know my feelings, but not feelings they call political—the only satisfactory feelings for them seem to be connected with sexual repression. Sex is the only satisfactory reason why Ike depresses me; or they ask, doesn't he remind me of my father or aunt or somebody?⁴⁷

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'.⁴⁸ 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.⁴⁹ 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'.⁵⁰

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 Jean Sutherland Boggs, the museum's director.⁵¹ 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 'agged 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).

53. G.R. Gene Swenson, 'The Thought Police', *New York Free Press*, 30 May 1968, p. 8.

54. Swenson, 'The Thought Police', p. 8.

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.



Fig. 4. Gene Swenson, 'The Thought Police', New York Free Press, 30 May 1968. Clipping from the Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York. Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, NY.

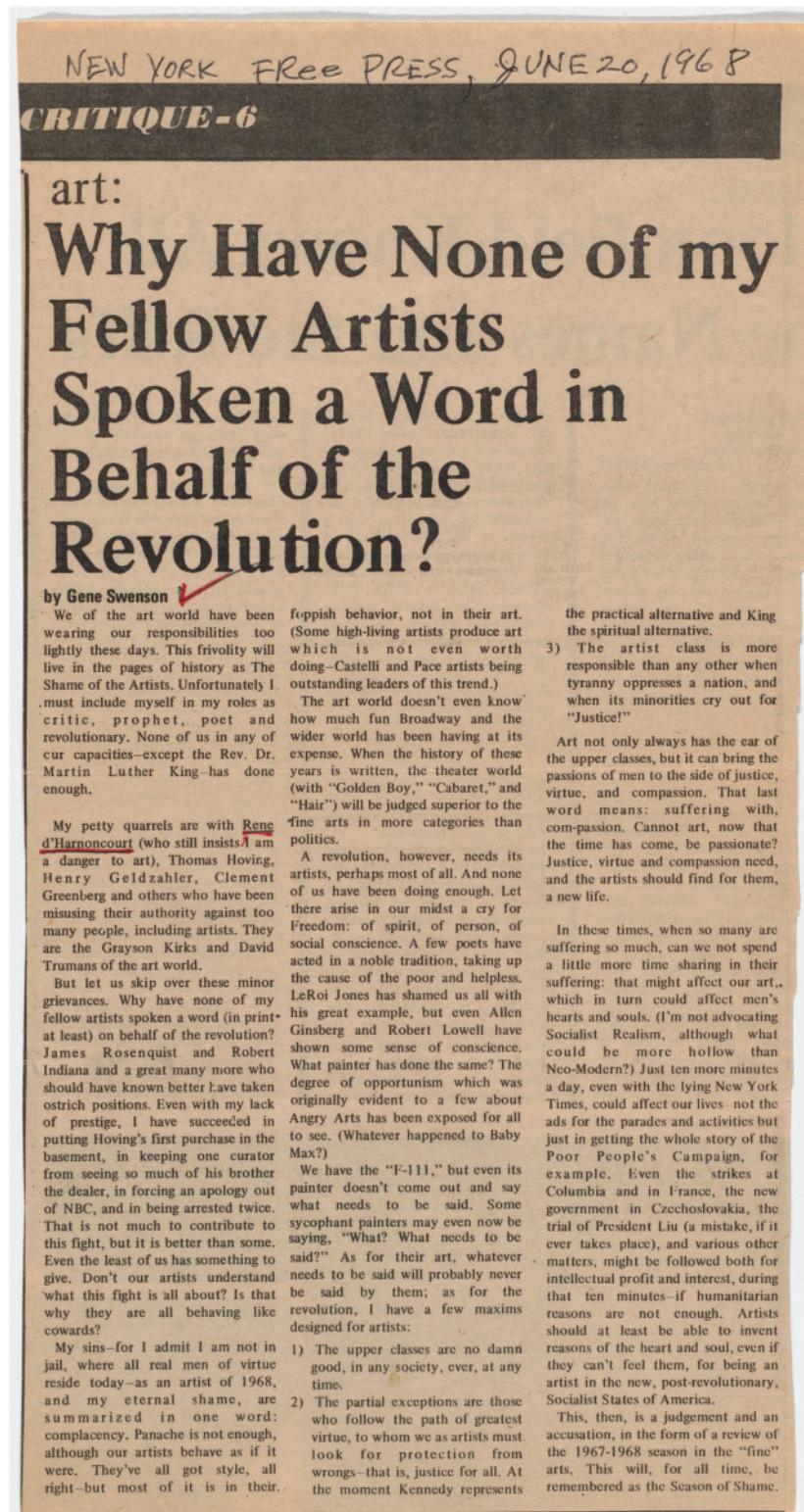


Fig. 5. Gene Swenson, 'Why Have None of my Fellow Artists Spoken a Word in Behalf of the Revolution?', *New York Free Press*, 6 June 1968, p. 17. Clipping from the Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York. Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, NY.

57. Jill Johnston, 'Dance Journal: Like a Boy in a Boat', *Village Voice*, 11 September 1969, p. 17.
58. 'Wreath Sent to Statue Puzzles Metropolitan', *New York Times*, 1 September 1967, p. 31.
59. James Rosenquist, contribution to 'Gene Swenson: A Composite Portrait', p. 27.
60. G.R. Swenson, 'The Question Mark'. Unpublished Archival document. The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York. Department of Public Information: Strikes by MoMA Union (PASTA) and Protests by Outside Groups, Folder 9.
61. Jill Johnston, 'Dance Journal: Cultural Gangsters', *Village Voice*, 6 June 1968, p. 33.
62. Johnston, 'Dance Journal: Cultural Gangsters', p. 33.
63. Advertisement titled 'FREUD IS DEAD. So, too, is Marx. And Modern Art' *Village Voice*, 21 March 1968, p. 20.
64. Grace Glueck, 'Hippies Protest at Dada Preview: 300 in Gentle Demonstration at Museum of Modern Art', *New York Times*, 26 March 1968, p. 21.
65. Gregory Battcock, 'Museum of Modern Art Hires Guards to Keep Swenson Out', *New York Free Press*, 29 February 1968, pp. 6, 10.
66. Lippard, contribution to 'Gene Swenson: A Composite Portrait', p. 18.

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.'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',⁵⁸ according to a write-up in the *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.'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',⁶⁰ which turned out only to involve Swenson showing up alone with a tin beggar's cup, wearing hand-scrawled 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'.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'.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 *Village Voice* advertisement (Fig. 7).⁶³ According to a report in the *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'.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 *New York Free Press* (Fig. 8), Battcock, 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'.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'.⁶⁶

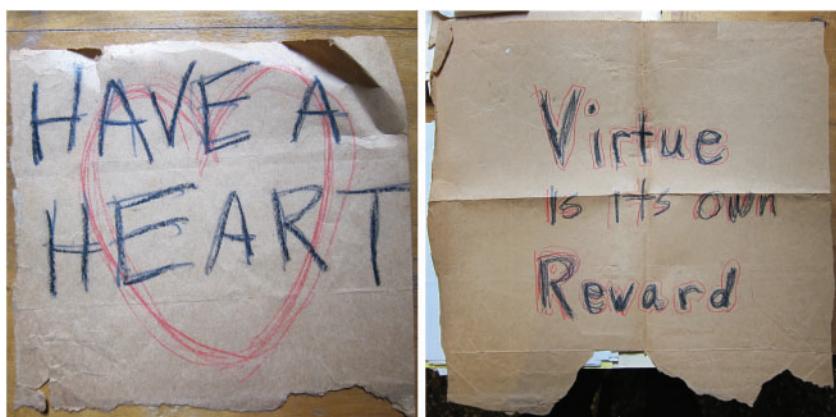


Fig. 6. Gene Swenson, handmade signs on brown packing paper, c. 1968. Reproduced with permission from Ann Wilson, Executor of the Gene Swenson Estate.

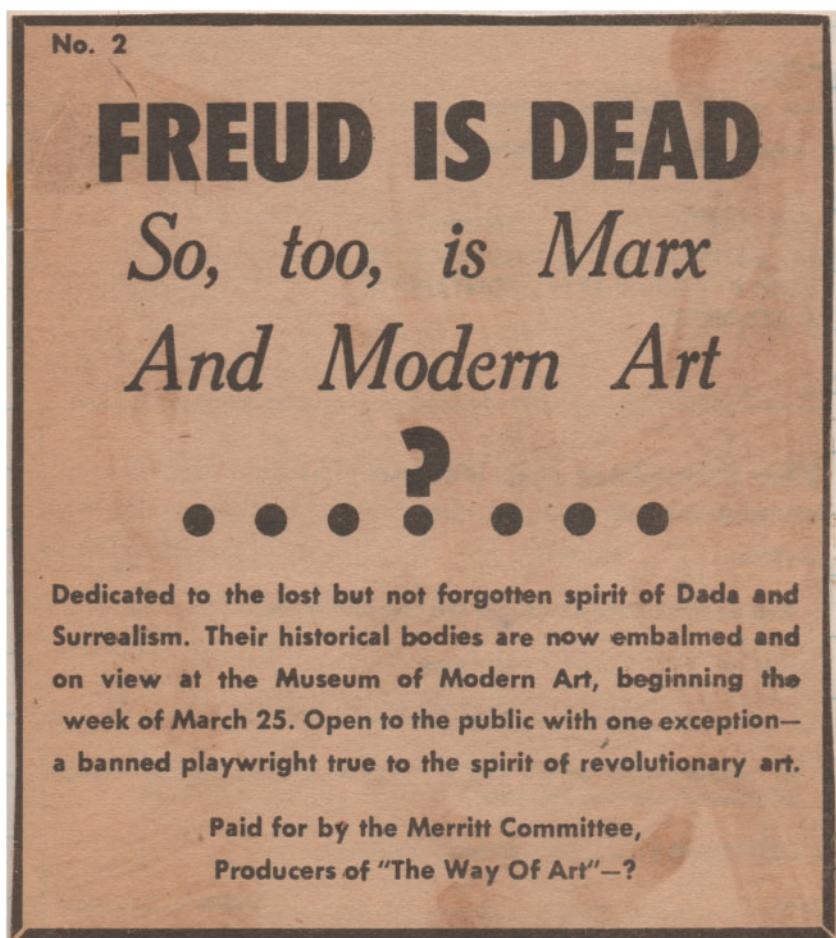


Fig. 7. Advertisement published in *Village Voice*, 21 March 1968. Clipping pasted into Ann Wilson's journal. Reproduced with permission from Ann Wilson, Executor of the Gene Swenson Estate.

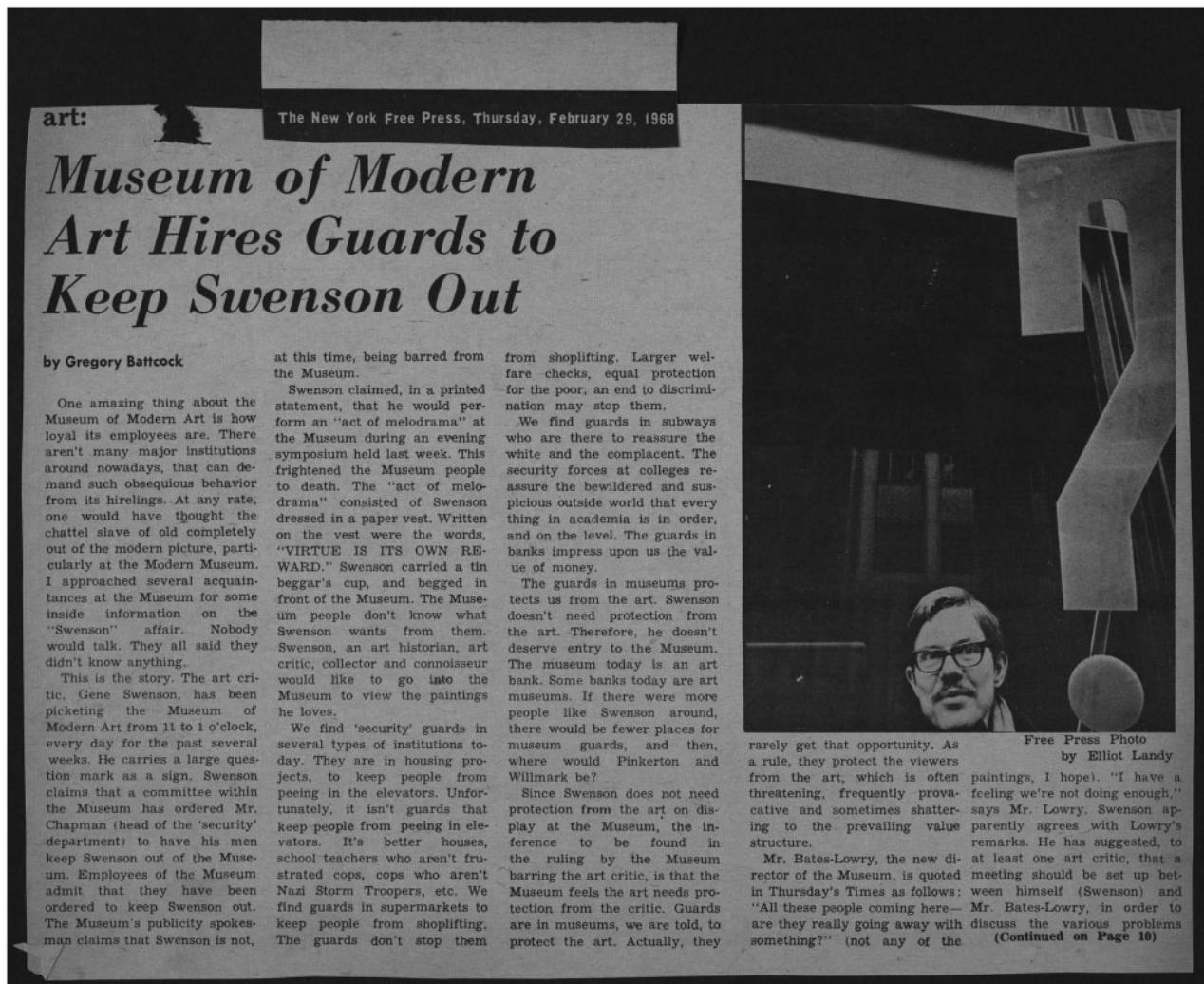


Fig. 8. Gregory Battcock, 'Museum of Modern Art Hires Guards to Keep Swenson Out', *New York Free Press*, 29 February 1968. Photo by Free Press photographer Elliott Landy. Gregory Battcock Papers, 1958–c. 1980. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

67. Swenson, 'Why Have None of my Fellow Artists Spoken a Word in Behalf of the Revolution?', p. 17.

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, com-passion',⁶⁷ 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.'⁶⁸ 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.⁶⁹ 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'.⁷⁰ 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'.⁷¹ 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

68. Battcock, 'Museum of Modern Art Hires Guards to Keep Swenson Out', p. 10.

69. Kris Cohen, 'Our Broken Genres: Sharon Hayes's Love Addresses', *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context and Enquiry*, vol. 38, Spring 2015, p. 31.

70. Cohen, 'Our Broken Genres', p. 32.

71. Cohen, 'Our Broken Genres', p. 29.

72. Cohen, ‘Our Broken Genres’, p. 31.

73. Julia Bryan-Wilson and Sharon Hayes, ‘We Have a Future: An Interview with Sharon Hayes’, *Grey Room*, vol. 37, Fall 2009, p. 89.

74. Bryan-Wilson and Hayes, ‘We Have a Future’, pp. 89–90.

75. Julia Bryan-Wilson, ‘Sharon Hayes Sounds Off’, *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context and Enquiry*, vol. 38, Spring 2015, p. 21. The quote is from: Carolyn Dinshaw, ‘Theorizing Queer Temporalities: A Roundtable Discussion’, *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, vol. 13, no. 2–3, 2007, p. 178.



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.

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-scratched 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

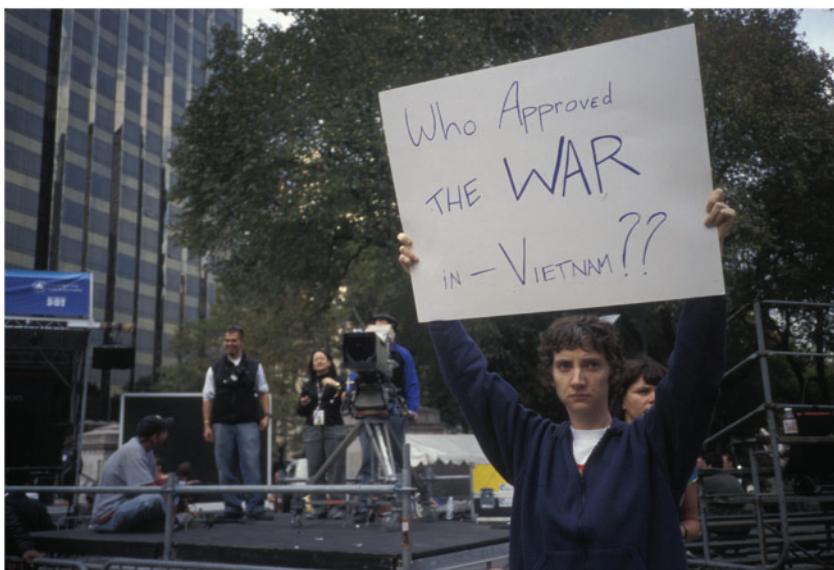


Fig. 10. Sharon Hayes, *In the Near Future*, New York, 2005. Detail. 35mm multiple slide projection installation, 9 actions, 9 projections 223 original slides (729 in total). Image courtesy of the artist and Tanya Leighton Gallery, Berlin.

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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