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CRITICISM WITHOUT AUTHORITY:

GENE SWENSON, JILL JOHNSTON, GREGORY BATTCKOCK

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Abstract

In New York City, from roughly 1963 through 1972, art criticism became a site for the production of unlikely forms of art. Art criticism offered, for a few critics, improbable spaces to assemble queer ways of being and of writing that shatter things rather than shore them up, withhold comforts of certainty and political solidarity, allow for dithering and pleasure over resolute productivity, and let passions percolate to the surface. To describe this genre, I propose the term “criticism without authority.”

I locate Gene Swenson, Jill Johnston, and Gregory Battcock at the center of this endeavor to create criticism without authority—an endeavor that happened very near to and within the margins of the art world as it was expanding and becoming institutionalized in New York. There exists an enduring sense within art history that “art criticism became a ‘serious discipline’ in the US only at this time [the 1960s and 1970s], and primarily through the medium of *Artforum*,” as Hal Foster characterizes it. This dissertation traces an alternative history of what unfolded outside the pages of *Artforum*, where it also happened that American art criticism came together as a collective project—albeit a very different kind of collective project shared among a loose constellation of critics and premised on instances of improbable alliance. Across three chapters, I dwell on moments when Swenson, Johnston, and Battcock manage to create alternative ways of working, being, and relating in the world—scenes that include, for example, Swenson picketing alone outside MoMA wielding only a giant blue question mark as a sign, Johnston reading aloud at a panel discussion she organized titled “The Disintegration of a Critic: An Analysis of Jill

Johnston,” and Battcock going “A la Recherche du Temps Trivial,” as he writes, or in search of trivial time.

The methodology I assemble in this dissertation does not adhere to a theoretical framework or attempt to see things through a specific critical lens. Rather, I think of methodology in terms of practice—habits of wading through material, piecing together fragments, reading, and writing—guided by two primary commitments: close attentiveness to archival material and openness to being surprised. From a scattered network of archival remains, I reassemble the achievements of Swenson, Johnston, and Battcock’s practices: episodes in which perverse, non-normative ways of knowing, dithering, slouching, and wandering manage to pierce through the noise of the era.

Introduction

Criticism without Authority

Resoluteness, efficiency, sobriety, self-sacrifice: if we learn these values at all, we learn them by and large from those whose pockets they help to line. If this is the case, we can turn to a different kind of revolutionary rhetoric entirely and speak not of the resolute, integrated political agent but of the disheveled, decentered one. Revolutions are about the shattering of identities as much as the construction of them, the generation of fantasy and disorder as well as of political constitutions. If they are not, then we probably know just about enough, historically speaking, to predict with some confidence that they will fail—fail, at least, in all the most fundamental ways.

—Terry Eagleton, 1988¹

In New York City, from roughly 1963 through 1972, art criticism became a site for the production of unlikely forms of art. Amid the turbulence of the era and the welter of alternative and underground newspapers that grew up in that turbulence, art criticism offered, for a few critics, improbable spaces to assemble queer ways of being and of writing that shatter things rather than shore them up, withhold comforts of certainty and political solidarity, allow for dithering and pleasure over resolute productivity, and let passions percolate to the surface. To describe this genre, I propose the term “criticism without authority.”

I locate Gene Swenson, Jill Johnston, and Gregory Battcock at the center of this endeavor to create criticism without authority—an endeavor that happened very near to and within the margins of the art world as it was expanding and becoming institutionalized in New York City at

¹ Terry Eagleton, “Forward” to Kristin Ross, *The Emergence of Social Space: Rimbaud and the Paris Commune* (London and New York: Verso, 2008; published originally 1988): vi.

the time.² If, around 1964, Alan R. Solomon (former director of the Jewish Museum) could still claim that New York's "new art scene" consists of "perhaps two dozen" artists, "three or four dealers, four or five critics, five or six museum people, maybe ten collectors. And no more"³—by the early '70s that was plainly no longer the case. In his 1972 article "Network: The Art World Described as a System," published in *Artforum* as part of a special issue celebrating the magazine's tenth anniversary, Lawrence Alloway describes the "art world now" in the following terms:

Not only has the group of artists expanded in number but art is distributed to a larger audience in new ways, by improved marketing techniques and by the mass media. What does this vague term art world cover? It includes original works of art and reproductions; critical, historical, and informative writing; galleries, museums, and private collections. It is a sum of persons, objects, resources, messages, and ideas. It includes monuments and parties, esthetics and openings, *Avalanche* and *Art in America*.⁴

As things in New York shifted from an "art scene" that could seem like it had just "four or five critics" to a networked "art world," it also happened that "the activity of art criticism became professionalized," as Amy Newman writes in the introduction to her massive anthology *Challenging Art: Artforum 1962-74*. "Writers about visual art had certainly drawn on other disciplines before, but in a somewhat haphazard, unpolemical way," Newman continues. "No one would have set out to *become* an art critic in order to argue a world view. [...] Before *Artforum* there had been no popular, as opposed to cult, journal devoted to the intellectual

² For accounts of the formation of "the art world" in New York City in the sixties, see: Gwen Allen, "Art Periodical and Contemporary Art Worlds," *ARTMargins* 5, no. 3 (2016): 35-60; Pamela M. Lee, *Forgetting the Art World* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2012); Amy Newman, "Introduction," *Challenging Art: Artforum 1962-1974* (New York: Soho Press, Inc., 2000).

³ See: Jennifer Wells, "The Sixties: Pop goes the Market," in *Definitive Statements: American Art: 1964-66*, ed. Kermit Champa (Providence, R.I.: Brown University, 1986), 53. The quote is from: Alan Solomon, *New York: The New Art Scene* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1967), 64.

⁴ Lawrence Alloway, "Network: The Art World Described as a System," *Artforum* 11, no. 1 (Sept 1972): 28-31.

discussion of exclusively contemporary art.”⁵ Newman’s bald claim about the singular importance of the magazine *Artforum*—which was founded in San Francisco in 1962 before it moved to Los Angeles and then New York in 1967—echoes a kind of enduring art historical sense that “art criticism became a ‘serious discipline’ in the US only at this time [the 1960s and 1970s], and primarily through the medium of *Artforum*,” as Hal Foster characterizes it.⁶

This dissertation traces a different history of what happened to art criticism in the US in the 1960s and 1970s, focused on a particular constellation of critics and the network of alternative and underground papers they wrote for: *The Village Voice*, *The New York Free Press*, *The New York Review of Sex, Culture Hero*, and *GAY*. Here I use the term “constellation” in the sense that Kristin Ross defines as “an oppositional rapport based on a kind of acentered, nonhierarchical mobility and alliance.”⁷ Swenson, Johnston, and Battcock formed such a rapport—in opposition, certainly, to a dominant mainstream, but more significantly in lateral shifting relationships with one another (and others). This dissertation heeds Matthew Jesse Jackson’s call for “a ‘horizontal’ history of twentieth-century art”—which Jackson defines as “an account that understands artworks primarily as manifestations of speculative ingenuity that are shared and contemplated among constellations of secular urbanites.”⁸ “It follows,” Jackson continues, “that the individual artwork in the late twentieth century might eventually be deemed less significant as a self-contained object than as a reifying moment within the give and take of competing distribution networks and discursive practices.”⁹ This prediction rings true here.

⁵ Newman, “Introduction,” 8-9.

⁶ Hal Foster, *Design and Crime (And Other Diatribes)* (London and New York: Verso, 2002), 105.

⁷ Kristin Ross, *The Emergence of Social Space: Rimbaud and the Paris Commune* (London and New York: Verso, 2008): 63-64.

⁸ Matthew Jesse Jackson, *The Experimental Group: Ilya Kabakov, Moscow Conceptualism, Soviet Avant-Gardes* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010), 2.

⁹ Jackson, *The Experimental Group*, 2-3.

Several mainstay art-world periodicals and institutions also factor into the history I trace in this dissertation, sometimes in pronounced and defining ways—in particular *ARTnews* (where both Swenson and Johnston were regular contributors), *ARTS Magazine* (where Battcock contributed and served a brief stint as editor-in-chief), and the Museum of Modern Art. However, *Artforum* remains marginal here—which is to say, the particular transformation of art criticism into a professional “serious discipline” that occurred in and around the pages of *Artforum* happens very much on the margins of the history I trace in this dissertation. At one point in *Artforum*’s early years, in a letter dated July 4, 1965, Barbara Rose proposed to Philip Leider (the magazine’s editor-in-chief): “Would you like a good article on the new modern dance renaissance in New York? If I control her closely enough Jill Johnston could probably produce something”¹⁰ (**Fig. 0.1**). But Leider turned down the offer, and nothing came of it. And it probably wouldn’t have worked out anyway. Johnston, along with Swenson and Battcock, willfully practiced the opposite of the close control exerted at *Artforum*. Meandering, fractured, disordered, queer, unprofessional, outrageous, angry, harsh, embarrassing, mad—these are the sorts of adjectives that tend to cluster around Swenson, Johnston, and Battcock’s practices.



Fig. 0.1. Excerpt of letter from Barbara Rose to Philip Leider, July 4, 1965. Philip Leider papers, 1962-1997, bulk 1965-1977. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

This project thus privileges the work of a few disheveled, decentered critics in New York City who persisted into the 1960s and early 1970s in dithering, shattering and creating things according to values wholly different from those such as intellectual rigor, serious discipline, and

¹⁰ Letter from Barbara Rose to Philip Leider. Philip Leider papers, 1962-1997, bulk 1965-1977. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

close control. Queer values. Here I use the term “dithering” not in the reproachful sense of vacillating to waste time, but rather in the sense that, as Lauren Berlant tells us, might actually be “an aspiration, as the traditional infrastructures for reproducing life—at work, in intimacy, politically—are crumbling at a threatening pace.”¹¹ According to Berlant, “dithering” in an impasse (along with “tottering, bargaining, testing”) might allow us to discover alternative rhythms “in which one moves around [as opposed to ‘forward’] with a sense that the world is at once intensely present and enigmatic, such that the activity of living demands both a wandering absorptive awareness and a hypervigilance that collects material that might help to clarify things, maintain one’s sea legs, and coordinate the standard melodramatic crises with those processes that have not yet found their genre of event.”¹² This dissertation lingers on episodes in which Swenson, Johnston, and Battcock seem to be moving “around” in this kind of way, with both a “wandering absorptive awareness” and a “hypervigilance” directed toward processes that they (and we) do not know how to classify—things that, in Berlant’s language, “have not yet found their genre of event.” Such episodes might induce, as Berlant writes, “diverse dramas of adjustment to being postgenre, postnormative, and not knowing entirely how to live.”¹³ “Probably the world is too sure about its things,” Jill Johnston writes in *The Village Voice* in 1967. “I like things that are certain about not being very sure about what they are.”¹⁴

The forms of art I describe here tend not to succeed in normal ways—they do not tend to accrue value or prestige; to argue coherent, influential worldviews; or to endure. They are not particularly recognizable *as* art, even now with fifty years distance. “As a matter of fact,” Battcock writes in 1969, “it might as well be the first criterion—at any rate a criterion for this

¹¹ Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011): 4-5.

¹² Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 4.

¹³ Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 28.

¹⁴ Jill Johnston, “Dance Journal: Take Me Disappearing,” *The Village Voice*, December 14, 1967, p. 33.

time and place for art—that it not be recognizable, identifiable, that we not know it when we see it. That is, not know it's ART when we see it.”¹⁵ One could say that these forms of art fail—but not, I argue, in the most fundamental ways.

“Failing is something queers do and have always done exceptionally well,” Jack Halberstam reminds us in the book *The Queer Art of Failure*.¹⁶ In Halberstam's reappraisal, failure “allows us to escape the punishing norms that discipline behavior and manage human development”—failure “preserves some of the wondrous anarchy of childhood” and “provides the opportunity to use negative affects to poke holes in the toxic positivity of contemporary life.”¹⁷ While Halberstam does spend time inhabiting “the bleak territory of failure” within which “we sometimes have to write and acknowledge dark histories,” the book does not linger there for too long.¹⁸ Halberstam remains committed to a project of excavating how a lot of things that look and feel like failure might actually provide possibilities for perverse, non-normative modes of productivity and even of thriving: “alternative ways of knowing and being that are not unduly optimistic, but nor are they mired in nihilistic critical dead ends.”¹⁹ Here I dwell on moments when such alternative ways of knowing and being come into focus—scenes that include, for example, Swenson picketing alone outside MoMA wielding only a giant blue question mark as a sign, Johnston reading aloud at a panel discussion she organized titled “The Disintegration of a Critic: An Analysis of Jill Johnston,” and Battcock going “A la Recherche du Temps Trivial,” as he writes, or in search of trivial time. From a scattered network of archival remains, I reassemble the achievements of Swenson, Johnston, and Battcock's practices—episodes in which perverse,

¹⁵ Gregory Battcock, “The Last Estate,” *The New York Review of Sex*, July 1, 1969, p. 16.

¹⁶ Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011): 3.

¹⁷ Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 2-3.

¹⁸ Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 23.

¹⁹ Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, p. 24.

non-normative ways of being, knowing, dithering, and wandering manage to pierce through all the other noise of the era.

* * *

If Swenson, Johnston, and Battcock tend to constellate near the margins of histories of late twentieth-century art in the US, here they are at the center. Which means some things that have long been central to late twentieth-century art history constellate around the periphery and near the margins of this study—Andy Warhol, as the most prominent example, but also figures such as Yvonne Rainer, Lucy Lippard, and the Art Workers’ Coalition. Focusing on Swenson, Johnston, and Battcock furnishes an oblique view of the rest of the network, exposing new facets of figures usually at the center.

This happens most dramatically in chapter one, titled “Gene Swenson’s *Other Tradition*.” In the course of my research, I tracked down Swenson’s papers (including journals, drafts, recordings, correspondence, and clippings), which were in the private possession of Swenson’s friend and fellow critic Henry Martin, unknown to scholars.²⁰ I found a cassette-tape recording of Swenson’s defining early interview with Andy Warhol, published in *ARTnews* in 1963 (heavily edited, as it turns out) as part of a series titled “What is Pop Art? Answers from 8 Painters.”²¹ 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 sustained many of art history’s most rigorous arguments about Warhol’s practice, Pop, and Postmodernism.²² However, on tape

²⁰ At the time of writing this dissertation (summer 2018) plans are being made to transfer Swenson’s papers to the Smithsonian Institution Archives of American Art.

²¹ G.R. Swenson, “What Is Pop Art? Answers from 8 Painters, Part I,” *ARTnews* 62, no. 7 (November 1963): 24-27, 60-64, and “What is Pop Art? Part II,” *ARTnews* 62, no. 10 (February 1964): 40-43, 62-67.

²² Such arguments range from Hal Foster’s account of “traumatic realism” in *Return of the Real* to Caroline Jones’s argument for the “performative aspect of the technological sublime” in *Machine in the Studio*. Foster writes, for example: “One way to develop this notion [of traumatic realism] is through the famous motto of the Warholian persona ‘I want to be a machine.’ Usually this statement is taken to confirm the blankness of artist and art alike, but

Swenson begins the interview by asking Warhol, “What do you say about homosexuals?”

Warhol goes on to answer this question with great care and complexity that is nowhere reflected in the published version. Every single reference to homosexuality and sex was, as it turns out, expunged from the published interview, line by line. Other revelations crop up throughout the dissertation. In chapter two titled “Jill Johnston’s *Dance Journal*,” for example, turning to Yvonne Rainer’s writing on Johnston exposes a confessional aspect of Rainer’s inchoate feminism that embraces the painful and dark parts of her lived experience and gives them a place at the heart of her work. In chapter three titled “Gregory Battcock’s *Last Estate*,” focusing on Battcock’s founding contributions to the Art Workers’ Coalition exposes a different rift in the movement’s early ambitions—a rift between all of the Coalition’s competing political programs and demands, on the one hand, and Battcock’s vision for a wholly different kind of redefinition of artistic labor rooted in parody, play and pleasure, on the other.

These revelations tend to affirm, I think, that the deeply archival methodology I assemble in this project works—which is to say, that it does valuable work within the field. The methodology I assemble here does not adhere to a theoretical framework or attempt to see things through a specific critical lens—although I would describe it as queer. As Halberstam writes, “the archive is not simply a repository; it is also a theory of cultural relevance, a construction of

it may point less to a blank subject than to a shocked one, who takes on the nature of what shocks him as a mimetic defense against this shock: I am a machine too. I make (or consume) as good (or as bad) as I get.” In *Machine in the Studio*, Caroline Jones argues, for example: “Equally significant is Warhol’s concluding thought [in his exchange with Swenson]: through massification, through thinking alike, we can become machines. These are not insensate, gear-driven devices, however, but Deleuzian ‘desiring production’ machines. We can like everything, over and over again.” Most significant, however, is Jonathan Flatley’s recent argument in his book *Like Andy Warhol* that “liking” for Warhol is an active practice that “made space for Warhol to conceive of attraction, affection, and attachment without relying on the homo/hetero opposition so central to modern ideas of sexual identity and desire.” Flatley argues: “Warhol’s liking is an attempt to imagine new, queer forms of affection and relationality and to transform the world into a place where those forms could find a home.” As I discuss in chapter two, the tape recording furnishes even more (and pretty incontrovertible) evidence that Flatley’s argument is the right one. See: Hal Foster, *Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996): 126-68; Caroline Jones, *Machine in the Studio: Constructing the Postwar American Artist* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996): 189-267; and Jonathan Flatley, *Like Andy Warhol* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017).

collective memory, and a complex record of queer activity. In order for the archive to function, it requires users, interpreters, and cultural historians to wade through the material and piece together the jigsaw puzzle of queer history in the making.”²³ I embrace the queer labor of wading through material and piecing together fragments.²⁴ I aim to practice the kind of “genealogy” that Michel Foucault describes as “gray, meticulous, and patiently documentary,” that “operates on a field of entangled and confused parchments, on documents that have been scratched over and recopied many times.”²⁵ “Genealogy,” Foucault writes, “consequently, requires patience and knowledge of details, and it depends on vast accumulation of source material.”²⁶

In this dissertation, I think of methodology in terms of practice—habits of searching, wading, assembling, reading, and writing—guided by two primary commitments: close attentiveness to archival material and openness to being surprised. From Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s essay “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading,” we have learned that “to a reparatively positioned reader, it can seem realistic and necessary to experience surprise.” “Because there can be terrible surprises, however, there can also be good ones,” Sedgwick writes. “Hope, often a fracturing, even a traumatic thing to experience, is among the energies by which the reparatively positioned reader tries to organize the fragments and part-objects she encounters or creates.”²⁷ In the course of my research, I have sought out archival “fragments and

²³ Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005): 169-70.

²⁴ I am grateful for Miriam Kienle’s insights and ongoing collaboration in thinking through the theoretical stakes and methodological challenges of doing queer archival work. Thanks also to Miriam for sharing with me the excerpt from *In a Queer Time and Place* quoted above. We plan to continue to address these issues in a session we are co-chairing titled “Queer Work / Queer Archives” at the College Art Association 2019 Annual Conference.

²⁵ Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History” (1971) in *Language, Counter-memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977): 139.

²⁶ Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” 140.

²⁷ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or You’re so Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay is About You” in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003): 146.

part-objects” in official repositories and in private spaces with an ambition to ferret out the complexities, conflicts, encounters, and happenstances that caused things to turn out the way they did, but without knowing often what I am looking for, or looking at (**Fig. 0.3**). This means reckoning with both good surprises, like the shock of learning that Andy Warhol’s early statements about “liking things” and being “like a machine” were actually queer and earnest in ways we couldn’t have imagined, and also terrible surprises—dark sentiments that are troubling and difficult, but also important for the ways they shape the objects and episodes I care about in this dissertation.



Fig 0.2. Ann Wilson, close friend to both Jill Johnston and Gene Swenson (and executor of the Gene Swenson Estate) sharing her handwritten notes from the 1960s and ’70s with me in her home in Valatie, NY, July 21, 2017.

Criticism without Authority

The term “criticism without authority” names a genre that does not cohere entirely, a messy constellation of “things that are certain about not being very sure about what they are,”²⁸ to return to Johnston’s turn of phrase. By calling this genre (or, better, perhaps becoming-genre or not-genre) “criticism without authority,” I am following Gregory Battcock’s lead. In his

²⁸ Johnston, “Dance Journal: Take Me Disappearing,” p. 33.

introduction to Jill Johnston's first anthology *Marmalade Me* (1971), Battcock coins the phrase "criticism *without apology*" (emphasis original) to describe Johnston's new vision for criticism as "a unique form that does not necessarily depend upon another specific object or phenomenon for its own existence and worth." Battcock writes,

So Johnston introduced, by her writings, a new vision for criticism *without apology*, and for criticism claiming its own identification in the world of artistic expressions. It is a vision of enormous scope and one that offers considerable potential. She wrote: "I'll take a plot of level territory and stake out a claim to lie down on it and criticize the constellations if that's what I happen to be looking at. I also stake out a claim to be an artist, [a writer, if that's what I'm doing when I get to the typewriter and decide that I liked something well enough to say what I think it's all about.]"

The most difficult path for an artist to tread is one that doesn't exist. Yet it is the only possibility for an artist involved in the initial identification of a new idiom. Obviously, a lot of new material will be rejected later on. In so doing, the artist assumes considerable risk. But there is an interesting view from this wild, uncharted path. [...] A major discovery by Jill Johnston is, simply, that criticism is a unique form that does not necessarily depend upon another specific object or phenomenon for its own existence and worth. However, that criticism does possess a unique identity has not yet been sufficiently demonstrated. Before it can be demonstrated, the *possibility* needs to be conceived and the new, potentially vital form must be envisioned.

Thus if we glean from Johnston's writings only the vision of a new possibility for artistic expression, then her contribution to art is secure.²⁹

Following Battcock, in this dissertation I excavate and expound "the new, potentially vital form" that he calls "criticism *without apology*." The key here is Battcock's assertion that "criticism *without apology*" can claim "its own identification in the world of artistic expressions" even as it persists as "only the vision of a new possibility" and a "new, potentially vital form" that is not settled or resolved, and might never be. Battcock's definition of "criticism *without apology*" readily extends beyond Johnston to describe, most proximately, things that Swenson achieved, as

²⁹ Gregory Battcock "Introduction" to Jill Johnston, *Marmalade Me* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc, 1971): 10-11. The quote is from: Jill Johnston, "Critics' Critics," *The Village Voice*, September 16, 1965. In his introduction, Battcock's ellipses over the second half of Johnston's sentence (which is included in full later in the anthology) – Here, I have added in Johnston's full sentence (in brackets).

well as some of Battcock's own achievements. Indeed, "criticism *without apology*" could stand in as an alternative title for this dissertation.

However, on its own, outside the context of Battcock's description, "criticism *without apology*" is not specific enough. And so, riffing on Battcock's term, I devised the phrase "criticism without authority" in part to imply its opposite, criticism with authority—and to signal that "criticism without authority" grew up in a specific time and place, New York in the 1960s and 1970s, as a vital *other* to criticism as a professionalized, serious discipline with authority as it developed in and around *Artforum*. For example, as Gwen Allen writes in a recent article, "*Artforum*, founded in 1962, would become the main venue for Greenbergian formalist criticism, representing a reinvestment in art criticism."³⁰ She continues on to surmise, "it was in the pages of *Artforum* that American art criticism seemed to come together as a collective project, albeit one that was still very much unfolding."³¹ Here I trace a history (just one history, of course, among many) of what unfolded outside the pages of *Artforum*, where it also happened that American art criticism came together as a collective project—albeit a very different sort of collective project premised on "a kind of acentered, nonhierarchical mobility and alliance."³² My ambition is to elucidate the achievements of the particular collective project shared among Swenson, Johnston, and Battcock—non-normative achievements that can be difficult to recognize, that tend to shatter identities and generate fantasy and disorder—and to suggest, perhaps, what resources such achievements might offer us now.

This dissertation thus speaks to a lament that Hal Foster, for one, voices regarding "the sheer out-of-date-ness of criticism in an art world that couldn't care less," as he proclaims in a

³⁰ Gwen Allen, "Art Periodicals and Contemporary Art Worlds (Part I)," *ARTMargins* 5, no. 3 (2016): 46.

³¹ Gwen Allen, "Art Periodicals and Contemporary Art Worlds (Part I)," 48.

³² Ross, *The Emergence of Social Space: Rimbaud and the Paris Commune*, 63.

2012 article titled “Post-Critical” for *October*.³³ “Not much of this is new,” he writes in a footnote directing the reader to a roundtable titled “The Present Conditions of Art Criticism,” published in *October* a decade prior, in 2002. And indeed, that roundtable is shot through with various proclamations and nostalgic laments that art criticism is not, somehow, what it used to be—for example, George Baker talks about “the abandonment of stakes that art criticism had always claimed as its own and had defended”; David Joselit notes “the fact that the concept of quality has lost its legitimacy for people like us”; and James Meyer remarks, “You don’t know anymore for whom you are writing. The *Artforum* of 2001 is not the *Artforum* of 1970 where you knew for whom you were writing and that your writing counted somehow.”³⁴

In the article “Post-Critical,” in response to his own complaint that art criticism now operates “in an art world that couldn’t care less,” Foster writes,

Yet what are the options on offer? Celebrating beauty? Affirming affect? Hoping for a “redistribution of the sensible”? The post-critical condition is supposed to release us from our straitjackets (historical, theoretical, and political), yet for the most part it has abetted a relativism that has little to do with pluralism.

How did we arrive at the point where critique is so broadly dismissed? Over the years, most of the charges have concerned the positioning of the critic. First, there was a rejection of *judgment*, of the moral right presumed in critical evaluation. Then, there was a refusal of *authority*, of the political privilege that allows the critic to speak abstractly on behalf of others. Finally, there was skepticism about *distance*, about the cultural separation from the very conditions that the critic purports to examine.³⁵

This dissertation furnishes an earnest and historically grounded answer to Foster’s admittedly rhetorical question, “Yet what are the options on offer?” Here I trace a history of criticism that developed without authority in the US in the 1960s and 1970s—in the time and place when

³³ Hal Foster, “Post-Critical,” *October* 139 (Winter 2012): 3.

³⁴ Baker, George, Rosalind Krauss, Benjamin Buchloh, Andrea Fraser, David Joselit, James Meyer, Robert Storr, Hal Foster, John Miller, and Helen Molesworth. “Round Table: The Present Conditions of Art Criticism,” *October* 100 (2002): 200-28.

³⁵ Foster, “Post-Critical,” 3. Emphasis original.

(before “over the years”) the hegemony of authoritative criticism tends to be taken for granted as obvious, natural, and heroic. I argue that Swenson, Johnston, and Battcock indeed furnish other “options on offer.” These critics refuse authority, in the terms that Foster defines it: “the political privilege that allows the critic to speak abstractly on behalf of others.” And along with authority, they tend to reject judgment and distance as well. But, crucially, they stave off the mere-ness implied in Foster’s list of rhetorical questions: “Celebrating beauty? Affirming affect? Hoping for a ‘redistribution of the sensible’?” Swenson, Johnston, and Battcock achieve so much more. In the following pages, I dwell on those achievements to show other ways criticism “counted somehow” in the 1960s and 1970s, and might still.

Chapter 1

Gene Swenson's *Other* Tradition

Gene sometimes seemed to see art in a different light and space than other people, and his brilliant articulation of these other-oriented perceptions may confirm some of R. D. Laing's ideas about the "politics of experience." Maybe some of Gene's own personal terrors were transferred to the art world and made him particularly sensitive to the corruption of that microcosm of a capitalist society. He wasn't listened to because what he said was said too strongly and it was too true. His involvement with politics seemed natural because of the depth of his involvement with life—too heavy a burden, finally.

—Lucy Lippard, 1971¹

I. The Question Mark

In February and March of 1968, Gene Swenson picketed alone every weekday for about a month outside the Museum of Modern Art in New York wielding only a giant blue lucite question mark as a sign (**Fig. 1.1**). "There is anger in my tone," Swenson noted of his solitary protest, "for they have treated the soul of art foully."² In an article for the *New York Free Press* titled "Museum of Modern Art Hires Guards to Keep Swenson Out" Gregory Battcock surmises, "The Museum won't let Swenson in, because they don't know what to expect from him. They don't know what he wants"³ (**Fig. 1.2**). At the time of his protest outside MoMA, Swenson was maligned by the art world. He "frightened and embarrassed" even sympathetic friends by demanding "as much commitment as he was willing to offer himself," as his friend and fellow

¹ Lucy Lippard, contribution to 'Gene Swenson: A Composite Portrait', *The Register of the Museum of Art, University of Kansas* 4, no. 6-7 (1971): 16. Special edition published to accompany the exhibition *Gene Swenson: Retrospective for a Critic* (Oct. 24 – Dec. 5, 1971).

² Gene Swenson, 'An Art Critic's Farewell Address', *The New York Free Press*, March 28, 1968, 8.

³ Gregory Battcock, "Museum of Modern Art Hires Guards to Keep Swenson Out," *The New York Free Press*, February 29, 1968, 6, 10.

critic Lucy Lippard put it—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.”⁴



Fig. 1.1. 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.

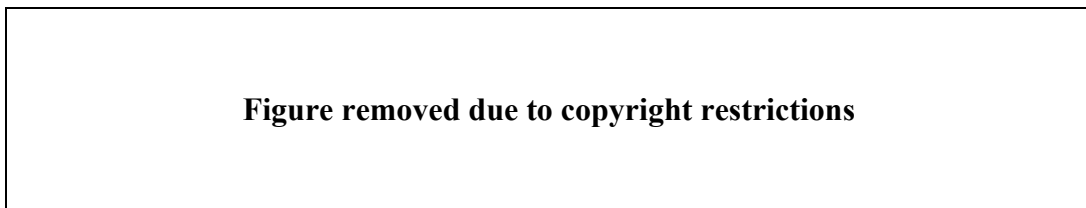


Fig 1.2. Gregory Battcock, “Museum of Modern Art Hires Guards to Keep Swenson Out,” *The New York Free Press*, February 29, 1968. Photo by *Free Press* photographer Elliott Landy. Gregory Battcock Papers, 1958-circa 1980. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

However, Swenson had not always been relegated to the sidewalk outside MoMA. Just a year and a half earlier, the museum employed Swenson to curate a traveling exhibition titled “Art in the Mirror” (it was, incidentally, still traveling as Swenson was protesting outside the museum). With his exhibition, Swenson aimed to display an alternative art history as seen through the eyes of artists; an art history in which works from the past are “examined with care and love” by artists in the present, as he writes in an introductory text.⁵ Swenson proposed to write a three-part essay titled “Reflections in Art” to accompany the exhibition, but suffered a life-threatening attack of appendicitis before he had the chance. James Rosenquist recalls that

⁴ Lippard, contribution to “Gene Swenson: A Composite Portrait,” 18.

⁵ Gene Swenson, “Art in the Mirror: A Metaphor” (Introductory Text). Unpublished archival document. Circulating Exhibitions Collection, Series.Folder 11.2.140.2.1, The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York.

Swenson was “very sad and angry that he was not able to carry through with this show.” “The show opened,” Rosenquist continues, “but naturally it didn’t have Gene’s touch.”⁶

Before “Art in the Mirror,” in January 1966 Swenson curated an exhibition and published a text titled “The *Other* Tradition” for the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia (**Fig. 1.3**). “The *Other* Tradition” was a bold curatorial gambit—“a flying wedge into the heart of the matter,”⁷ as Lippard writes in a long review of the exhibition for *Art International*. For Swenson “the matter” was this: formalist critical standards had infected everyone’s vision, engendering such widespread myopia that it was hardly possible for anyone to see works of art at all. The result: an entire “*other* tradition” of twentieth-century art, from Dada and Surrealism to Pop (but including also certain paintings by Picasso, Albers, Gorky, Pollock and other artists usually grouped on the “formalist” side of things), occluded from view—“overlooked or neglected by art historians,”⁸ in Swenson’s words. “Unlike most ‘theme shows,’” Lippard writes in her review, “the *Other* Tradition did not demonstrate a single theory cut, dried, and laid out for the spectator’s second-hand delectation. It encouraged participation in the thought process that produced it.”⁹

⁶ James Rosenquist, contribution to “Gene Swenson: A Composite Portrait,” 27.

⁷ Lippard writes: “Very much products of their time, as well as a highly personal operation, essay and exhibition are often successful attempts to expand the rapidly shrinking scope of criticism and ways of seeing art. In such a case complete success is beside the point. More important is the fact that Swenson has provided a barrage of ideas and visual cross-references that send up vital sparks of perception. Rambling, obscure, studded with provocative extra-art quotations, everything he says is open to discussion and dispute, but it is also a flying wedge into the heart of the matter.” Lucy Lippard, “An Impure Situation (New York and Philadelphia Letter),” *Studio International* 10.5 (May 1966): 60-65.

⁸ Swenson, *The Other Tradition*, VIII.

⁹ Lippard, “An Impure Situation,” 60.

Figure removed due to copyright restrictions

Fig. 1.3. Installation photos “The *Other Tradition*” from Gene Swenson’s archive. Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, January 7 – March 27, 1966. Gene Swenson Papers. Ann Wilson, Executor of the Gene Swenson Estate.

Before “The *Other Tradition*,” Swenson was well-known in the art world for his ardent writings on Pop, including his 1962 article “The New American ‘Sign Painters’” and his defining series of interviews published in *ARTnews* in 1963 and ’64 titled “What is Pop Art? Answers from 8 Painters.”¹⁰ Lippard writes, “From 1960 or ’61 we shared a strong commitment to Jim Rosenquist’s work. Gene had acquired an Indiana very early, and was the first person I heard talk intelligently about Warhol, who was a great influence on him. His interviews on Pop Art in *ARTnews* are *the* source material for the movement. The artists trusted him.”¹¹ In this interview with Swenson, Warhol first declared, “I think everybody should be a machine’ and ‘I think everybody should like everybody”¹²—those famous utterances that have sustained many arguments about Warhol’s practice, Pop, and Postmodernism.

On a dissertation research trip in March 2016, I uncovered an unknown, scratchy audio recording of Swenson’s interview with Warhol (along with several other of Swenson’s Pop interviews) on a set of cassette tapes. The cassette tapes are stashed away in a box among Swenson’s papers, which are being cared for by Swenson’s friend Henry Martin, who acquired

¹⁰ See: G.R. Swenson, “The New American ‘Sign Painters,’” *ARTnews* 61, no. 5 (September 1962): 44-47, 60-62; G.R. Swenson, “What Is Pop Art? Answers from 8 Painters, Part I,” *ARTnews* 62, no. 7, (November 1963): 24-27, 60-64; and G.R. Swenson, “What is Pop Art? Part II,” *ARTnew* 62, no. 10 (February 1964): 40-43, 62-67.

¹¹ Lucy Lippard, contribution to “Gene Swenson: A Composite Portrait,” *The Register of the Museum of Art, University of Kansas* 4, no. 6-7 (1971): 16. Special edition published to accompany the exhibition *Gene Swenson: Retrospective for a Critic* (Oct. 24 – Dec. 5, 1971).

¹² Swenson, “What Is Pop Art? Answers from 8 Painters, Part I,” 26.

them after Swenson's death in a car accident in the summer of 1969 at age thirty-five.¹³ 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 this chapter, 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 Warhol and Swenson's work.¹⁴

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."¹⁵

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

¹³ Arrangements are currently being made (as of August 2018) to bring Swenson's papers into the collection of the Smithsonian Archives of American Art.

¹⁴ For an extended transcript of the recording of Swenson's interview with Warhol, see: Jennifer Sichel, "'What is Pop Art?' A revised transcript of Gene Swenson's 1963 interview with Andy Warhol," *Oxford Art Journal* 41, no. 1 (March 2018): 85-100. 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).

¹⁵ 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 organize his papers and recordings for posterity. In a letter dated May 10, 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, penciled 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* 41, no. 1 (November 1966): 33-35.

Swenson waged against publishers, curators, and institutions over their culpable willingness to abet injustice by suppressing disruptive social, political and queer content during the '60s. Evidence survives as well confirming that Tom Hess had a troublesome reputation in the '60s amongst 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."¹⁶ Eulogizing Swenson after his death in 1969, Battcock reflects, "Swenson's large and 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."¹⁷ And Lippard writes, "He wasn't listened to because what he said was said too strongly and it was too true." She continues,

His hyper-critical sensitivity to and responsibility for remedying 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.¹⁸

* * *

¹⁶ Donald Judd Interviewed by Lippard, 1968 April 10 - June 2, 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.

¹⁷ Gregory Battcock, "The Art Critic as Social Reformer—With a Question Mark," *Art in America*, Vol. 59 (September-October 1971), 26-27.

¹⁸ Lippard, contribution to "Gene Swenson: A Composite Portrait," 17-18.

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 over the past two decades to establish and understand Warhol’s particular queerness. For example, as Jonathan Flatley and Anthony E. Grudin write in 2014, 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.¹⁹

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 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-

¹⁹ Jonathan Flatley and Anthony E. Grudin, “Introduction: Warhol’s Aesthetics,” *Criticism* 56, no. 3 (Summer 2014): 421.

the-record statements about Pop's relationship to homosexuality got suppressed from publication.²⁰

This chapter 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 laid 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 analyze how they fit within larger patterns of suppression and everyday censorship in sixties-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.)

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 a fiercely outspoken subject who frequently acted out and verbalized 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."²¹ Swenson disrupted parties and panel discussions, shouted on street corners, and protested alone.

If, as Jonathan Flatley claims, 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,

²⁰ 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* 40, no. 10 (Summer 2002): 142-5.

²¹ Lippard, contribution to "Gene Swenson: A Composite Portrait," 18.

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.²²

“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 silk-screened 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, “turn feelings into things so we can deal with them.”²³ 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 to Swenson 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 wall-papered 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.

²² Jonathan Flatley, “Like: Collecting and Collectivity,” *October* 132 (Spring 2010): 72.

²³ 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 (September 10 – December 8, 1965). In his essay “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), 28.

II. “Do you think Pop Art’s queer?”

Swenson did not conduct his interview with Warhol one-on-one. Warhol’s then-new studio assistant Gerard Malanga joined in for the interview, along with another friend named John.²⁴ 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 started 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 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 like *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 put it in his recent essay elaborating Warhol’s non-hierarchical, “queer ways of listening.”²⁵ But here, Warhol’s performance for the tape recorder is tentative and uneven, as he and Swenson, along

²⁴ The ‘John’ in question is perhaps John Giorno, Warhol’s boyfriend at the time, who starred in his 1963 film *Sleep*, or the poet John Wieners, who appears in a 1963 photo-booth strip alongside Warhol and Malanga. At a talk I gave at the Andy Warhol Museum on May 1, 2018, Matt Wrbican—longtime Warhol archivist and expert—identified the voice as more likely belonging to John Wieners.

²⁵ Gustavus Stadler, “‘My Wife’: The Tape Recorder and Warhol’s Queer Ways of Listening,” *Criticism* 56, no. 3 (Summer 2014): 440. Stadler notes that Warhol procured his first tape recorder “sometime in 1964.”

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's 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...

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 called 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.²⁶ As Douglas Crimp reminds us in his 1999 essay “Getting the Warhol We Deserve”: it was amid police raids on underground film screenings and *New York Times* headlines like “Growth of Overt Homosexuality in City Provokes Wide Concern” that Warhol and his friends managed in the early-sixties 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.”²⁷ Amid this uptick 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

²⁶ Jonathan D. Katz, “The Silent Camp: Queer Resistance and the Rise of Pop Art,” in Hans-Jorg Heusser and Kornelia Imesch (eds.), *Visions of a Future: Art and Art History in Changing Contexts* (Zurich: Swiss Institute for Art Research, 2004): 147-58.

²⁷ Douglas Crimp, ‘Getting the Warhol We Deserve’, *Social Text* 59 (Summer 1999): 61-64.

embracing and renegotiating his alienated and effete image as a defining strategy of his postmodern persona building.²⁸

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 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

²⁸ Gavin Butt, *Between You and Me: Queer Disclosures in the Art World, 1948-1963* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005): 109.

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 put 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 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.²⁹

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 preemptively 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 U.S. 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 isn't "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

²⁹ Swenson, "What Is Pop Art? Answers from 8 Painters, Part I," 61.

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 homosexuality and heterosexuality, thereby making room for different forms of difference.

In his essay “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.”³⁰ 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.³¹ 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 misfitting in common.”³² In his 2010 book *Our Kind of Movie’: The Films of Andy Warhol*, Douglas Crimp analyzes 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

³⁰ Flatley, “Like: Collecting and Collectivity,” 72.

³¹ Flatley, “Like: Collecting and Collectivity,” 72-73.

³² Flatley, “Like: Collecting and Collectivity,” p. 93.

fitting together.”³³ 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 Warhol’s statements about “liking things,” censorship be damned.

But censorship matters, of course. And it is worth noting that Warhol insists three separate times 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.

³³ Douglas Crimp, “Our Kind of Movie”: *The Films of Andy Warhol* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012):102 - 09.

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 marvelous. 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 sixties. 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’s 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 described 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.”³⁴ 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 his 2012 book *Opacity and the Closet: Queer Tactics in Foucault, Barthes, and Warhol*, Nicholas de Villiers

³⁴ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993): 8

describes this sort of shared understanding among scholars as a “queer intellectual solidarity” that aggrandizes 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.”³⁵ “We must instead look at what happens on the surface of these texts,”³⁶ 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,”³⁷ it also reveals that what happens on the surface of the text we have received is deeply misleading in this case. The recording reveals 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 publicly. 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.”³⁸

In the wake of this interview, Warhol developed his own, now well-theorized queer strategies with which to face the world: to navigate institutions and preempt interview situations

³⁵ Nicholas de Villiers, *Opacity and the Closet: Queer Tactics in Foucault, Barthes, and Warhol* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012): 92. Emphasis original.

³⁶ De Villiers, *Opacity and the Closet*, 116.

³⁷ De Villiers, *Opacity and the Closet*, 116.

³⁸ Donald Judd Interviewed by Lippard, Lucy R. Lippard papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

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 over the past two decades. 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.”³⁹

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 strategies, 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”⁴⁰ (**Fig. 1.4**). For her part, Ann Wilson writes,

[Gene] reminded you of your commitment. His own life itself was all commitment. [...] Often outrageous, sometimes mad, and always brilliant, he was too much involved in commitment for most people’s comfort. He would yield to none of the conventions of success. He was very much solitary and could not discipline the intensity of his emotions. He saw too much and could implement too little.⁴¹

³⁹ Flatley, “Like: Collecting and Collectivity,” 94.

⁴⁰ Lippard, contribution to “Gene Swenson: A Composite Portrait,” 18.

⁴¹ Ann Wislon, contribution to “Gene Swenson: A Composite Portrait,” 20-22.



Fig. 1.4. Gene Swenson and Ann Wilson in Central Park. Photo from *Culture Hero: Special Issue: Jill Johnston Exposed*, published February, 1970.

Swenson's inscrutable displays of excessive emotion in response to an art world that felt to him irredeemably cynical, complacent, and cruel rendered him isolated, 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."⁴² Eulogizing Swenson for *The 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. Didn't know what to do. Leave New York and don't go back to Kansas, that was all I ever said, I dunno what the others said. 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

⁴² Lippard, contribution to "Gene Swenson: A Composite Portrait," 18.

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.⁴³

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 writes. As he explored possibilities for affectivity in the late '60s, Swenson also exposed, time and again, the painful limits of what feelings can (and can't) do when up against the recalcitrance of our institutions. As Ann Wilson put it, "He saw too much and could implement too little."⁴⁴

III. "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 silk-screen paintings Warhol referred to (in his 1963 interview with Swenson) as "Death in America" of car crashes, suicides, electric chairs, etc.; his wooden replicas of *Brillo*, *Mott's*, *Del Monte*, *Kellogg's*, *Heinz*, and *Campbell's* boxes; and early films like *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.⁴⁵

⁴³ Jill Johnston, "Dance Journal: Like a Boy in a Boat," *The Village Voice*, September 11, 1969, 17.

⁴⁴ Ann Wilson, contribution to "Gene Swenson: A Composite Portrait," 20-22.

⁴⁵ Gene R. Swenson, "The Darker Ariel: Random Notes on Andy Warhol," *Collage* 3-4 (December 1964): 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. 1.5**) to advertise Warhol’s second solo exhibition at the Stable Gallery, in which Warhol filled the gallery 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 writes:

“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.⁴⁶



Fig. 1.5. *The Personality of the Artist*, flier advertising Andy Warhol’s Stable Gallery exhibition, April 21 – May 9, 1964. Photo and text by G.R. Swenson.

⁴⁶ G. R. Swenson, “The Personality of the Artist.” Essay printed on a flier to advertise Warhol’s exhibition at the Stable Gallery, April 21- May 6, 1964.

In an extended version of the essay “The Personality of the Artist,” which Swenson delivered as a lecture at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia on the occasion of Warhol’s first museum exhibition in 1965, 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.”⁴⁷ In a draft of the lecture 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.⁴⁸

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 put it, writing thirty years after Swenson.⁴⁹ 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 fueled by the artist’s “private feelings”—a belief “sanctified to the point of blasphemy,”⁵⁰ 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

⁴⁷ Swenson, “The Darker Ariel,” 106.

⁴⁸ 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.”

⁴⁹ Thomas Crow, ‘Saturday Disasters: Trace and Reference in Early Warhol’ (1996) in *Andy Warhol: October Files*, ed. Annette Michelson (Cambridge, MA: MIT press, 2001): 58.

⁵⁰ Swenson, “The Personality of the Artist” flier (1964).

front page each day, and emphasize what is present persistently day after day.”⁵¹ And throughout the mid-’60s, Swenson mustered reasons to be optimistic that Warhol’s turn toward expressing “public, communal feelings” rather than “private feelings” could be understood as a harbinger of a wider, societal shift toward dealing with shared social ills and systemic injustice, rather than diagnosing each suffering individual as psychotic. In the early to mid-’60s, if Swenson saw “new possibilities available to us in this brave and not altogether hopeless new world”⁵² 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 prominent leftist psychiatrists like R.D. Laing, David Cooper, Thomas Szasz, and Robert Coles.⁵³ 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.”⁵⁴ In these writings, which appeared regularly in popular magazines like *The New Republic*, Coles condemns the psychiatric establishment’s willingness to act at the behest of those in power to maintain the status quo by pathologizing dissent.⁵⁵

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 “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:

⁵¹ Swenson, “The Personality of the Artist” lecture (1965).

⁵² Swenson, “The Darker Ariel,” p. 106.

⁵³ 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).

⁵⁴ Swenson, “The Darker Ariel,” p. 106.

⁵⁵ For a recounting by Coles of this “anti-psychiatric” turn in his thinking during the early sixties, see: Robert Coles, “A Fashionable Kind of Slander,” *The Atlantic* 226.5 (November 1970): 53-57.

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?⁵⁶

Swenson then emphasizes 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.”⁵⁷ 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.”

IV. The Other Tradition & Post-Freudian Art

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. The year 1966 also marks the high-point 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

⁵⁶ Swenson, “The Darker Ariel,” 105-106.

⁵⁷ Swenson, “The Darker Ariel,” 106.

exhibition "The *Other* Tradition" opened successfully on January 27, 1966 at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia (Fig. 1.6).⁵⁸

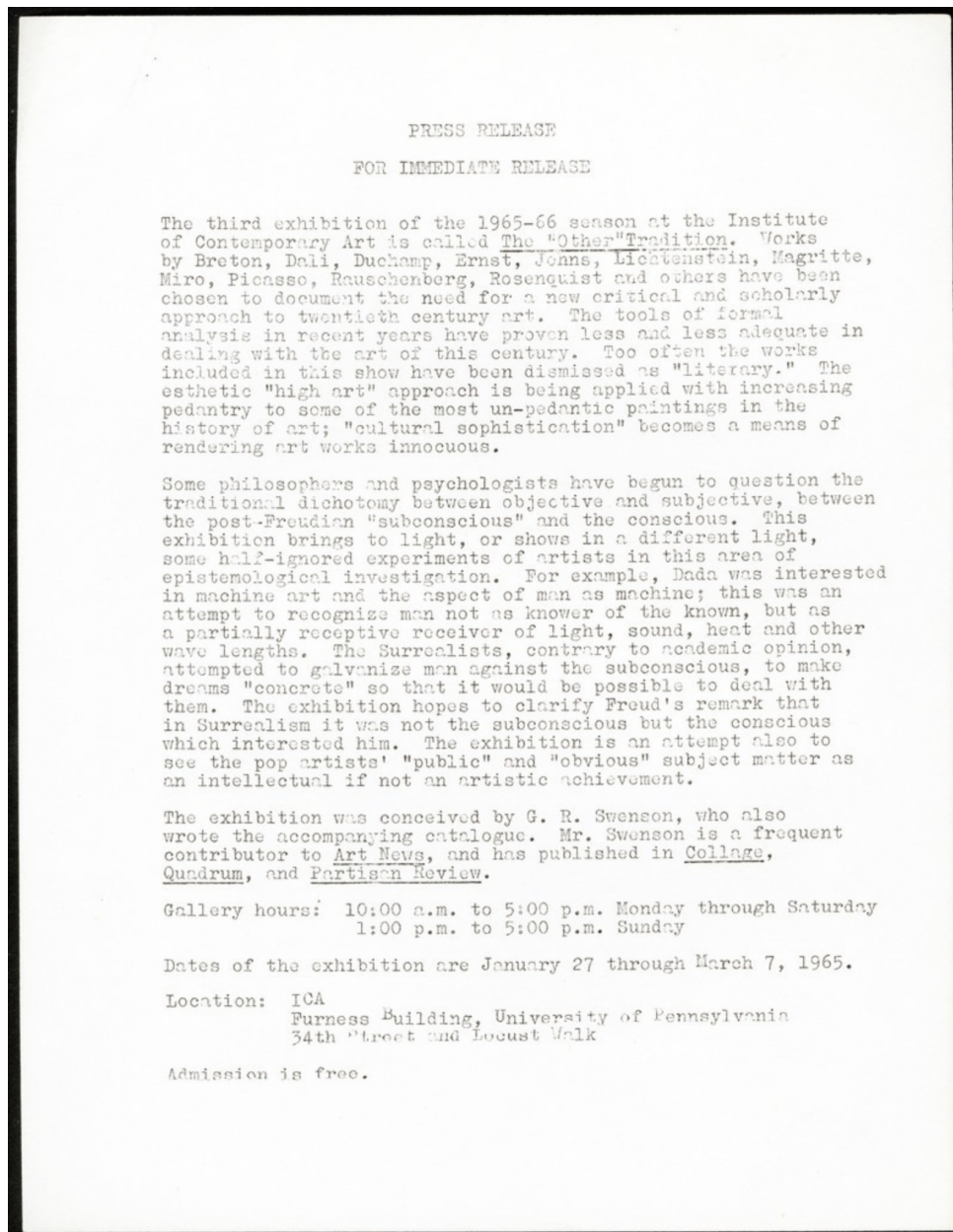


Fig. 1.6. Press release for "The *Other* Tradition."

To accompany the exhibition, Swenson published an essay as a stark black paperback that got passed around New York like "radioactive material," in the words of critic Peter

⁵⁸ 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. 60-65.

Schjeldahl.⁵⁹ Critic Robert Pincus-Witten recalls, “There was also an exhibition called ‘The *Other* Tradition,’ which took place in Philadelphia at the ICA—hardly The Museum of Modern Art. The catalogue was kind of manuscript, kind of typed. It was *so* alternative, it was *so samizdat*, that it didn’t even merit the nobility of glossy paper and real type.”⁶⁰ According to Anne M. Wagner, Swenson’s text turned out to be “one of the first—if not the first—pieces of writing to propose an alternative to modernist criticism.”⁶¹

“The *Other* Tradition” is a difficult essay to read, as it represents an amalgamation of Swenson’s critical writings produced over several years, including his writings on Warhol. The essay is something of a cut-and-paste project, with old writings sliced apart, reconfigured, fit back together, and then framed as a polemical injunction against the paucity of the prevailing “formal criticism” that sees only “the abstract-formal-Cubist tradition in modern art,”⁶² as Swenson writes. Swenson freely acknowledges the fragmentary and partial form of his essay, as well as “the rash decision,” as he calls it (writing in the third-person), “to make public his opinions on so complicated and rich a theme as the *other* tradition at this time, when he himself is neither a philosopher nor an artist.”⁶³ “This is an essay—a try,” Swenson reiterates a few pages later, “Only the uniformity of contradictory opinions has emboldened me to make public these views at this time, without waiting to develop them more completely.”⁶⁴

Swenson divides the essay into four sections titled: “The Limits of Classical Cubism,” “The Problem with Form,” “Feelings Are Things,” and “Art as Exploration.” In the first section,

⁵⁹ Peter Schjeldahl, quoted in Rothkoph, “Banned and Determined,” 143.

⁶⁰ Robert Pincus-Witten, quoted in Amy Newman *Challenging Art: Artforum, 1962-1974* (New York: Soho Press Inc., 2000): 192.

⁶¹ Anne Wagner, *Three Artists (Three Women): Modernism and the Art of Hesse, Krasner and O’Keeffe* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996): 255-6.

⁶² Swenson, “The *Other* Tradition,” VIII.

⁶³ Swenson, “The *Other* Tradition,” V.

⁶⁴ Swenson, “The *Other* Tradition,” IX.

Swenson inveighs against the “tendency to treat ‘revolution’ and ‘discovery’ as if they were suffixes to the word ‘Cubist.’”⁶⁵ He condemns this tendency as bad faith on the part of almost all critics and scholars, who refuse to acknowledge anything in Cubist paintings that might compromise the story that Cubism represents a revolutionary advance in the evolution toward “conscious use of the picture plane” and “the turn to abstraction.”⁶⁶ “Pictures such as the *Portrait of Kahnweiler* are distorted and crushed when seen in terms of a ‘breakthrough,’ progress, or even the heroism of the artist,” he writes. “It is not a picture we would take to the barricades, we would sit before it, perhaps in the same position as Kahnweiler, and try to plumb its depths.”⁶⁷

In the second section, “The Problem with Form,” Swenson broadens the scope of his attack to assert that the “formal tradition” represents the easy way out. To make the formalist claim that “the history of painting from Manet through Synthetic Cubism and Henri Matisse may be characterized in terms of the gradual withdrawal of painting from the task of representing reality [...] in favor of an increasing preoccupation with problems of painting itself”⁶⁸ (as, for example, Michael Fried does in “Three American Painters”) is in Swenson’s estimation simply to ignore and/or diminish everything that does not fit into the story. In the process of hammering home the point, Swenson takes a roundhouse punch at pretty much everyone including (in order of appearance): Clement Greenberg, Harold Rosenberg, Robert Rosenblum, Henry Geldzahler, David Rosand, William Rubin, John Golding, Robert Goldwater, Barbara Rose, Michael Fried, and Max Kosloff. The section is full of pithy zingers and one-line takedowns. “Why bother with

⁶⁵ Swenson, “The *Other* Tradition,” 1.

⁶⁶ Swenson, “The *Other* Tradition,” 2.

⁶⁷ Swenson, “The *Other* Tradition,” 8.

⁶⁸ Michael Fried, “Three American Painters: Kenneth Noland, Jules Olitski, Frank Stella” in *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 214. Published originally as the catalogue essay for the exhibition *Three American Painters: Kenneth Noland, Jules Olitski, Frank Stella* at the Fogg Art Museum, Cambridge, Mass, April 21-May 30, 1965.

‘modernist’ originality if it is so easily defined?’—Swenson snaps back against Greenberg’s denigration of Pop as belonging merely “to the history of taste and not to the history of art.” A few pages later, he quips: “It is hard for me to muster more than boredom in greeting that humorously ubiquitous subject, the picture plane.” And summing it all up, he writes: “History is often a reflection of the historian’s prejudices.”⁶⁹

In the third section, “Feelings are Things,”⁷⁰ Swenson describes the *other* tradition in positive terms, as a tradition of works of art that have managed, over the course of the twentieth century, “to objectify experience, to turn feelings into things.” Using language culled directly from his Warhol essays, Swenson stakes his most direct and bold claim for what the *other* tradition is:

The paintings of the *other* tradition are not, however, 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, to turn feelings into things so that we can deal with them.⁷¹

In this section of the essay, Swenson begins to populate the *other* tradition with particular works of art and historical ideas. “I beg the reader’s patience as certain intuitive ideas are more thrown out than developed within a cohesive whole,” he warns near the start of the section. “I permit myself this indulgence only in the hope that these ideas will start further investigations, for myself as well as others.”⁷² Swenson reaches back to the beginning of the twentieth century to

⁶⁹ Swenson, “The *Other* Tradition,” 10-14.

⁷⁰ In the table of contents, the section is titled “Feelings are Things.” However, on the first page of the section, the title is rendered “Feelings and Things.” The section includes the following quote: “‘Feelings and Things’ do not lie on the evolutionary scale of the life of forms.” Both titles make sense, but I think the first title, “Feelings are Things,” represents more accurately the main thrust of Swenson’s claim.

⁷¹ Swenson, “The *Other* Tradition,” 28. The *Other* Tradition was not limited to paintings... I think Swenson uses the word “paintings” in part because it’s less clunky than saying “works of art,” and in part because that’s how the sentence was written in the earlier essay, when he was referring specifically to Warhol’s paintings.

⁷² Swenson, “The *Other* Tradition,” 19-20.

identify sparks of the *other* tradition in “the Dada and Surrealist assault on bourgeois clichés”—an assault that, according to Swenson, “had its own rules, as must all attacks on authority.”⁷³

Swenson is interested in how “Dada ideas of ‘mechanical man’” upended the prevailing “epistemological situation,” as he calls it, by dismantling the notion of “man” as an individual, self-contained source of thought, creativity, and emotion. Duchamp and Picabia were, according to Swenson, among the first “to recognize the exciting aspect of man not as knower of what could be known, but as a partially receptive receiver of light, sound, heat and other kinds of mass-energy wave lengths.”⁷⁴ Swenson is also interested in how Dada’s “satire on the impersonality of sex”—in, for example, Picabia’s *Universal Prostitution* (1917)—constitutes “a recognition of impersonality not as a base, animal quality but a base, modern quality.”⁷⁵ When it comes to Surrealism, Swenson is primarily interested in Dali’s Paranoiac Criticism. If most critics and historians might say that “Freudian sexuality is the prime mover of all Surrealist art,”⁷⁶ as Lippard does in her review of “The *Other* Tradition,” Swenson actually sees the legacy of Surrealism against this grain. Swenson argues that the “Surrealists attempted to galvanize men against the unconscious, to make dreams concrete so that it would be possible to deal with them; this is particularly apparent in Dali’s paranoiac-critical method.”⁷⁷ Swenson continues,

Dali stood apart from the other Surrealists almost from the moment he came to Paris; he insisted less on re-shaping the world through intuitive and Freudian processes, more on reshaping himself by hardening his obsessive identification with “phenomena and elements.” [...] Dali externalizes so much that, even if the object or image at first might not correspond with a psychological state, his willed obsession then reshapes his psyche.⁷⁸

⁷³ Swenson, “The *Other* Tradition,” 24.

⁷⁴ Swenson, “The *Other* Tradition,” 20.

⁷⁵ Swenson, “The *Other* Tradition,” 21.

⁷⁶ Lippard, “An Impure Situation,” 63.

⁷⁷ Swenson, “The *Other* Tradition,” 22.

⁷⁸ Swenson, “The *Other* Tradition,” 24.

Swenson concludes this section of “The *Other* Tradition” by restaging his turn away from any project to probe individual “innermost feelings,” and toward instead a project to describe “public, communal feelings.”

In the final section of the essay, “Art as Exploration,” Swenson explains that the *other* tradition includes explicit images and discussions of sex. All kinds of sex. Facing an audience of artists and critics who, in Swenson’s estimation, “give no awareness that, like colors and rhythms, there are thousands of varieties of sex and an equal number of ways of using it,”⁷⁹ several young artists of the *other* tradition produce explicit images of sex—sex that Swenson calls “post-Freudian,” an adjective he uses capaciously to characterize certain art, pictures, people and sex (**Fig. 1.7**). “Three young artists, Joe Raffaele, Paul Thek and Mike Todd might be called post-Freudian,” Swenson writes.

They are not, however, sexually obsessed nor are they pornographers; but sex is a more important and conscious part of their content than is usually the case. As in pornography, the erotic and sensual are not a sub-class of love or tragedy; unlike pornography, there is an integration of sexual with poetic and even moral feelings. The erotic is turned toward a wider range of human possibilities.⁸⁰



Fig. 1.7. Installation photos “The *Other* Tradition” from Gene Swenson’s archive, with examples of “Post-Freudian” art. Works include: center- Mike Todd, *The Strange Case of Ann Wilson*, 1966, assemblage (14” high); right foreground- Alik Cavaliere, *Tree and Fruits*, 1965, mixed media (69” high); right background – Ann Wilson, *untitled drawing*, graphite on paper, 1966 (16x16”). Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, January 7 – March 27, 1966. Gene Swenson Papers. Ann Wilson, Executor of the Gene Swenson Estate.

⁷⁹ Swenson, “The *Other* Tradition,” 34.

⁸⁰ Swenson, “The *Other* Tradition,” 35.

Working against the Freudian tenant that “tendencies to every kind of perversion can be shown to exist as unconscious forces,”⁸¹ Swenson maintains that “perversions” are what they are on the surface—conscious, describable desires, and precisely *not* outward symptoms of inner “unconscious forces.”

Like “post-Freudian” sex, “post-Freudian” art, according to Swenson, is what it is on the surface; it is not a symptom of, nor does it provide a window into, the artist’s unconscious or anything like that. Writing about James Rosenquist’s painting *Flower Garden* (1961) (**Fig. 1.8**) several years after “The *Other* Tradition” was published, Swenson declares: “The obvious contact of flesh with flesh is not dream imagery, repressed homosexuality, or anything else idiotic.”⁸² The painting depicts five hands set against a black ground: as one hand supports the dangling arm of a slumped athlete (his track uniform just visible along the canvas’s left edge), three larger disembodied hands reach up from the bottom—one hand wears a rubber dish glove, flanked by two nearly identical hands wearing wedding rings. Swenson writes, “The artificial delicacy of the two hands and the Martian absurdity of the gloved hand form a tremendous contrast with the helpful hand and the helpless arm.” “This contrast suggests to me at least one way of understanding the picture.” “What if,” he proposes, “instead of calling it the picture plane, we used the word, surface.” “Surface is more general,” he continues, “and can be applied to ideas, to feelings, to life and not just to a technique of painting.”⁸³

⁸¹ Sigmund Freud and James Strachey (trans.), *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (New York: Basic Books, 2007): 97.

⁸² Gene Swenson, “James Rosenquist: The Figure a Man Makes” in *The Register of the Museum of Art, University of Kansas* 4, no. 6-7 (1971): 60. Special edition published to accompany the exhibition *Gene Swenson: Retrospective for a Critic* (October 24 – December 5, 1971).

⁸³ Swenson, “James Rosenquist: The Figure a Man Makes,” 61.

Figure removed due to copyright restrictions

Fig. 1.8. James Rosenquist, *Flower Garden*, 1961. Oil on canvas, 71 3/4" x 96", Collection of the Yale University Art Gallery, Gift of Richard Brown Baker.

During an era (the mid-'60s) when, according to Swenson, "we still psychoanalyze ourselves in a Freudian manner although we may not be the least bit suppressed with Victorian 'secrets,'" ⁸⁴ Swenson proposes *other* strategies for understanding ourselves, our art and our world: strategies that revolve around describing—not probing—"public, communal" feelings, "political" feelings, "common clichés," and "common stock responses" as they appear on the surface. In the films of Godard and Truffaut, Swenson also sees such strategies at work: strategies for understating a new mode of subjectivity—one applicable to "*later* twentieth-century people," as Swenson puts it—in which the self is constituted not through "inner psychology," but rather through the clustering of images, attributes and clichés on the surface. "Some viewers seem to have difficulties with these films," Swenson writes, "these viewers are, I suggest, often frustrated because they cannot find traditional Freudian psychological motivations for the plot." Swenson continues,

But that is one of the exciting innovations, particularly of Godard's and Truffaut's films. Those directors don't seem to think that inner psychology is very interesting or applicable in telling stories of *later* twentieth-century people. Psychologizing is not a proper viewer attitude toward the characters in the film. They are already more likely to know why they are doing something than what they are doing. We are not dealing with a 'psychological' situation in its usual sense at all; it is, in a way, the reverse—as if one probed the psyche through the present rather than the past, through politics and business and culture rather than sexuality. ⁸⁵

⁸⁴ Swenson "The *Other* Tradition," 35.

⁸⁵ Swenson, "The *Other* Tradition," 32.

* * *

It is worth noting that “The *Other* Tradition” does have an important legacy within the mainstream of art history, primarily through the work of Lucy Lippard. A strand of Swenson’s influence stretches from Lippard’s first efforts in 1966 to frame “Eccentric Abstraction” and to come to terms with the work of Eva Hesse, through to Anne Wagner’s plea, nearly thirty years later in her book *Three Artists (Three Women)*, to recapture “the main force of Lippard’s approach to Hesse’s art: her effort to keep interpretation alive to the ways opposites join forces in a disquieting and unstable union.”⁸⁶

Lippard first proposed the term “Eccentric Abstraction” in direct response to the provocations of “The *Other* Tradition.” In her long review of Swenson’s exhibition and essay, published May 1966 in *Art International* (and then reprinted in her 1971 anthology *Changing: Essays in Art Criticism*), she writes:

My main quarrel with the Other Tradition is that, as presented here, and aside from the pop artists, it lacks a strong younger generation to make it important in terms of actual work accomplished. [...] [Frank] Viner’s work, and Eva Hesse’s at Graham, and Robert Greer’s and Bonino, are intuitive rather than intellectual, but they share certain attitudes with the more conceptual branches of current art as well as with the *Other* Tradition. I find their experiments more interesting and more stimulating to the contemporary sensibility than Thek’s, Arman’s or Raffaele’s warmed over and updated Surrealism. In view of the prevalent formalist trends, this kind of art could be called Eccentric Abstraction.⁸⁷

Several months later, Lippard published an essay and curated an exhibition at the Fischbach Gallery titled “Eccentric Abstraction,” which has long been heralded as a watershed event in the history of postwar American art—“the moment is mythic,” Briony Fer declared back in 1999, “in

⁸⁶ Wagner, *Three Artists (Three Women)*, 262.

⁸⁷ Lucy Lippard, “An Impure Situation (New York and Philadelphia Letter),” *Art International* 10.5 (May 1966): 62-63.

so far as it has come to be charged with the significance of revealing all that Minimal art itself had sought to repress.”⁸⁸ Lippard describes Hesse’s work in the following terms,

Hesse’s self-contained but tentative quality re-occurs in *Long Life*, a black cord-wrapped sphere, set on the floor and attached to the wall by a graded “lifeline.” It takes little imagination to perceive the “body ego” that went into this work, but it adds the curiously withdrawn, objectified subjectivity of “Swenson’s new sexuality,” in which matter-of-fact understatement of ideas usually overstated is paramount.⁸⁹

In 1966, Lippard’s criticism was very much alive to Swenson’s plea for the cultivation of a conscious, explicit, “matter-of-fact” post-Freudian sexuality, and also to the possibility that Hesse’s work answers that plea in disquieting, unstable ways that Swenson might not have envisioned.

V. “Why Have None of my Fellow Artists Spoken a Word in Behalf of the Revolution?”

After 1966, facing institutions continuing on with business as usual—unwilling to deal with “feelings they call political”⁹⁰—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 1967 the National Gallery of Canada commissioned Swenson to write an essay on James Rosenquist for the artist’s first major museum retrospective, which the museum ultimately refused to publish because Swenson would not acquiesce to the demand that he excise certain passages—a demand handed down directly from Jean Sutherland Boggs, the museum’s director.⁹¹ Swenson sent his manuscript draft to Brydon Smith, the exhibition’s

⁸⁸ Briony Fer, “Objects beyond Objecthood,” *Oxford Art Journal* 22.2 (1999): 26.

⁸⁹ Lucy Lippard, “An Impure Situation,” 64.

⁹⁰ Swenson, *The Other Tradition*, 35.

⁹¹ 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.

curator, in three parts appended with typed-up notecards (**Fig. 1.9**) that proclaim: “I almost can’t believe that it is as good as I think it is”; “Here are another sensational 20 pages. The final heart rending 10 pages [...] should be on its way in a few more days”; and “Here is the end of my piece and, after a few corrections, the beginning of a new era in criticism and possibly even in art. I can never again thank you as I can now for making this possible.” In a letter to Smith dated August, 1967 Swenson declares: “I let myself be a writer, with fantasies of Lessing [...] Anyway I hope it’s perfect enough for you. I’m terribly pleased with it, for it so beautifully sums up my career as a critic.”⁹²

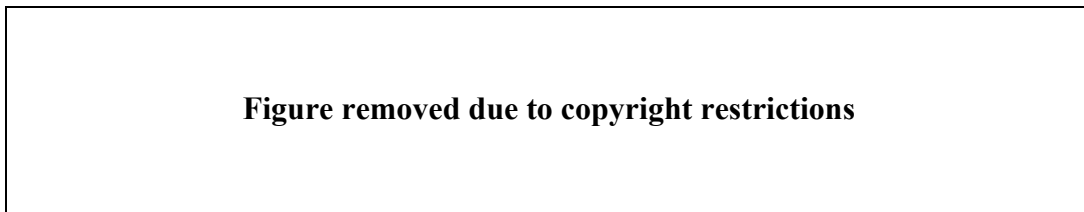


Fig. 1.9. Notecards from Gene Swenson to Brydon Smith at the National Gallery of Canada. National Gallery of Canada fonds, Exhibitions in Canada, James Rosenquist, Box 509, 12-4-360, vol. 6.

In a letter to Swenson dated October 31, 1967, Boggs informs Swenson that the museum is planning to excise large sections of his text because as “the establishment figure in the background” (her words), she made the determination that “not all of it is as relevant nor as accessible as it should be in a catalogue of a Rosenquist exhibition.”⁹³ Swenson replies by telegram, “I categorically refuse permission to print Rosenquist essay as edited”⁹⁴—and after a few more telegrams back-and-forth, the catalogue was sent to print without Swenson’s text.

In that essay, Swenson lays bare the despair and “utter confusion” he felt in the early ’60s, following in particular the assassination of John F. Kennedy:

⁹² Archival Material. National Gallery of Canada.

⁹³ Archival Material. National Gallery of Canada.

⁹⁴ Archival Material. National Gallery of Canada.

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.

I was just then beginning work on the transcripts of four interviews, one of them with Rosenquist. In following days I tried completing the work. The very atmosphere had changed. I no longer knew what to seek in the artist's words. Rosenquist and I consulted about the text. Apart from the work we did together, we talked of little but the tragedy in Dallas. Few of us were then talkative. Life was different. Some went about as usual, but most did not.⁹⁵

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" or the parameters of a post-Freudian subjectivity that "may not be the least bit suppressed with Victorian 'secrets.'"⁹⁶ In an editorial from May 30, 1968 for *The New York Free Press* titled "The Thought Police" (**Fig. 1.10**), 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."⁹⁷ Swenson 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. Perhaps my crime, like those young people recently rounded up

⁹⁵ Gene Swenson, "James Rosenquist: The Figure a Man Makes" (1968), 77. Published posthumously in *Gene Swenson: Retrospective for a Critic*.

⁹⁶ Swenson, *The Other Tradition*, 35.

⁹⁷ Gene Swenson, "The Thought Police," *The New York Free Press*, May 30, 1968, 8.

late one evening on Second Avenue, was that I was simultaneously happy and poor: a psychiatric impossibility and politically dangerous.⁹⁸



Fig. 1.10. Gene Swenson, “The Thought Police,” *The New York Free Press*, 30 May 1968. Clipping from the Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York.

Several weeks before his arrest, on April 25, 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.”⁹⁹ Swenson, let it be said, made no secret of the fact that he perceived blatant suppression of homosexual content, or “fagged art” as Swenson says it got called, from the highest levels of the art world 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 June 20, 1968 titled “Why Have None of my Fellow Artists Spoken a Word in Behalf of the Revolution?” (**Fig. 1.11**), Swenson declares:

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

⁹⁸ Swenson, “The Thought Police,” 8.

⁹⁹ Gene Swenson, “The Corporate Structure of the American Art World,” *The New York Free Press*, April 25, 1968, 9.

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? My sins—for I admit I am not in jail, where all real men of virtue reside today—as an artist of 1968, and my eternal shame, as summarized in one word: complacency. [...]

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, com-passion. [...] 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. [...] 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.¹⁰⁰

Figure removed due to copyright restrictions

Fig. 1.11. Gene Swenson, "Why Have None of my Fellow Artists Spoken a Word in Behalf of the Revolution?," *The New York Free Press*, 6 June 1968, 17. Clipping from the Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York.

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 got 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 pointed finger. I don't know the content of his fury because I was making just as much

¹⁰⁰ Gene Swenson, "Why Have None of my Fellow Artists Spoken a Word in Behalf of the Revolution?," *The New York Free Press*, June 6, 1968, 17.

noise in my own distress while cowering toward the exit.”¹⁰¹ And reflecting back on Swenson’s plight in 1972, she writes,

I had a friend gene swenson who went on an intergalactic journey in his own space ship, I’ve forgotten the details. [...] As for preparation there was none. The trips were a little on the sayonara side. He did come back however. He came back three times, and after the third time the Medical Inquisition Recovery Team and all the rest of their frogmen had at last convinced the guy that he was a “case.” He was ready then to take their tranquilizers and get a nice nine to five job filing something and wear a suit and a tie and go to a shrink very often regularly to keep himself straight. The last thing that happened was he biologically died in a carcrash in kansas with his mother.¹⁰²

The content of Swenson’s fury is worth getting to know, I think, especially now—fury that led him at the end of the sixties to act up and lash out in ways that could be at turns menacing and poetic, frightening and gentle. 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,”¹⁰³ according to a write-up in the *New York Times*. “Gene didn’t take this lightly and neither did Henry,” recalled James Rosenquist. “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.”¹⁰⁴ In a letter to the Museum of Modern Art 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,”¹⁰⁵ which turned out only to involve Swenson showing up alone with a tin beggar’s

¹⁰¹ Jill Johnston, “Dance Journal: Like a Boy in a Boat,” *The Village Voice*, September 11, 1969, 17.

¹⁰² Jill Johnston, “R.D. Laing: The Misteek of Sighcosis,” published November 30, 1972. Reprinted in Jill Johnston, *Admission Accomplished: The Lesbian Nation Years (1970-75)* (London: Serpent’s Tail, 1998): 178-199.

¹⁰³ Barbara Rose, contribution to *Culture Hero*, p. 11.

¹⁰⁴ “Wreath Sent to Statue Puzzles Metropolitan,” *The New York Times*, September 1, 1967, 31.

¹⁰⁵ James Rosenquist, contribution to “Gene Swenson: A Composite Portrait,” 27.

¹⁰⁵ Gene 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.

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. 1.12**)



Fig. 1.12. Gene Swenson, handmade signs on brown packing paper, c. 1968. Gene Swenson Papers. Ann Wilson, Executor of the Gene Swenson Estate.

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.”¹⁰⁶ By disrupting the flow of business as usual, Swenson suspended everyone in the auditorium—panelists 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.”¹⁰⁷

On the occasion of MoMA’s 1968 exhibition “Dada, Surrealism, and their Heritages,” Swenson organized 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,

¹⁰⁶ Jill Johnston, “Dance Journal: Cultural Gangsters,” *The Village Voice*, June 6, 1968, 33.

¹⁰⁷ Johnston, ‘Dance Journal: Cultural Gangsters’, 33.

beginning the week of March 25,”¹⁰⁸ as he put it in a *Village Voice* advertisement (**Fig. 1.13**).

According to a report in the *New York Times* published 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.”¹⁰⁹

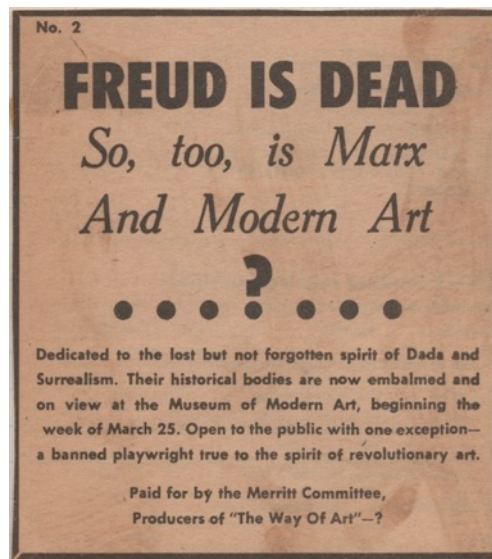


Fig. 1.13. “Freud is Dead, So, too, is Marx and Modern Art...?...” Advertisement published in *The Village Voice*, 21 March 1968.

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 as a sign (**Fig. 1.14**). Lippard remembers, “The whole Art Workers’ Coalition couldn’t match the courage of Gene, the year

¹⁰⁸ Advertisement titled “FREUD IS DEAD. So, too, is Marx. And Modern Art ...?...” *The Village Voice*, March 21, 1968, 20.

¹⁰⁹ Grace Glueck, “Hippies Protest at Dada Preview: 300 in Gentle Demonstration at Museum of Modern Art,” *The New York Times*, March 26, 1968, 21.

before it was founded, persistently picketing the Museum of Modern Art, alone, with a huge blue question mark on a stick.”¹¹⁰

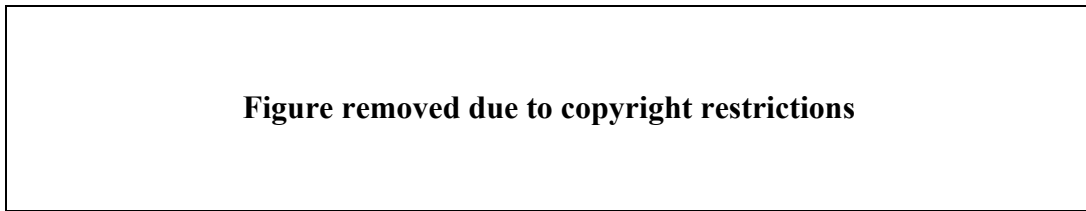


Fig. 1.14. Swenson picketing outside the Museum of Modern Art, 1968. Black and white snapshot pasted into Ann Wilson’s journal. Reproduced with permission from Ann Wilson, Executor of the Gene Swenson Estate.

Picketing alone outside MoMA wielding only that giant blue question mark, Swenson reflects back darkly the immorality of an art world complacent in the face of atrocity. He withholds comforts 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 materializes. No rallying cry rises up in response to his question mark. How could it? It’s not meant to. Rather than giving fellow critics, artists, curators and museumgoers the chance to feel, if fleetingly, a sense of “suffering with, compassion,”¹¹¹ as Swenson put it, 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, 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 people’s emotions toward a common cause. By

¹¹⁰ Lippard, contribution to “Gene Swenson: A Composite Portrait,” 18.

¹¹¹ Swenson, “Why Have None of my Fellow Artists Spoken a Word in Behalf of the Revolution?,” 17.

picketing alone, by dramatizing a breakdown of reciprocity and foreclosing the possibility for collective response, Swenson's big blue question mark functions as a mirror that reflects back to the art world its own culpable complacency. Indeed, Battcock interprets Swenson's protest as 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."¹¹² 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 like 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

¹¹² Battcock, "Museum of Modern Art Hires Guards to Keep Swenson Out," p.10.

ease, even as our nation's moral compass feels broken beyond repair, our institutions feel unmovable, and resistance seems futile.

VI. Conclusion: 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 U.S. war, likewise clad in a dark jacket, scarf and gloves, although in this instance wielding not a question mark but a megaphone (**Fig. 1.15**). Into the megaphone, she speaks love letters from “a time of passionate, optimistic protest against the Iraq War in 2003” intercut with protest slogans.¹¹³ 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.”¹¹⁴ 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 (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

¹¹³ Kris Cohen, “Our Broken Genres: Sharon Hayes’s Love Addresses,” *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context and Enquiry* 38 (Spring 2015): 31.

¹¹⁴ Cohen, “Our Broken Genres,” 32.

disillusionment of failed protest deflates a key promise of liberal democracy: the idea that if a protest is allowed to happen, it will matter.”¹¹⁵



Fig. 1.15. 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, 2007-08. Photograph: Andrea Geyer.

In a related series titled *In the Near Future* (2005-08), 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. 1.16**). 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?”¹¹⁶ 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.”¹¹⁷ 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

¹¹⁵ Cohen, “Our Broken Genres,” p. 31.

¹¹⁶ Julia Bryan-Wilson and Sharon Hayes, “We Have a Future: An Interview with Sharon Hayes,” *Grey Room* 37 (Fall 2009): 89.

¹¹⁷ Bryan-Wilson and Hayes, “We Have a Future,” 89-90.

affective contact between marginalized people now and then ... [so as to] form communities across time.”¹¹⁸

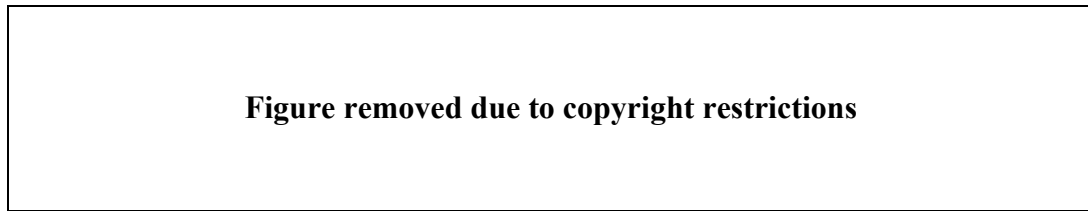


Fig. 1.16. Sharon Hayes, *In the Near Future*, New York, 2005. Detail. 35mm multiple slide projection installation, 9 actions, 9 projections 223 original slides (729 in total).

In Hayes’s performances we witness a queer ghost of Swenson picketing alone with his question mark—in 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??.” Which 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 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.

¹¹⁸ Julia Bryan-Wilson, “Sharon Hayes Sounds Off,” *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context and Enquiry* 38 (Spring 2015): 21. The quote is from: Carolyn Dinshaw, “Theorizing Queer Temporalities: A Roundtable Discussion,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 13, no. 2–3 (2007):178.

Chapter 2

Jill Johnston's Dance Journal

Someone told me I like nonart. It sounds good but I don't know what it is. I'd probably like it. I'd have to see it first. If we prefixed all our indications of things with "non" we'd always be looking elsewhere for these things. The confusion would be terrific. Probably the world is too sure about its things. I like things that are certain about not being very sure about what they are. "I am for an art that grows up not knowing it is art at all" (Oldenburg). When things get very certain about themselves they tend to tell you to look out, stand back, make way, shut up, and put down your money. When it's settled it's finished. "The beautiful is what your servant instinctively thinks is frightful." This is your local reporter always "looking elsewhere"—for the nonthing of the thing—for whatever isn't settled, labeled, canned, caulked, cherished, claimed, and consumed. "Take me disappearing through the smoke rings of my mind."

—Jill Johnston, December 1967¹

I. lesbianlesbianlesbianlesbianlesbianlesbianlesbian

Jill Johnston began writing criticism for the *Village Voice* around 1960, "just as the entire art world was entering a convulsion of dissolving boundaries"²—as she explains in the preface to *Marmalade Me* (Fig. 2.1), her first anthology of criticism published by E.P. Dutton in 1971 as part of a series of volumes in modern art criticism edited by Gregory Battcock. Recall, it was in the introduction to *Marmalade Me* that Battcock credits Johnston with having "introduced, by her writings, a new vision for criticism *without apology*, and for criticism claiming identification in the world of artistic expression."³ "Jill Johnston is one of the most important, radical, and innovative writers of her time," Battcock declares. "It is to Johnston's credit," he continues, "that

¹ Jill Johnston, "Dance Journal: Take Me Disappearing," *The Village Voice*, December 14, 1967. Reproduced in Jill Johnston, *Marmalade Me*, (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1971), 105.

² Jill Johnston, "Preface," *Marmalade Me*, 13.

³ Battcock, "Introduction," *Marmalade Me*, 10. Emphasis original.

her work is several things all at once. It is poetry. It is criticism. It is history. It is self-revelation.”⁴ And back in 1965, Johnston proclaimed for herself in the pages of the *Voice*, “I also stake out a claim to be an artist, a writer, if that’s what I’m doing when I get to the typewriter and decide that I liked something well enough to say what I think it’s all about.”⁵

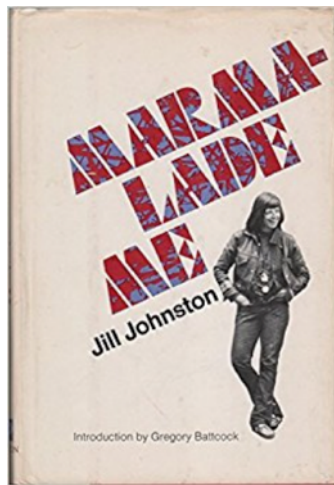


Fig. 2.1. Cover of *Marmalade Me*, Jill Johnston’s first anthology of criticism, published 1971.

Week after week in the *Village Voice* from the early-1960s on, Johnston assembled critical language to describe new intermedia experiments in art and performance conducted in and around the Judson Dance Theatre. Yvonne Rainer, for one, pays special tribute to the role Johnston’s writing played in catalyzing artistic experimentation of the era in her 2006 memoir *Feelings are Facts: A Life*. The title of Rainer’s memoir echoes the language of Johnston’s 1964 description of Rainer’s dances “Three Seascapes” and “Dialogues,” published in the *Village Voice*. Johnston writes, “She’s presenting emotions as facts and not as idealized commentaries on the human condition. The facts are the facts about herself. Naturally. But she releases

⁴ Battcock, “Introduction,” *Marmalade Me*, 10. Emphasis original.

⁵ Jill Johnston, “Critics’ Critics,” *The Village Voice*, September 16, 1965. Reproduced in *Marmalade Me*, 100-01.

something nutty about herself, and this nutty thing stays intact [...].”⁶ And for her part, Rainer reflects in *Feelings are Facts*,

As I look back, what stands out for me, along with the inevitable undercurrents of petty jealousies and competitiveness (from which I was not exempt), is the spirit of that time: a dare-devil willingness to try anything, the arrogance of our certainty that there was ground to be broken and we were standing on it, the exhilaration produced by the response of the incredibly partisan audiences, and the feverish anticipation of each new review in the *Village Voice* by our champion, Jill Johnston.⁷

At the same time—in many of those same feverishly anticipated reviews—Johnston begins the labor of assembling new language for living a lesbian life, before any such language had crystalized within the culture or popular imagination. In 1973, Johnston published her second anthology of criticism, this one titled *Lesbian Nation: The Feminist Solution* (**Fig. 2.2**).



Fig. 2.2. Cover of *Lesbian Nation*, Jill Johnston’s second anthology of criticism, published 1973.

Near the beginning, she writes, “Growing up in amerika was to grow up not talking about anything that meant anything. We talked a lot but not about real things. I never said I was a dyke even to a dyke because there wasn’t a dyke in the land who thought she should be a dyke or even

⁶ Jill Johnston, “Pain, Pleasure, Process” *The Village Voice*, February 27, 1964, 15.

⁷ Yvonne Rainer, *Feelings are Facts: A Life* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 225.

that she was a dyke so how could we talk about it. [...] We never said it so it didn't exist."⁸ On the first page of *Lesbian Nation*, Johnston instructs, "This book should be read like an interlocking web of personal experience and history and events of the world forming a picture of an evolving political revolutionary consciousness of one who was female who emerged from straight middle unconscious postwar amerika."⁹

Later in the book Johnston dubs this process "Slouching Toward Consciousness"¹⁰— cribbing Joan Didion's reference to W. B. Yeats's 1919 poem "The Second Coming." Johnston's quippy reference to Didion's 1968 collection of essays *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* is important and telling.¹¹ In the preface to that book, in reference to the titular essay, Didion writes: "I went to San Francisco because I had not been able to work in some months, had been paralyzed by the conviction that writing was an irrelevant act, that the world as I had understood it no longer existed. If I was to work again at all, it would be necessary for me to come to terms with disorder."¹² Not working, paralysis, coping with the conviction that the world as you understood it no longer exists, escaping New York City, and coming to terms with disorder—if these motifs are hallmarks of "slouching," Johnston's claim to be "slouching toward consciousness" encompasses them all. In a chapter of *Lesbian Nation* titled "A Series of Great Escapes," Johnston tells the story of "travelling in a vw squareback south and west and back east

⁸ Jill Johnston, *Lesbian Nation: The Feminist Solution* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1973), 48, 52.

⁹ Johnston, *Lesbian Nation*, 1.

¹⁰ Johnston uses this phrase as the title for chapter 3 of *Lesbian Nation*.

¹¹ There is a story here (one that amounts to more than the sum of its parts) about the loose connections forged among a messy network of "feminist misfits" who moved in relation to one another, who dropped out and fucked up, and lived disordered lives in dark times in proximity to one another. The phrase "feminist misfits" comes from Jo Applin's recent book *Lee Lozano: Not Working*. Indeed, Applin includes an account of the loose connection between Didion and Lozano in the conclusion to her book. See: Jo Applin, "Conclusion: Lee Lozano versus the world," in *Lee Lozano: Not Working* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2018): 152-161.

¹² Joan Didion, *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1968, reprinted 2008): xi-xii.

again 12000 miles in seven weeks” in 1969.¹³ During that particular escape, Johnston “went crazy again,” as she puts it, “and completed my trip for the first time unmolested by the psychiatric profession with the aid of my lover who provided the getaway car and the supportive company which included some essential assistance in controlling my delusions.”¹⁴ Johnston writes, “Going crazy has always been a personal solution in extremis to the unarticulated conflicts of political realities”¹⁵—and summing up the result of her “traumatic confrontations alone against the male corporation,” Johnston proclaims: “I had tried absolutely everything there was to try and the only thing that sort of worked was writing.”¹⁶

* * *

In the 2017 book *Living a Feminist Life*, Sara Ahmed stakes an improbable claim: “in order to survive what we come up against, in order to build worlds from the shattered pieces, we need a revival of lesbian feminism. [...] Lesbian feminism can bring feminism back to life.”¹⁷ The claim is improbable because now, forty-five years after the publication of *Lesbian Nation: The Feminist Solution*, few things seem more passé than lesbian feminism. As Ahmed notes, “in some queer literature, lesbian feminism itself appears a miserable scene that we had to get through, or pass through, before we could embrace the happier possibility of becoming queer.”¹⁸ And then she asserts: “Lesbians are not a step on a path that leads in a queer direction. A willful lesbian stone is not a stepping stone.”¹⁹ According to Ahmed, lesbian feminism is “a willfulness

¹³ Johnston, *Lesbian Nation*, 75.

¹⁴ Johnston, *Lesbian Nation*, 86.

¹⁵ Johnston, *Lesbian Nation*, 83-84.

¹⁶ Johnston, *Lesbian Nation*, 97.

¹⁷ Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2017): 213-14.

¹⁸ Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, 222-3.

¹⁹ Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, 222.

archive, a living and lively archive made up and made out of our own experiences of struggling against what we come up against.” She continues,

When a world does not give us standing, to stand is to stand against that world. And when a world does not give us standing, we have to create other ways of being in the world. You acquire the potential to make things, create things. Lesbian feminism: the actualization of a potential we have to make things. A movement is assembled by those who keep encountering in their everyday life what they stand against.²⁰

When a world does not give standing, one alternative is “slouching.” Here I treat Johnston’s claim to be “slouching” as a claim to be creating other ways of being in a world that did not give her standing.

With the double entendre “Lesbian feminism can bring feminism back to life,” Ahmed makes a double claim: that lesbian feminism can revive feminism, and that lesbian feminism can return feminism to everyday life, to the “question of how to live a feminist life.”²¹ The connection between lesbian and feminism is “a connection to be lived,” Ahmed asserts, “living as a lesbian is how I live a feminist life.”²² If lesbian feminism brings feminism “back to life,” then writing a lesbian feminist history requires us to dwell in the disordered, sweaty stuff of life—in particular, of messy and difficult lives spent struggling, coming up against things, shattering them, and then creating new things out of the shards, improbable things that tend to fall apart again before too long. Nothing is clear-cut.

In this chapter, I embrace the labor of what it might mean to write a lesbian feminist history—labor that involves wading through material and archival fragments in order to piece

²⁰ Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, 222-3.

²¹ Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, 2. As Ahmed notes, “Lesbian feminism might seem to be passé precisely because lesbian feminism posed feminism as a life question. Many of the critiques of lesbian feminism, often as a form of cultural feminism, were precisely because of this attachment to life.” (p. 2) Think for example of the quote, widely attributed to Ti-Grace Atkinson: “Feminism is the theory; lesbianism is the practice.”

²² Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, 214

back together the lesbian life that Jill Johnston lived, and to dwell on episodes in which Johnston manages to devise improbable ways of being, writing, speaking, and moving in a world that did not give her much in the way of standing. It is important to note that for Johnston, living a lesbian life did not entail embracing lesbian as a fixed identity, or as a stable banner under which to claim easy political solidarity with other women. Which is not to say that Johnston denies being a lesbian; rather she demonstrates that, for her, lesbian is not a particularly stable thing to be. Pretty early on, Johnston refused to participate in the group politics of either the Women's Movement or the Gay Liberation Movement. "Movement Schmoovement," she declares in a *Village Voice* column from November 1971, summing up her "final impression of movement politics."²³ "There were only a few encounters," Johnston continues, "and this last one I knew was all over when I threw a handful of crackers at the leader and like every reprimanded child went to bigger and better worse things."²⁴ At her most public and polemical, Johnston often renders words like lesbian, dyke, and woman unstable and unfamiliar through repetition. At the end of *Lesbian Nation*, Johnston includes a text she performed aloud at a 1971 panel discussion moderated by Norman Mailer titled *A Dialogue on Women's Liberation* (an episode I return to at the end of this chapter). Johnston begins,

All women are lesbians except those who don't know it naturally they are but don't know it yet I am a woman who is a lesbian because I am a woman and a woman who loves herself naturally who is other women is a lesbian a woman who loves women loves herself naturally this is the case that a woman is herself is all woman is a natural born lesbian so we don't mind using the name like any name it is meaningless [...]²⁵

²³ Jill Johnston, "Movement Schmoovement," *The Village Voice*, November 11, 1971. Reprinted in *Lesbian Nation*, p. 234.

²⁴ Jill Johnston, "Movement Schmoovement," p. 234. As Jo Applin notes, this sort of "rejection of feminism"—of refusing "to participate in its group politics"—was "in many ways of a piece with the times." See: Applin, *Lee Lozano: Not Working*, 137, 154.

²⁵ Johnston, *Lesbian Nation*, 266. After Johnston performed this text aloud at the "Dialogue on Women's Liberation" panel discussion, she published it in the *Village Voice*. See: Jill Johnston, "On a clear day you can see your mother," *The Village Voice*, May 6, 1971, 37, 40, 46.

Later on, Johnston asserts twice in a row, in italics: “*Until all women are lesbians there can be no true political revolution.*” But then she also declares, “lesbian is a label invented by anybody to throw at any woman who dares to be a man’s equal and lesbian is a good name it means nothing of course or everything so we don’t mind using the name,” and also “lesbian which means nothing we could say it over and over again over lesbianlesbianlesbianlesbianlesbianlesbianlesbianlesbian.”²⁶

In *Living a Feminist Life*, Ahmed demonstrates that “repetition is the scene of feminist instruction.” She writes,

I think of feminism as poetry; we hear histories in words; we reassemble histories by putting them into words. This book still follows words around just as I have done before, turning a word this way and that, like an object that catches a different light every time it is turned; attending to the same words across different contexts, allowing them to create ripples or new patterns like texture on a ground. I make arguments by listening for resonances; the book thus involves repeating words, sometimes over and over again; words like *shatter*, words like *snap*. The repetition is the scene of feminist instruction.²⁷

Over and over again. In addition to being the scene of feminist instruction, repetition is also the scene of avant-garde artistic experimentation, particularly in the 1960s and 1970s: John Cage’s *Variations*, Andy Warhol’s “you do the same thing over and over again,”²⁸ Jasper Johns’s letters and numbers, Agnes Martin’s grids, Yayoi Kusama’s nets and dots, Donald Judd’s “one thing after another,”²⁹ Sol LeWitt’s open cubes, Howardena Pindell’s punched holes, Eleanor Antin’s serial photos, Mary Kelly’s documents, etc.—the list, of course, goes on and on.³⁰ And

²⁶ Johnston, *Lesbian Nation*, 269, 271.

²⁷ Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, 12.

²⁸ See chapter 2 of this dissertation.

²⁹ Donald Judd, “Specific Objects,” in *Complete Writings 1959–1975* (Halifax: Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1975), 184

³⁰ For various arguments that this is the case, see: Kartsaki, Eirini (ed.), *On Repetition: Writing, Performance & Art* (Bristol, UK and Chicago: Intellect Books / The University of Chicago Press, 2016).

throughout the '60s and '70s Johnston dwelled on repetition as the scene of avant-garde artistic experimentation, beginning with her earliest reviews of Judson Dance. Writing in 1962 about Yvonne Rainer's dance "Satie for Two" Johnston declares,

The phrases do not go any place; there is no connecting material, no climaxes, etc. [...] Now this sort of repetition could be a deadly bore I'll admit, but Miss Rainer is quite special and she is doing something in this dance that comes close to what Gertrude Stein was doing in her writing. Reading "Lectures in America" the other night I came onto this passage, which states the case for the author's method and which could easily apply to Miss Rainer's method in "Satie for Two":

"From this time on familiarity began and I like familiarity. It does not in me breed contempt it just breeds familiarity. And the more familiar a thing is the more there is to be familiar with. And so my familiarity began and kept on being."³¹

The same "could easily apply" to Johnston's method—a method that remained in some ways remarkably consistent through the '60s and '70s, even as the world around and within Johnston ruptured over and over again. Johnston writes in *Lesbian Nation*, "in august of 1965 on my own behalf I went totally mad. In 1966 I went mad again and in january 1969 I did it again and in that condition having escaped the clutches of the psychiatric profession and its penal colonies I was travelling about the union in style convinced at last that it was the world who was fucked up and not me and that if I didn't do something about the world it would continue to mess with me and all the other mes like me..."³² In a column from October 1968 titled "Untitled," Johnston asks: "What does it mean to name something? Where do we come off giving everything a legal identity?" Then she proclaims, "we make ourselves new not by changing the name but by

This claim stretches back to Rosalind Krauss's defining argument that "originality" is the foundational "modernist myth." Krauss argues that the grid is "the structure that has remained emblematic of the modernist ambition within the visual arts ever since [the early 20th century]." Famously, she asserts, "Structurally, logically, axiomatically, *the grid can only be repeated*. And, with an act of repetition or replication as the 'original' occasion of its usage within the experience of a given artist, the extended life of the grid in the unfolding progression of his work will be one of still more repetition, as the artist engages in repeated acts of self-imitation." See: Rosalind Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986).

³¹ Jill Johnston, "Fresh Winds," *The Village Voice*, March 15, 1962, 13. The quote is from: Gertrude Stein, *Lectures in America* (New York: Random House, 1935): 78.

³² Johnston, *Lesbian Nation*, 78.

repeating and repeating it into a magical transcendence of itself. It becomes meaningless by becoming so much itself.”³³ And by the end of *Lesbian Nation*, we get to “say it over and over again over lesbianlesbianlesbianlesbianlesbianlesbianlesbianlesbian.”³⁴

My point is that lesbian feminism and avant-garde artistic experimentation are not mutually exclusive practices; certainly for Johnston they weren’t in the 1960s and ’70s. In this chapter I dwell on episodes in which Johnston seems to be doing both at the same time—scenes and objects in which the boundaries between lesbian feminism and art making are not clear-cut at all, in which a lot of messy, affective things are happening “that have not yet found their genre of event,” to return to Lauren Berlant’s formulation.³⁵ I attend to the jagged edges where things that will perhaps matter—as art, lesbian feminism, or both—unfold in inchoate, angry, outrageous, often inarticulate ways, and I trace how such confounding scenes and objects counted somehow to the artists and critics working around Johnston in the ’60s and ’70s.

Johnston’s uneven process of slouching toward lesbian feminist consciousness unfurls inside her *Village Voice* criticism alongside and within her sustained descriptions of how the experimental art of her day matters. Suspended amid dissolving boundaries, Johnston’s practice does not resolve into a stable genre—which is, I contend, the source of its energy and the locus of its achievement. “I lugged dada forward with me into the lesbian feminist arena,” Johnston declares in 1997 essay titled “Aroused is Aroused is Aroused,” reflecting back on the era,

No guides or precedents existed for organizing my particular assemblage of narrative fragments, found phrases, twisted grammars, colloquialisms, political discourse and matriarchist myth-making into an aesthetic whole. Writing fast, every week, could stretch my need for form and order. [...] Aesthetically, I counted on the surface “all-over” unparagraphed and lower-cased look to convey unity; and for internal cohesion, on some instinct for balance, for equal emphasis

³³ Jill Johnston, “Dance Journal: Untitled,” *The Village Voice*, October 10, 1968. Reprinted in *Marmalade Me*, 19.

³⁴ Johnston, *Lesbian Nation*, 269.

³⁵ Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 4.

in progress on each part or element. Compositionally, the pieces are a form of weaving, of webworking or interlacing.³⁶

Through her critical practice, Johnston devised new ways to persist amid dissolving boundaries, to get by without a fixed genre, and to communicate layers of meaning without becoming fully intelligible or coherent: “a form of weaving, of webworking or interlacing.”

* * *

Although the achievement of Johnston’s critical, lesbian feminist practice scarcely registers now within the art historical record, artists and critics working near Johnston in the 1960s and ’70s made a point of registering in print, on panel discussions, and in their own artistic and critical projects the impact of Johnston’s near-constant presence on the scene and in the pages of the *Voice* every week. In a special issue of the short-lived underground paper *Culture Hero* devoted entirely to Johnston titled *Jill Johnston Exposed* published February 1970 (**Fig. 2.3**), artist-cum-publisher Les Levine writes on the first page,

Of all the special people inhabiting the New York cultural zoo, Jill Johnston is in some ways the most special. Not, oddly enough, so much for what she is and does, though in both she is plenty noteworthy, as for the galvanizing effect she has had in the course of her being and doing on all sorts of other special people. Somehow she seems to represent, and in a vicarious way express, a lot of secret feelings, fears, and aspirations these people (us included) think are characteristic of themselves, their art(s), and their times.³⁷

³⁶ Jill Johnston, “Aroused is Aroused is Aroused,” *Admission Accomplished: The Lesbian Nation Years (1970-75)* (London: Serpent’s Tail, 1998), ix.

³⁷ Les Levine, “Publisher Note,” *Culture Hero: JILL JOHNSTON EXPOSED: SPECIAL ISSUE: A life dominated by Strange Arts, Consuming Desires, and Ego-Eroticism*. . . (February 1970), 1.

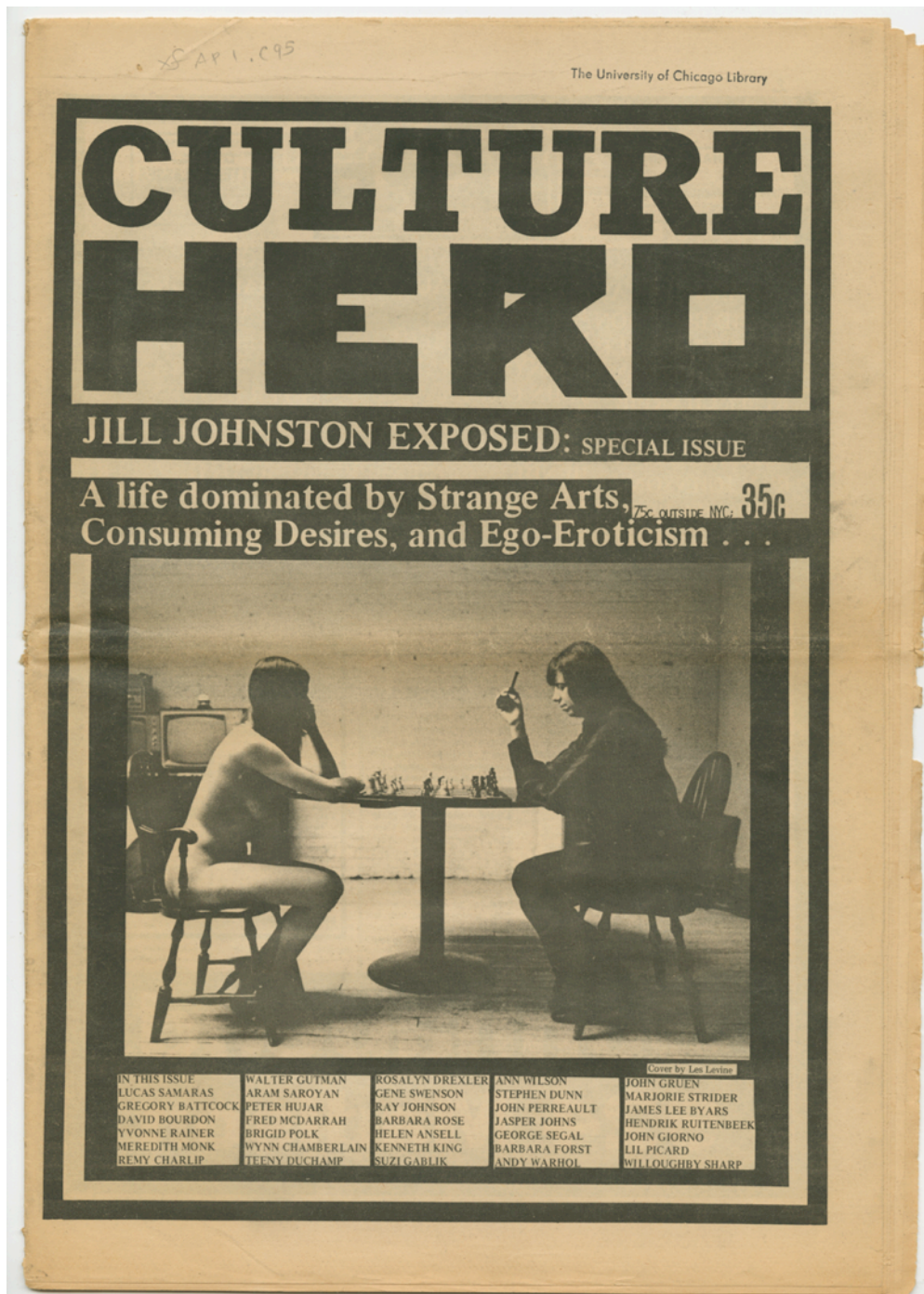


Fig. 2.3. *Culture Hero: JILL JOHNSTON EXPOSED: SPECIAL ISSUE: A life dominated by Strange Arts, Consuming Desires, and Ego-Eroticism. . .* (February 1970), cover.

This chapter investigates how an unruly lesbian critic without a coherent practice managed nevertheless to become the “most special” of all the “special people” in “the New York cultural zoo,” how she managed to “represent, and in a vicarious way express, a lot of secret

feelings, fears, and aspirations these people (us included) think are characteristic of themselves, their art(s), and their times.” In addition to Johnston’s columns from the *Village Voice* (many of which are reprinted in *Marmalade Me* and *Lesbian Nation*), this chapter’s archive includes the sustained, often collaborative projects undertaken to reckon with Johnston’s unsettled, and unsettling practice: the special issue *Culture Hero* devoted entirely to Johnston; ephemera from a 1969 panel discussion titled “The Disintegration of a Critic: An Analysis of Jill Johnston” (including a transcript by Andy Warhol of the entire panel printed in *Culture Hero*); a cinéma-vérité documentary titled *Town Bloody Hall* by Chris Hegedus and D. A. Pennebaker of Johnston’s performance on the 1971 panel discussion moderated by Norman Mailer titled “A Dialogue on Women’s Liberation” at New York’s Town Hall theatre; press coverage of that event and others; and numerous articles about Johnston published in periodicals ranging from the *Village Voice* and *East Village Other*, to queer underground papers *The New York Review of Sex* and *GAY*, to *Art in America* and mainstream magazines like *Vogue* and *Esquire*.

Here I take Levine at his word that in 1970 Johnston had become the “most special” of all the “special people inhabiting the New York cultural zoo,” and that she managed somehow to represent and express the “secret feelings, fears, and aspirations” of her era in ways that few others could. As critic John Perrault affirms in the pages of *Culture Hero*, “If anyone in the future wants to find out about the Sixties, they will have to read Jill’s columns”³⁸—a prescient assertion of Johnston’s importance that I think has withstood the test of time. In 2015, poet Adam Fitzgerald posed the following question to Eileen Myles for *Interview* magazine: “Young, queer poets coming up today have an Eileen Myles to look up to. Who’d you have?” To which she replies, affirmatively, “There was Jill Johnston. So many of us came to New York because of

³⁸ John Perrault, contribution to *Culture Hero*, 9.

Jill; we read her column in *The Village Voice*. The book she wrote was called *Lesbian Nation: The Feminist Solution*, and Queer Nation came from that. All the nations came from that.”³⁹

In what follows, I trace the ambitions and achievements of Johnston’s practice. By sustaining it for so long amid dissolving boundaries, Johnston managed week after week to capture and convey the currents of things happening around her before they congealed into events. “*I like things that are certain about not being very sure about what they are.*” Likewise, Johnston managed to capture and convey the currents of her evolving revolutionary lesbian feminist consciousness before it could congeal into identity. Staving off the expedience of intelligibility, she dwelled instead in a prolonged state of vigilant uncertainty. And in choosing this road less traveled by, Johnston improvised her way along, slouching, contriving new ways to use language and her body, bending the genre of criticism beyond recognition, and inventing new queer forms of artistic practice suspended in states of becoming. “*This is your local reporter always ‘looking elsewhere’—for the nonthing of the thing—for whatever isn’t settled, labeled, canned, caulked, cherished, claimed, and consumed. ‘Take me disappearing through the smoke rings of my mind.’*”

II. “*The Disintegration of a Critic: An Analysis of Jill Johnston*”

On the evening of May 21, 1969 critics Gregory Battcock and Lil Picard, artists Andy Warhol, Ultra Violet, Brigid Berlin and Charlotte Moorman, stock-market-analyst-cum-artist Walter Gutman, and philanthropist John de Menil all convened behind a long table on stage before a packed audience at the Loeb Student Center at New York University for a panel

³⁹ Eileen Myles and Adam Fitzgerald, “Eileen Myles,” *Interview*, published December 17, 2015, <https://www.interviewmagazine.com/culture/eileen-myles-1> (accessed 31 October 2017).

discussion moderated by critic David Bourdon titled “The Disintegration of a Critic: An Analysis of Jill Johnston” (**Fig. 2.4**). Johnston conceived, organized and promoted the panel herself, taking out ads in *The Village Voice* (**Fig. 2.5**) and circulating a typed-up, mimeographed press release (**Fig. 2.6**) in which she declares,

My purpose in arranging this my third and last panel was to offer my name as a sort of sacrifice if you like for the idea(1) of a disintegration of criticism, which I view as an outmoded form of communication. [...] I am now interested solely in autobiographical history, from the cradles as well as from the history of an (our) archetypal past. [...] Having been a so-called critic I fall into the cultural category and the panel May 21st is meant to illustrate, as an art event of the “object lesson” variety, the demise of a particular critic who both literally and figuratively (or intellectually) disintegrated. In 1965, as I was hospitalized one aspect of my vision was in the form of a command to relinquish the role of judge, a role I never dreamed I would assume in 1950 in the first place, for in 1957 I was inspired solely to find a new language a new vocabulary for dance—to make a new dance literature which I thought was historically and contemporaneously appalling. My first panel at N.Y.U. in 1968 was a conventional one with Robert Morris moderating. My second in the fall of ’68 was a disintegration panel I moderated and the panel members and myself relinquished our places to the audience. It was a “difficult” object lesson for everybody, us too, in the absurdity of authority. The panel May 21st is my final solution to the personal problem which I would hope to have some effect on all those caught in a similar trap if indeed they see it that way.⁴⁰



Fig. 2.4. *The Disintegration of a Critic: An Analysis of Jill Johnston* panel at Loeb Student Center, May 21, 1969. Participants (Left to Right): Charlotte Moorman, John de Menil, Jill Johnston, Ultra Violet, David Bourdon, Gregroy Battcock, Andy Warhol, Bridget (Polk) Berlin, Lil Picard, Walter Gutman. Photo by Peter Moore.

⁴⁰ Jill Johnston, “PRESS RELEASE: Re Panel Discussion May 21st at Loeb Student Venter of N.Y.U. ‘The Disintegration of a Critic – An Analysis of Jill Johnston.’” Papers of Lil Picard, Series II, Box 15. University of Iowa Libraries Special Collections.

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Fig. 2.5. Newspaper advertisements for “The Disintegration of a Critic: An Analysis of Jill Johnston.” L- Lil Picard Papers, The University of Iowa Libraries, Iowa City, Iowa. R- Gregory Battcock Papers, 1958-circa 1980. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Figure removed due to copyright restrictions

Fig. 2.6. Jill Johnston, “PRESS RELEASE: Re Panel Discussion May 21st at Loeb Student Venter of N.Y.U. ‘The Disintegration of a Critic – An Analysis of Jill Johnston.’” Papers of Lil Picard, Series II, Box 15. University of Iowa Libraries Special Collections.

Three years after the “Disintegration of a Critic” panel, in the pages of *Lesbian Nation* Johnston reflects, “As Valerie Solanas said dropping out is not the answer; fucking up is.” “She said most women are already dropped out, they were never in,” Johnston continues. “Dropping out gives control to those few who don’t drop out; dropping out is exactly what the establishment leaders want; it plays into the hands of the enemy; it strengthens the system instead of undermining it, since it is based entirely on the non-participation, passivity, apathy and non-involvement of the mass of women. End-quote.”⁴¹

With the “Disintegration of a Critic” panel, Johnston fucks up pretty spectacularly—which is to say, she makes a spectacle of fucking up, with as much fanfare as possible in full view of as many art-world people as could fit into an auditorium. However, it is important to note that Johnston does not does not fuck up nearly as spectacularly as Solanas did. After shooting Andy Warhol (and Mario Amaya) on June 3, 1968, Solanas was “charged with assault, judged incompetent, then competent, released temporarily then re-institutionalized for making

⁴¹ Johnston, *Lesbian Nation*, 20.

threats against Warhol,” as Catherine Lord writes. “She was released again in 1971, only to make more threats and bounce in and out of mental institutions. She dropped so far out of sight that some assumed she had died.”⁴² Johnston did not assault anyone, she was not incarcerated and, crucially, she did not drop out of sight.

The “Disintegration of a Critic” panel discussion did not represent the “object lesson” in Johnston’s “demise” or the “final solution” that she billed it to be. Rather, the panel discussion became one provisional solution to Johnston’s “personal problem” of how it might be possible to slouch toward lesbian feminist consciousness within a sexist, homophobic art world that was not particularly hospitable to an unruly lesbian critic. Johnston’s solution involved reconfiguring that world to make it more hospitable—in this case, setting a literal stage and filling it with art-world luminaries to talk about her disintegration so that she could commandeer the authority away from the panel to start talking about it for herself on her own terms, which is what she did. Although the panel discussion occurred more than a year before Johnston would “come out” officially in the *Village Voice*,⁴³ and a month before the *Village Voice* would proclaim for the first time “Gay

⁴² Catherine Lord, “Wonder Waif Meets Super Neuter,” *October* 132 (Spring 2010): 135–163.

See also: Sara Warner and Mary Jo Watts, “Hide and Go Seek: Child’s Play as Archival Act in Valerie Solanas’s SCUM Manifesto,” *TDR/The Drama Review* 58, no. 4 (2014): 80-93. Warner and Watts argue that “SCUM provides a welcome corrective to the conservative program of social assimilation that passes for contemporary LGBTQ politics.” They write, “The scummy subjects who populate Solanas’s work are important to revisit now, when queer integrationists overly invested in a politics of respectability disavow the abject identifications and stigmatized practices of their nonconforming kin on the grounds that these profligate degenerates threaten the socioeconomic enfranchisement of “good” gays eager to prove that they are just like everyone else. Solanas’s art has the capacity to generate what we might call scummy archives — caustic chronicles of nasty girls, hateful bitches, and gutter dykes — as well as scummy archival practices — fugitive strategies and low-down dirty tactics that flip a middle finger at socially conservative memory-making processes that censor and sanitize history.”

⁴³ Johnston “came out” officially in the *Village Voice* on July 2, 1970 in a column titled “Of This Pure But Irregular Passion.” She writes, “In support of the gay movement on the occasion of the gay celebration week: I guess yes I’ve been saying it in this column for a year and a half now, but always fragmentarily in the context of the literary exercises. So this will be straight on. I don’t recall any decision to declare my sexuality, in print, as though it should necessarily have interested anybody in any case. [...] Gradually the life became the theatre became the column. The life being everything of course included everything. Sex was especially interesting since I was in love with a beautiful girl and we were having a very good time of it at home and on the road.” Jill Johnston, “Dance Journal: Of This Pure But Irregular Passion,” *The Village Voice*, July 2, 1970, 20-30, 38-39, 55.

Power Comes To Sheridan Square” following the Stonewall Riots,⁴⁴ Johnston was (by the time of the panel discussion) already ahead of the curve—already “from the standpoint of anger,” as she puts it in *Lesbian Nation*, conducting her own “one woman revolution [...] in the guise of a literary code hopefully so challenging and fascinating and entertaining and difficult to read that any premature retaliation from a hostile society would be discouraged.”⁴⁵

In the summer of 1968, Johnston returned from a trip to London “as ‘a roaring lesbian.’” “I meant that I discovered I could sleep with a woman and not feel like it was the beginning or the end of the world,” Johnston writes in *Lesbian Nation* in a section titled “The Making of a Lesbian Chauvinist.” She continues,

Meaning, it was possible to just go to bed and have a good time and get up and share a cup of coffee or not and say goodbye and thank you quite amicably like any self respecting male chauvinist for whom the pleasures of the body are not necessarily complicated and constrained by the emotions of greed envy fear guilt anger jealousy etcetera all the defensive aggressive equipment attending the onset of romantic love. The British taught me this lesson. They were very hard on me. I arrived a gaping tourist and left a hardened sexist. Not really. I cried all the way home. I don’t remember why. But I remained as mushy as ever which was pretty mushy.⁴⁶

* * *

Johnston was not the only artist or critic in New York City around 1969 to experiment with how a conspicuous rhetoric of dropping out, fucking up, and staging one’s own demise might (paradoxically) work as a way to keep working—or might not, in the end.⁴⁷ Recently Jo Applin has argued for the political significance of such gestures of refusal, even when they are

⁴⁴ Lucian Truscott, “Gay Power Comes to Sheridan Square,” *The Village Voice*, July 3, 1969, 1, 18.

⁴⁵ Johnston, *Lesbian Nation*, 97.

⁴⁶ Jill Johnston, “The Making of a Lesbian Chauvinist,” *The Village Voice*, June 17, 1971. Reprinted in Johnston, *Lesbian Nation*, 158.

⁴⁷ Both Swenson and Battcock experimented with such strategies, but their overtures to dropping out were, from the get-go, legible as political/moral stands. On March 28, 1968 Swenson published an essay in the *New York Free Press* titled “An Art Critic’s Farewell Address,” which Battcock described as “a curious, sensitive document that isn’t really a farewell address at all, but another plea for ethical reevaluation of modern esthetics, containing “personal” experience that were anathema to the orthodoxies of current art-writing.” And one year later, on March 13, 1969, Battcock published his own “Retirement Message” in the *New York Free Press*.

“mired in a confused and confusing strategy” that might be “far from progressive.”⁴⁸ Taking on artist Lee Lozano’s *General Strike Piece* of 1969, followed by her *Dropout Piece* of April 1970 and “boycott of women” beginning August 1971, Applin argues that “a nascent, shaky, and ultimately failed attempt at ‘world-building’” emerges across these “various withdrawals, refusals, strike actions, and boycotts.” Applin continues,

Lozano embodies, then, a kind of “scandalous feminism,” to borrow Jacqueline Rose’s term for a feminism that embraces and takes seriously the darkness and failures of the emotional, psychic, and lived experiences of women. Such an “outrageous” feminism does not set out to sanitize but to lay itself out on the table, in all its mad and unreasonable forms, and is important precisely because of its refusal to conform, to be sane; in Lozano’s words, for its embrace of the “schizoid.”⁴⁹

Once Lozano “quit the art world” in 1970 with *Dropout Piece* “things never really picked up again,” according to Applin. Even as scholars now treat Lozano’s decision to drop out as a sincere, serious “attempt,” as Applin writes, “one more attempt, to live on, to wait out the impasse at which she found herself,” it also remains true that “waiting it out didn’t work for Lozano”⁵⁰—which makes her practice no less significant or important, although perhaps more painful to reckon with now. “Just as Lozano stopped working,” Applin concludes, “so the world, it seems, stopped working for her.”⁵¹

In the conclusion to the book *Lee Lozano: Not Working* (2018), Applin writes,

In the preceding chapters we have encountered other instances of powerful, at times “scandalous feminisms,” from Lozano to Jill Johnston and Valerie Solanas. Resistance to the label “feminist” was, as we have seen, commonplace at the time: in 1975 Lucy Lippard described Yvonne Rainer as a “hesitant feminist.” Lippard later reflected how “in the sixties and early seventies, New York feminists tended to be messy, antiformalist, and justifiably ‘self-centered.’” She was referring to

⁴⁸ Jo Applin, “Hard Work: Lee Lozano’s Dropouts,” *October* 156 (Spring 2016), 77.

⁴⁹ Applin, “Hard Work,” 92, 97-8. The quote comes from Jacqueline Rose, *Women in Dark Times* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014), x.

⁵⁰ Applin, “Hard Work,” 98-99.

⁵¹ Applin, “Hard Work,” 99.

the means by which women were both working towards establishing a feminist mode of making, and a way of living and being in the world.⁵²

Applin closes her book by turning to Hannah Arendt's essay "The Concept of History: Ancient and Modern." Characterizing Arendt's claim in that essay, Applin writes: "for an act to be truly a political one, its outcome must be unknown and, by extension, potentially disastrous. That, Arendt points out, is the necessarily precarious nature—what she called the 'frightening arbitrariness'—of the social contract we enter into when we choose to participate in the public arena of politics."⁵³

* * *

Through the mid-1970s, Johnston maintained the stamina to keep fucking up ever more spectacularly with increasing fanfare—indeed, laying her confused and confusing lesbian feminism "out on the table, in all its mad and unreasonable forms" for everyone to see. Fucking up represents a refusal to choose between playing by the rules or getting out of the game. Fucking up represents a third way forward, a mode of improvisation. For Johnston, fucking up represents a "personal solution" to the problem of how to make the world keep working for her as a critic, artist, and burgeoning lesbian chauvinist in 1969. And fucking up is a deeply creative act for Johnston, as it involves devising new forms of writing and speech, new platforms from which to write and speak, and new forums for other art-world people to register and proclaim her importance on her terms, not theirs—which is precisely what went down at the "Disintegration of a Critic" panel discussion.

* * *

⁵² Applin, *Lee Lozano: Not Working*, 158. The quote comes from, Lucy R Lippard, "Moving Targets/ Concentric Circles: Notes from the Radical Whirlwind," in *The Pink Glass Swan: Selected Feminist Essays on Art* (New York: The New Press, 1995), 3–28 (22).

⁵³ Applin, *Lee Lozano: Not Working*, 160.

In the press release, Johnston declares that the “Disintegration of a Critic” panel will be her “third and last.” While the panel was her third, it was not actually her last. (Two years later, on April 30, 1971, she appeared on Mailer’s “A Dialogue on Women’s Liberation” panel.)

Johnston’s first panel, titled “Dance and its Alternatives,” occurred one year prior in June 1968. Moderated by Robert Morris, it featured Johnston as a panelist alongside Yvonne Rainer, Simone Whitman (Forti), and Meredith Monk for a discussion on “the cleavage between dance traditionally based on studio techniques with concomitant ‘performing attitudes,’ and dance reconsidered as a response to tasks, rule-games, objects and the like,” as Johnston wrote in her *Village Voice* column the next week.⁵⁴ Gene Swenson interrupted that panel by screaming from the balcony (as I also discuss in chapter one). “I think the panel was every bit as world-shaking as that thing I read about where those cultural gangsters Mailer, Schlesinger, and Marcuse got together to straighten out democracy,” Johnston writes. “They didn’t have a Gene Swenson at their thing,” she continues. “Gene is a very disruptive guy but I’ll tell you I was at a party once where Mailer and another guest were beating each other into a bloody pulp, and Gene is basically a harmless democrat with excellent vocal projection. He could improve his style, but what he’s doing is actively creating the kind of impossible situation that reduces all talking to zero.”⁵⁵ Swenson’s impromptu disruption prompted for Johnston a crisis of authority:

So at some level the panel was Gene the people raging against the authority of us the government. (Do not go gentle into that good night.) That Gene was ejected finally was the power of the law. Since I’m a minor criminal myself I felt uncomfortable being on the side of the law. I would have objected if I hadn’t been deadlocked as I said by my divided sympathies. When Gene was up there on the balcony screaming quotes from Mao or Ho Chi shortly before ejection Yvonne

⁵⁴ Jill Johnston, “Dance Journal: Cultural Gangsters,” *The Village Voice*, June 6, 1968. Reprinted in Johnston, *Marmalade Me*, 158-161.

⁵⁵ Johnston, *Marmalade Me*, 158-59. Johnston is referencing a panel discussion hosted by the “Theatre for Ideas” titled “Democracy: Does it Have a Future?” For a transcript of the panel, see: Klein, Alexander (ed.), *Dissent, Power, and Confrontation* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1971): 33-55.

[Rainer] was sputtering to me to do something because I'd promised I could "handle it" but I thought it was handling itself. I mean it was just another Happening. Assuming authority is one kind of occupational hazard and Gene knows the price he can pay for being an uninvited bully.⁵⁶

By disrupting the flow of business as usual, by rudely reminding everyone listening politely to a panel discussion on the breakdown between art (Dance) and everything else (Alternatives) that war in Vietnam is being waged in their names, Swenson suspended everyone—panelists and audience members alike—in a state of being unnerved and uncomfortable without a clear protocol. Withholding comforts of slogans and solidarity, of simple demands shouted in unison, he instead played the role of "uninvited bully" making everyone feel bad and uneasy. He called the panel's bluff, exposing a limit of how much "alternative" the artists were willing to accommodate. "Artistically, we were a combine of two simultaneous events not brought together by a single design," Johnston writes. "Audience participation in the form of questions from the floor belonged to our event in the accepted protocol of a panel."⁵⁷ In the chaos of Swenson's screaming and Rainer's sputtering, the battle over commandeering authority became an "occupational hazard" for Swenson and Johnston both. For Swenson, the hazard came with an instant price: ejection, banishment—the sorts of things that would also, in a different sense, aggrandize his cultural capital, as his disruption became legible as a genre of sincere but imprudent political protest. For although he would no longer be invited to participate in art-world happenings or contribute criticism to official publications, he would come to be seen as a man of uncompromising conviction, as someone not to be trifled with. For example, as Lucy Lippard put it to Donald Judd in a 1968 interview: "Of

⁵⁶ Johnston, *Marmalade Me*, 159.

⁵⁷ Johnston, *Marmalade Me*, 159.

course you don't mess with Gene Swenson."⁵⁸ After Swenson's death in 1969, Battcock declared, "When Swenson died, many of us felt as though we had lost our conscience."⁵⁹

Johnston paid a different kind of price, as she found herself unexpectedly upholding an art-world penal code from an authoritative position on the expert-sanctioned side of the panel table, knowing full well that if she performed the role of "uninvited bully," people would be more likely to wring their hands over her demise as a tragic hysteric than herald her as the art world's conscience. In her 1985 book *Paper Daughter: Autobiography in Search of a Father, Volume II*, Johnston provides a retrospective analysis of the problem she had with Swenson's particular "one-man battle [...] waged against the art establishment":

Sometime during '67 Gene cracked up and went to Bellevue. I believe that event radicalized him. Unlike myself, he found an immediate target for his rage. [...] I couldn't relate to it. I was inside the museum "doing my thing," but I thought of it in no way politically. Politics to me still meant a bunch of brutish people in Washington who ran something called a government which had nothing to do with me. [...] Possibly I was more sympathetic to Gene than I realized and just had no interest in doing things his way. I didn't want to be locked out of the establishment; I wanted to take it by storm from within. [...] I saw Gene much the way I had seen James Byars and Kenneth King: an intelligent and deranged spirit of the times, a man who would make good copy.⁶⁰

With her second panel, Johnston set out to wreck the authority she was able to assume (and Swenson was able to commandeer) during the first panel "by exposing," as she puts it, "the emotional roots of any authoritative situation."⁶¹ She invited artists Les Levine, Allan Kaprow, Gordon Mumma, Barbara Lloyd, and Trisha Brown to collaborate with her on a "panel performance" to take place at the Loeb Student Center at NYU on October 6, 1968. "The panel is

⁵⁸ Donald Judd interviewed by Lippard, 1968 April 10 - June 2, corrected transcript. Lucy R. Lippard papers, Box 36 Folder 39. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

⁵⁹ Gregory Battcock, "The Art Critic as Social Reformer—With a Question Mark," *Art in America*, Vol. 59 (September-October 1971), 26-27.

⁶⁰ Jill Johnston, *Paper Daughter: Autobiography in Search of a Father, Volume II* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985): 214-15.

⁶¹ Jill Johnston, "Dance Journal: The Unhappy Spectator," *The Village Voice*, October 17, 1968, p. 34-35, 40.

a conventional public structure as good as any other for revealing the raw nerve of the unhappy spectator and the presumptuous authority,” Johnston proclaims in her column the following week titled “The Unhappy Spectator”—a detailed chronicle of how this, her second panel, devolved into chaos. “The key word became ‘disintegration,’” she continues. “We had no idea the extent to which a disintegration would be fulfilled. If we had we might have worn bullet-proof vests.”⁶²

She explains,

Someone said the situation at Loeb October 6 was a historic occasion. If so it was only because a breakdown of actor-spectator boundaries took place under the guise of a panel idea, and through an agony of extreme confusion in which an audience encouraged to express its hostility had to fight its way through to the recognition it has always been primed to reject. (If you cease to be the authority, who are we going to attack, and so on.) We didn’t make it that easy. Nor was it easy on us.⁶³

This second panel disintegrated almost as soon as it began, as panelists responded to each other with scripted non-sequiturs and predetermined gesture possibilities. Lloyd brought a live pig on stage with her (**Fig. 2.7**), Mumma distorted everyone’s voices with an electronic sound modification system, Levine hid behind three television sets on the table in front of him, Brown slammed her chair down and stormed off (one of the gesture possibilities), artist Willoughby Sharp got on stage, tackled Johnston to the floor and got naked (also gesture possibilities), audience members rushed the stage, and someone yelled fire over and over again. “But the fire which must have moved everyone was the unhappy desperate girl who mounted the stage at last to burn the place up in a plea for love,” Johnston writes. “She was absolutely for real. She was signaling through the flames.”⁶⁴

⁶² Johnston, “Dance Journal: The Unhappy Spectator,” 40.

⁶³ Johnston, “Dance Journal: The Unhappy Spectator,” 40.

⁶⁴ Johnston, “Dance Journal: The Unhappy Spectator,” 40.

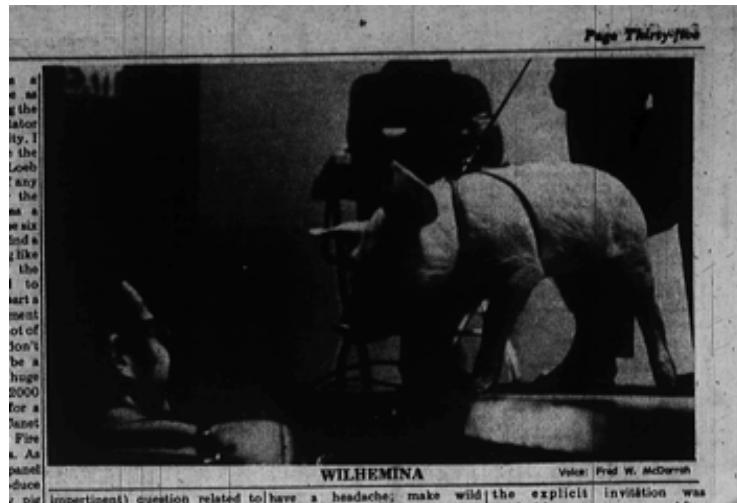


Fig. 2.7. Photo of “Wilhemina” the pig from Jill Johnston’s panel discussion of October 6, 1968. Clipping from *The Village Voice* October 17, 1968. Photo by Fred W. McDarrah.

For her third panel, titled (recall) “The Disintegration of a Critic: An Analysis of Jill Johnston,” Johnston recast herself in the role of Artaud’s martyr “burnt at the stake, signaling through the flames”⁶⁵ by offering, as she announced in the press release, “my name as a sort of sacrifice if you like for the idea(l) of a disintegration of criticism... my final solution to the personal problem which I would hope to have some effect on all those caught in a similar trap if indeed they see it that way.”⁶⁶

The “Disintegration of a Critic” panel represents an effort by Johnston to “take it by storm from within,”⁶⁷ with the recognition that the establishment is not set up for an unruly lesbian to play the role of “uninvited bully” and get taken seriously as a serious bully with serious grievances and convictions. She needed to get more creative than that. By assembling a row of “experts” behind a long panel table, several microphones, a packed audience, and the official imprimatur of New York University’s Special Programs in Continuing Education,⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Antonin Artaud, *The Theatre and Its Double*, trans. Mary Caroline Richards (New York: Grove Press, 1958): 13.

⁶⁶ Johnston, “PRESS RELEASE.”

⁶⁷ Johnston, *Paper Daughter*, 214.

⁶⁸ In the official “Continuing Education Summer Program 1969” published by New York University, Johnston’s panel is promoted as follows: “‘THE DISINTEGRATION OF A CRITIC: AN ANALYSIS OF JILL JOHNSTON’

Johnston set the stage (literally) to commandeer the authority she ceded to others for the sake of analyzing the “disintegration of criticism” as represented by her own prescient decision “to relinquish the role of judge.”⁶⁹ She even attempted to get an actual psychoanalyst on the panel—“a middle-aged Gary Cooperish recently divorced ivy league Park Avenue \$40-a-visit man” who was treating Johnston’s girlfriend at the time. And hitting on her. “If you can believe it,” Johnston writes in *Lesbian Nation*, “the man kept sending her the \$40 bill for her last visit and called her several times as well to see if she was really serious about not finding him the most dashing white knight in the world.” She continues,

A few months later I did my best to get him on the panel I had arranged at NYU called “The Disintegration of a Critic: An Analysis of Jill Johnston.” He agreed at first but then must have realized what I was up to. I was up to no good. It wasn’t him personally I was after really but the entire profession he represented. It’s always been Freud the intellect who interested me and I must say until reading the Dora book I had never linked him directly with the modern profession which he inspired after all and which has been my personal Goliath ever since observing first hand its victims and martyrs in extremis.⁷⁰

The “Disintegration of a Critic” panel discussion was yet another “‘difficult’ object lesson [...] in the absurdity of authority”⁷¹—but it was also a serious event in front of a packed art-world audience on important issues with a long afterlife in the under- and above- ground press: John Perrault wrote about it in *The Village Voice*, Lil Picard in the *East Village Other*, Gregory Battcock in *The New York Review of Sex*, John Guren in *Vogue*, and Andy Warhol contributed to the *Jill Johnston Exposed* special issue of *Culture Hero* a transcript of the entire panel discussion

A panel discussion by: ‘David Bourdon, moderator, a wealthy former Village Voice writer who is now with Life magazine; Dr. John Achley, psychiatrist; Walter Gutman, securities analyst, writer, artist, film-maker, ‘sugardaddy’; John de Menil, art patron; Carolee Schneemann, film-maker and director, founder of Kinetic Theatre; Lil Picard, artist and writer; Andy Warhol, ‘a’ author; and Ultra Violet, superstar.’ Description furnished by participants.” Papers of Lil Picard, Series II, Box 15. University of Iowa Libraries Special Collections.

⁶⁹ Johnston, “PRESS RELEASE.”

⁷⁰ Johnston, *Lesbian Nation*, 198.

⁷¹ Johnston, “PRESS RELEASE.”

printed in italic font extending over three newspaper pages with every word reproduced, including the *ummys*, *uhhhs*, and stutters indicated by ellipses (Figs. 2.8–2.10).

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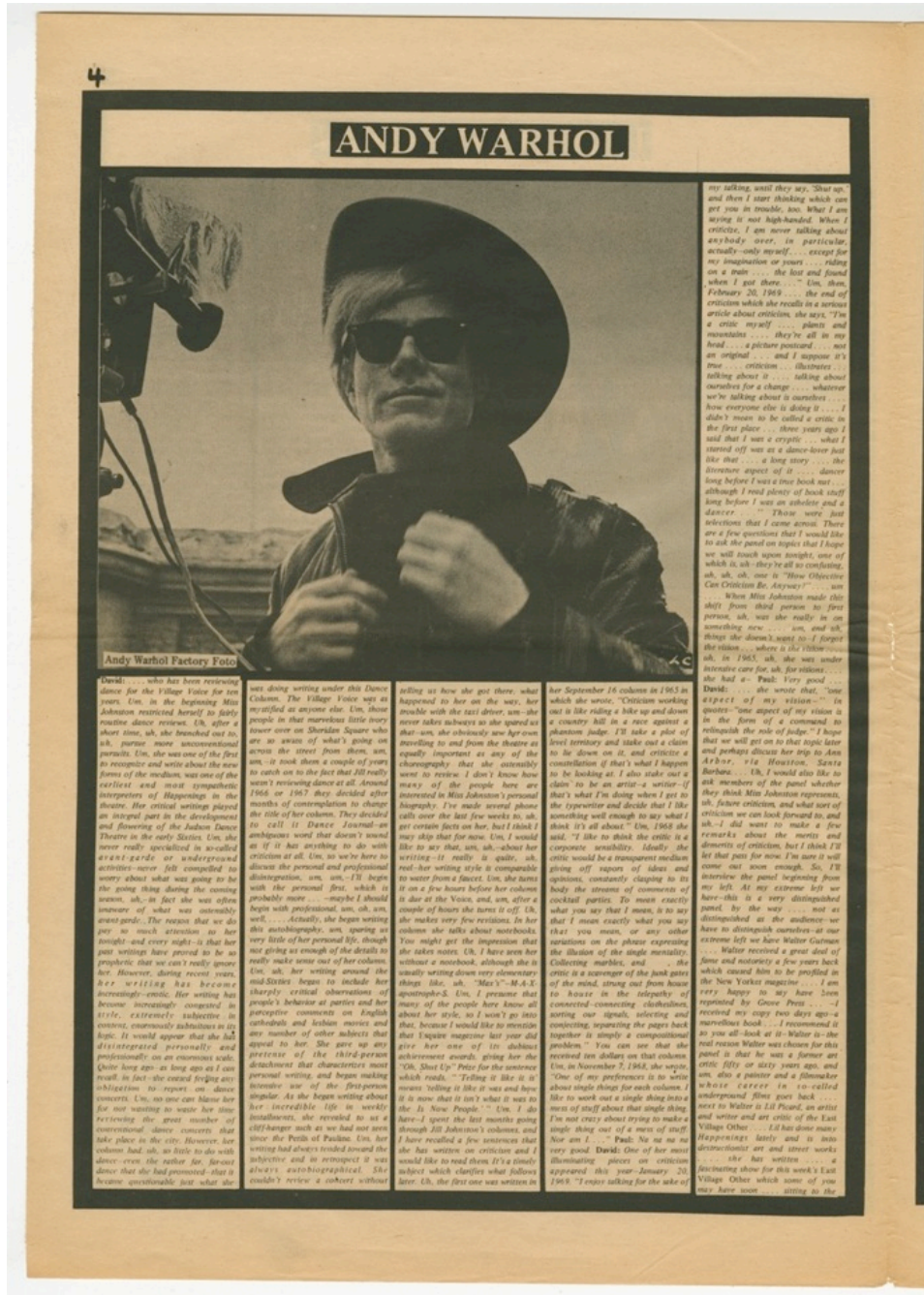
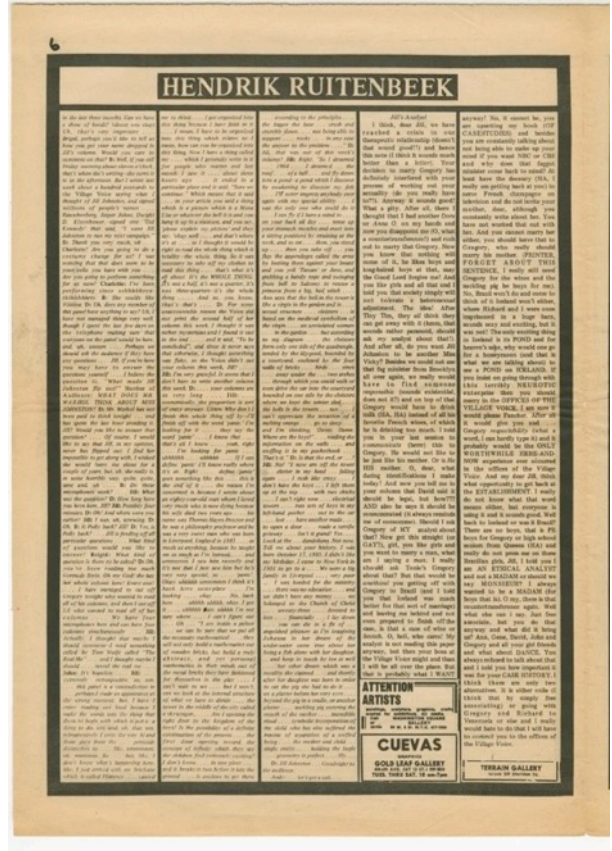
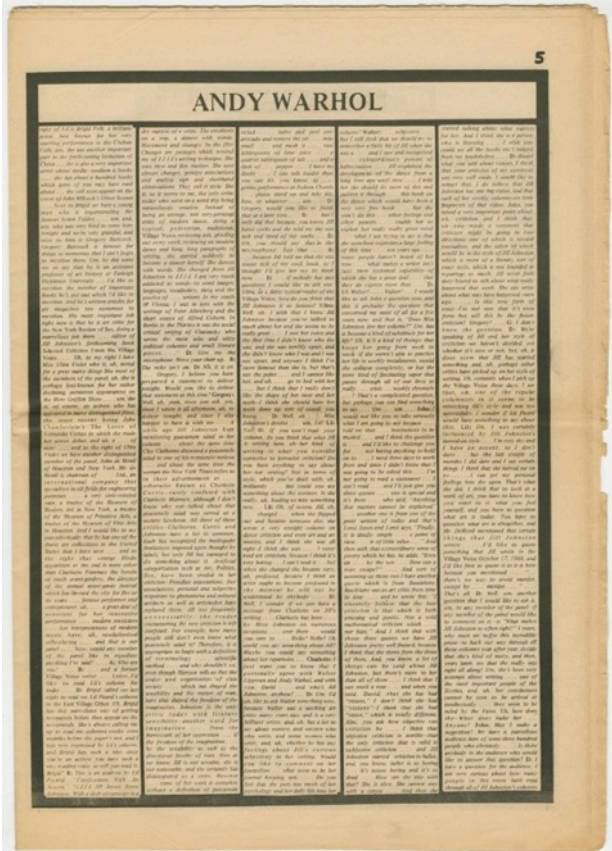


Fig. 2.8. Culture Hero: JILL JOHNSTON EXPOSED: SPECIAL ISSUE: A life dominated by Strange Arts, Consuming Desires, and Ego-Eroticism. . . (February 1970), page 4.



Figs. 2.9-2.10. *Culture Hero: JILL JOHNSTON EXPOSED: SPECIAL ISSUE: A life dominated by Strange Arts, Consuming Desires, and Ego-Eroticism. . .* (February 1970), pages 5 & 6.

All the panelists arrived late, except for Charlotte Moorman who missed the memo and arrived on time only to sit on stage in front of the packed audience alone for thirty minutes wrapped in pink gauze with her cello (**Fig. 2.11**). “By 9 o’clock I began to think that the bastards had really done it and that the rascals were not going to arrive at all,” *Village Voice* art critic John Perrault reported back after the event, observing it from his reserved seat in the “press section.” “I toyed around with the idea and felt comfortable with it and felt it appropriate given the announced topic, so at 9.05, when they began filing in, I was a little disappointed.”⁷² Writing for *The New York Review of Sex*, Battcock (who was on the panel) explains what happened:

⁷² John Perrault, “Art: A Sort of Sacrifice,” *The Village Voice*, May 29, 1969, pp. 14-15.

For ten weeks before the thing Jill is phoning every day so is David Bourdon, moderator. Nobody was sure who would show up through practically everybody did in the end. [...] The panel is at Loeb at 8:30. At 8:30 they're bringing us more Mersault at SHOEL. David is a nervous wreck. Lil Picard sends out for some scotch. Andy is taking pictures with his new Polaroid. So is Bridget but her's don't come out so good. More fantastic dishes come to the table. We can't tear ourselves away. It's nine o'clock already and still nobody is sure whether or not the panel will come off. Charlotte Moorman is missing. The hotel Paris they don't answer. Bridget orders more sake. Me too. And off we go. Everything is extremely serious, but like the good lord said, if you don't mind, be so kind and unwind which we did. So we get to Loeb and the audience is all there, thousands of them waiting for only god knows what, we certainly didn't.⁷³

Figure removed due to copyright restrictions

Fig. 2.11. *The Disintegration of a Critic: An Analysis of Jill Johnston* panel at Loeb Student Center, May 21, 1969. Charlotte Moorman with her cello, flanked by Jill Johnston (left) and John de Menil (right). Photo by Peter Moore.

“Well, David started things off fine,” Battcock continues, “alot of straight talk, everybody listened politely, somebody passed around a little bottle of bourbon, somebody else scotch, Charlotte had her beer, I had a little thing of sake still.”⁷⁴ While it seems an exaggeration to call it “straight talk,” Bourdon did kick off the panel discussion according to the fairly standard formula: introductory remarks about the significance of Johnston’s critical practice followed by several questions for the panelists. “Um,” Bourdon begins (according to Warhol’s transcript in *Culture Hero*), “in the beginning Miss Johnston restricted herself to fairly routine dance reviews. Uh, after a short time, uh, she branched out to, uh, pursue more unconventional pursuits.” “Um,” he continues, “she was one of the first to recognize and write about the new forms of the medium, was one of the earliest and most sympathetic interpreters of *Happenings* in the theatre. Her critical writings played an integral part in the development and flowering of the Judson Dance

⁷³ Gregory Battcock, “The Last Estate,” *New York Review of Sex & Politics* (July 1, 1969): 17.

⁷⁴ Gregory Battcock, “The Last Estate,” July 1, 1969, p. 17.

Theatre in the early Sixties.” “However,” he goes on (a bit further down), “*during recent years her writing has become increasingly—erotic. Her writing has become increasingly congested in style, extremely subjective in content, enormously subtitious in its logic. It would appear that she has disintegrated personally and professionally on an enormous scale.*”⁷⁵

By way of kicking off the discussion portion of the evening, Bourdon asks the panel, “‘*How Objective Can Criticism Be, Anyway?*’ . . . um. . . . *When Miss Johnston made this shift from third person to first person, uh, was she really in on something new um, and uh, things she doesn’t want to—I forgot the vision. . . where is the vision uh, in 1965, uh, she was under intensive care for, uh, for visions she had a—*” Responding to this initial question, John de Menil counters, “. . . . *and when you said, David, that she has had ‘visions,’ I don’t think she had ‘visions’—I think that she had ‘vision,’ which is totally different.*” “*And I think she is a person who is listening,*” de Menil goes on, “. . . . *I wish you could see all the books she’s swiped from my bookshelves. . . .*”

Bourdon asks the panelists whether Johnston “*represents, uh, future criticism*” and if she provides “*a corrective to formalist criticism.*” He also asks, “*Does Miss Johnston live her column?*” which he follows up by asking, “*Um, has it come a kind of substitute for her life? Uh, is it a kind of therapy that keeps her going from week to week—if she weren’t able to practice her life in weekly installments, would she collapse completely, or has she some kind of fascinating vapor that passes through all our lives to really crisis. . . weekly chronicle. . . .?*” And near the end of the panel, Bourdon asks: “‘*What makes Jill Johnston so often right?*’ *I mean, why must we suffer this incredible prose—to hack our way through all these columns year after year, decide that she’s kind of nutty, and then, years later, see that she really was right all*

⁷⁵ Andy Warhol, contribution to *Culture Hero*, 4-6. Unless otherwise notes, all italicized quotes from the panel discussion come from Warhol’s contribution to *Culture Hero*.

along? Um, she's been very accurate about writing. . . one of the most important people of the Sixties, and, uh, her conclusions cannot be seen to be arrived at intellectually. . . they seem to be ruled by the Fates. Uh, how does she—What does make her. . . Anyone?"

Not long after Bourdon asks that question, Johnston rocks up to the stage unexpected to claim a microphone and read aloud her column from that week's *Village Voice*, which the editors truncated without her permission. "She was in her beads-vest-pants get-up, long hair flying, carrying her briefcase 'Florence'," Perrault writes in his *Village Voice* report on the event. "She was smashed and all upset because her column had been cut."⁷⁶

Bourdon asks, "How long have you been here, Jill?"

"Possibly four minutes."

"Oh! And where were you earlier?"

"I was, uh, screwing."

"Is Polly back? Jill?" Brigid Berlin interjects. "Yes, is Polly back?. . . ." Bourdon reiterates. Johnston does not answer (because, as it turns out, she wasn't "screwing" Polly). In the spring of 1969 Johnston was in the midst of her "true leap into chauvinism" as she explains in *Lesbian Nation*,

Back in New York I was on stage at the finish of a panel I'd arranged about myself called "The Disintegration of a Critic" at Loeb Student Center at NYU telling the panel and the auditorium in answer to the moderator's question about where I'd just come from and what I'd been doing that I'd just seduced a woman at my place and as soon as the panel was over I left with another woman collecting on my way out my wallet from the first woman who had come with me and was sitting in the audience I went back home to seduce the second woman.⁷⁷

". . . this panel is a contradiction in . . . perhaps I made an appearance at the wrong moment, but, I have—I enjoy reading out loud because I make the words into the thing," Johnston

⁷⁶ Perrault, "Art: A Sort of Sacrifice," 16.

⁷⁷ Johnston, *Lesbian Nation*, 162-3.

proclaims upon her arrival. “So but, like, I don’t know what’s happening here, like, I just arrived with my briefcase which is called Florence caused me to think I got organized into this thing because I have faith in it” As Johnston interrupts her own panel to read aloud the portion of her column which had been cut, the language in Warhol’s transcript of the panel discussion deteriorates: long ellipses and interjections puncture Johnston’s words in an auditory, now textual, performance of the “disintegration” she gathered everyone together to talk about. “After a false start—she was trying to locate the word ‘panic’ which is where the column had ended—she began to read, and read, and read. It was terrific,” Perrault reports. “Listen, Why don’t I finish this whole thing off by—I’ll finish off with the word ‘panic.’ I’m looking for it they say the word ‘panic’ I know that that’s all I know yeah, right I’m looking for panic uhhhhh uhhhhh If I can define ‘panic’ I’ll know really where it’s at. Right define ‘panic’ goes something like this this is the end of it” “I was moved,” Perrault concludes. “And so I finally understood Jill’s writing. Spoken aloud all the fragments fall into place. Jill is an orator and an evangelist. She is a poet. An old-fashioned poet, but a poet nevertheless. Jill Johnston not only dances, as Lil Picard says, she also sings.”⁷⁸

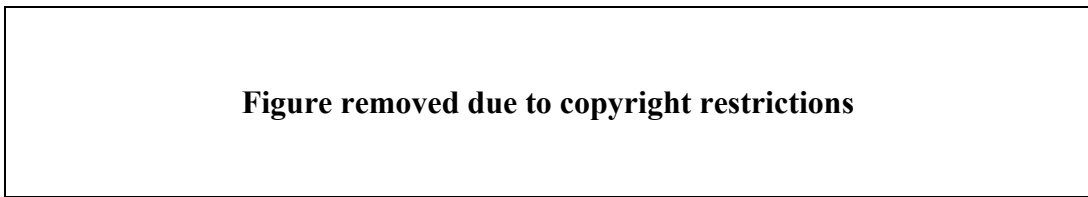


Fig. 2.12. Andy Warhol, polaroid photo of Lil Picard taken at the “Disintegration of a Critic” panel discussion, May 21, 1969. Papers of Lil Picard, University of Iowa Special Collections.

Of all the panelists, Lil Picard (**Fig. 2.12**) makes the strongest case for Johnston’s status as a poet—one of the most important poets of her generation. A few days before the panel, Picard published her own “Analysis” of Johnston in *The East Village Other* titled “Confessions

⁷⁸ Perrault, “Art: A Sort of Sacrifice,” 16.

with an Accent,” which Brigid Berlin read aloud during the panel discussion, sitting right next to Picard: “*This is an analysis by Lil Picard, ‘Confessions With An Accent,’ ‘J J J J Jill James Joyce Johnston. With a dash of caraway is a dry martini of a critic. The emotions on a trip, a dancer with words. Movement and changes.*” And Berlin goes on, but the transcript of Berlin reading aloud Picard’s “Analysis” gets the words all wrong, which serves as a telling reminder of the errors and homophonic slippages that occur throughout the process of speaking, recording, transcribing, and reprinting the words of the panel discussion. A lot goes awry throughout the process of “*reading out loud*” to “*make the words into the thing,*” as Johnston (ostensibly) put it, and transcribing them back into words again.

Picard’s article actually begins: “J J J J Jill James Joyce Johnston with a dash of Kerouac is a dry martini of a critic, in motion, on a trip, a dancer with words, movement and changes.”⁷⁹

Picard continues,

She uses slow and fast motion. She uses abrupt changes. Gossiping associations and analogies in sign and shorthand abbreviations, staccato style. She is, so it seems to me, the only critic today who went on a world-trip, becoming miraculously creative. [...] What I want to say is: Jill didn’t disintegrate as a critic. In fact, she got herself together and became a creative writer. I dig her. [...] I believe what happened to Jill is that she freed herself of conventions and is now on a voyage in the dream dance of words.

But for Picard, “a New York Fraulein with an accent” who lived in Berlin during Hitler’s rise,

Johnston’s “dream dance of words” is tainted by her “memories of Europe’s past”:

It is maybe indicative of our times, when a panel is discussing and analyzing the disintegration of a critic, that I am forced again and again to think back to the pre-Hitler years when the *Weltbühne* was one of the few real honest publications in the midst of fascistic revolt with inescapable onslaught of mental and physical disaster until the final end of it all: the disintegration of a culture. [...] Berlin before 1933 was a flourishing and vital art center. Also, there was permissiveness in every area. Homosexuality, pornography, nude cult, sadomaso bars and night

⁷⁹ Lil Picard, “Analysis by Lil Picard: Confession with an Accent” *East Village Other* (14 May 1969): 13.

clubs, etc. I somehow relive it here again, extended to gigantic proportions, to superactivities, superstars, superbitches, super-queens, superart, super underground, supersuicides, supercritics, maybe also superfascists very soon. I am dancing, too, Jill, you turned me on to it. My dance is polluted by my memories of Europe's past, so my dance is a death dance, but I really want to be positive.⁸⁰

In the miraculous creativity of Johnston's "dream dance of words," Picard felt the painful last excessive gasp of a culture about to "disintegrate" in the worst way: "superfascists very soon."

In his write-up of the panel for the *New York Review of Sex*, Gregory Battcock lauds Johnston's "'anti-criticism' of freedom," as he writes, which "neither depends upon nor even cares about any of such traditional freedoms permitted within the capitalist class system"—an assessment that is, as he writes, "pure Marcuse without the footnote."⁸¹ Whereas Picard praises Johnston in aesthetic terms as one of the finest craftspeople of her generation—a "miraculously creative" writer who "dances with words" in the manner of "James Joyce [...] with a dash of Kerouac"—Battcock lauds Johnston as a foremost exponent of "anti-art" liberated from "prevailing terminology, classifications and categorizations." "It's quite possible," Battcock writes, "that the most difficult subject for a panel of crickets to quiticize on is Jill Johnston because I think she knows all about 'anti-criticism' which is like 'anti-art in a way', it can [*sic*] be accommodated, within the traditional, prevailing institutions, procedures, marketplaces (I think—we don't know yet). That means it can't be analyzed on a panel discussion at Loeb Student Center at N.Y.U." He continues, "everybody thinks Jill Johnston is a quack, everybody respectable that is."⁸²

But Lil Picard certainly didn't think of Johnston as "a quack," neither did John Perrault, who came away from the panel discussion proclaiming Johnston an "orator," "evangelist" and

⁸⁰ Lil Picard, "Confession with an Accent," p. 2.5

⁸¹ Gregory Battcock, "The Last Estate," *New York Review of Sex & Politics* (July 1, 1969): 17.

⁸² Gregory Battcock, "The Last Estate," *New York Review of Sex & Politics* (July 1, 1969): 17.

“old-fashioned poet.” Nor, for that matter, did John Gruen who elucidated Johnston’s importance in unequivocal terms for readers of *Vogue* magazine, as part of “Vogue’s Spotlight” on “The Underground.” In an article published August 15, 1969, Gruen explains,

[Johnston’s] columns—often running for a number of pages—were in no way related to the “new journalism” attributed to such writers as Tom Wolfe, or Jimmy Breslin, or the *Voice*’s own Jack Newfield. They bore no relation to the overly ego-oriented reportage practiced by the incisive Norman Mailer. This was something different. It was—and is—a journalism drenched in instinctive, nervous, excruciating forms of introspection.⁸³

When it comes to the “Disintegration of a Critic” panel discussion, Gruen reports that all the panelists “lovingly dissected Miss Johnston’s style, her personal ‘madness,’ and her unbridled courage in bringing to criticism a Joycean freedom.” “Singlehandedly,” Gruen proclaims, “Jill Johnston seems indeed to have invented a new form of autobiographical criticism.” He concludes: “Through her ‘Dance Journal’ and through her panel discussions she has sparked an interest in altering criticism as a genre. Already, a discernible change has taken place in the writings of other young critics.”⁸⁴

* * *

Although in her press release, Johnston billed the “Disintegration of a Critic” panel as an “art event of the ‘object lesson’ variety” in her own “demise” as a critic who “both literally and figuratively (or intellectually) disintegrated,” it did not turn out to be anything like the final nail in her coffin. The panel discussion did not herald Johnston’s demise. Rather it functioned more like an “art event of the ‘object lesson’ variety” in how to fuck up spectacularly—in how “to take

⁸³ John Gruen, “Vogue’s Spotlight: The Underground,” *Vogue*, August 15, 1969, 38.

⁸⁴ John Gruen, “Vogue’s Spotlight: The Underground,” 38.

[the establishment] by storm from within,”⁸⁵ as she later put it, when the odds are stacked against you and practically no one in the establishment is predisposed to take you seriously.

Breaking the accepted protocol of the panel at every turn, Johnston fucked with the rules to keep playing the game. And it worked for the most part. As moderator, David Bourdon planted the notion that Johnston’s personal, poetic, “erotic” (or perhaps he said “erratic”) criticism might represent “a corrective to formalist criticism” and the “future of criticism”—ideas then taken up in earnest from the pages of the *East Village Other* to *Vogue*. Then, within the context of a discussion about whether her criticism represents “a corrective to formalist criticism,” Johnston managed, a month before the Stonewall riots, to tell an auditorium packed full of art-world people hearing all about her importance as a genre-breaking critic/artist who “live[s] her column” as a practice of “life in weekly installments” that she was busy “uh, screwing” another woman (or two). A brave move, albeit mired in a confused and confusing, scandalous strategy—one attuned from the outset to the “most disturbing component,” as Jacqueline Rose writes, of the then-nascent feminist claim that the Personal is Political “which is,” Rose continues, “that once you open the door to what is personal, intimate, you never know what you are going to find.”⁸⁶

After the “Disintegration of a Critic” panel discussion, Johnston continued on devising new forums for art-world people to reckon with her writing (and her slouching), and new platforms from which to analyze the shifting contours of her evolving lesbian feminist consciousness. These include the *Jill Johnston Exposed* special issue of *Culture Hero*, followed by Johnston’s spectacular performance at Mailer’s 1971 “Dialogue on Woman’s Liberation”

⁸⁵ Johnston, *Paper Daughter*, 214.

⁸⁶ Jacqueline Rose, *Women in Dark Times* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014), x.

panel, and the publication of *Lesbian Nation: The Feminist Solution*. In the end, “The Disintegration of a Critic: An Analysis of Jill Johnston” worked as a way to keep working.

III. “Jill Johnston Exposed”

Oh, Jill, how often I’ve wanted to be you, letting all my anxieties crash into people’s lives, translating fifty feelings at once into words, spilling the water and wine of my emotions into those already drunk on their own! I think you were born trembling with secrets clinging to them until you could bear it no longer. To have told even one, meant telling them all. And in return you have been blessed (or cursed) with uncensored vision—and with responses as excruciatingly alive as they are vulnerable. How can you be so exposed and still write? (and still live?)

—John Gruen, contribution to *Culture Hero: Jill Johnston Exposed*, February 1970

The first issue of Les Levine’s short-lived, underground newspaper *Culture Hero: A Fanzine of Stars of the Super World* hit newsstands in September, 1969 with a print run of 3000 to 4000 copies.⁸⁷ The paper ran only five issues, with the final issue published December 1970. In an interview for *Arts Magazine*, Levine explains, “recently I started *Culture Hero*, a monthly magazine on the people who make art. Now that art’s a part of our daily environment, it’s natural to find it on your local newsstand.”⁸⁸ In the introduction to the first issue of *Culture Hero*, Levine declares, “Everybody is part of the culture but some people are more part of it than others. [...] Welcome to ‘Culture Hero,’ a monthly magazine devoted to looking in on the cultural hotshots of the moment. [...] Whenever possible, we will get the Culture Heroes to

⁸⁷ Gwen Allen. *Artists’ Magazines: An Alternative Space for Art* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2011): 252.

⁸⁸ Levine, Les and Thelma R. Newman. “The Artist Speaks: Les Levine” in *Art in America* 57, no. 6 (Nov-Dec, 1969): 86-93

speak for themselves. We will go heavy on photographs, heavy on information, light on criticism.⁸⁹

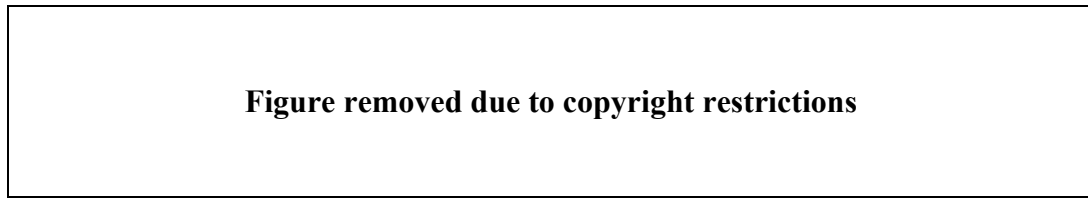


Fig. 2.13. Julian Wasser, *Duchamp Playing Chess with a Nude (Eve Babitz)*, Duchamp Retrospective, Pasadena Art Museum, 1963.

The third issue of *Culture Hero*, published February 1970 titled *Jill Johnston Exposed*, is the only special issue of the paper. The cover is emblazoned with a photograph of Johnston, fully clad, playing chess against a female opponent, fully nude—a not-so-subtle riff on the famous 1963 photograph *Duchamp Playing Chess with a Nude (Eve Babitz)* (**Fig. 2.13**). The headline over the photo proclaims, “A life dominated by Strange Arts, Consuming Desires, and Ego-Eroticism. . .” and the attribution beneath the photo reads, “Cover by Les Levine.”

As the *Jill Johnston Exposed* special issue of *Culture Hero* hit newsstands, seven months after the Stonewall Riots of June 1969, Johnston was in the crucible of slouching toward consciousness—as she was attending her first Gay Liberation Front meetings and figuring out her place in the newly-consolidating movement, or “movement schmoovement” as she would call it a year later, in a column dated November 11, 1971 and reprinted in *Lesbian Nation*.⁹⁰ The *Jill Johnston Exposed* special issue of *Culture Hero* came together in the midst of Johnston’s “few encounters” with the movement, as Johnston was under the sway of Lois Hart—“every important revolutionary movement produces its fearless catalysts prodding pushing probing challenging irritating power-tripping seducing all new comers and incurring much wrath on their

⁸⁹ Les Levine, “Publishers Note.” *Culture Hero: A Fanzine of Stars of the Super World* 1, no. 1, September 15, 1969, 1.

⁹⁰ Johnston, *Lesbian Nation*, 234.

own heads,” Johnston writes in *Lesbian Nation*. “lois hart is one of those,” she continues, “the lois in these record book entries is her and she seemed to be a vigilante committee of one over my dormant political awareness.”⁹¹

In one of those “record book entries,” which Johnston reproduces in *Lesbian Nation* with annotations in brackets, Johnston writes,

jan. 26 [1970]—general despair.
lois told me on the phone that the women have taken over rat—they thought of me as a possible person to include but they said i have very poor women’s liberation consciousness. culture hero: jj: what the hell is consuming desire. les: when you make the daily enquirer you’ve got it made. they don’t put anything in there that isn’t hot stuff. lois: stereotyped view of a lesbian imitating a man re. duchamp photo. [*culture hero was a pig issue les levine put out with my cooperation about me, the cause of our permanent estrangement, and much embarrassment to me over his daily enquirer headlines (consuming desires etc.) and consternation in explaining myself to lois who rightly observed that my imitation of the famous duchamp photo taking the part of duchamp fully clothed playing chess with the naked woman was a lesbian chauvinist identification with the pig but who (lois) let me off the hook somewhat by compromising herself and allowing that i could’ve been posing with myself or my alter ego, me both clothed and naked as it were.*]⁹²

As a “pig issue” that Johnston helped produce just as her “true leap into chauvinism” came crashing headlong into her newly awakened “political awareness” and “very poor women’s liberation consciousness”—on the verge of her official “coming out” column in the *Village Voice*, but only a year before she would throw in her crackers and proclaim “Movement Schmoovement”—the *Jill Johnston Exposed* special issue of *Culture Hero* is an object mired in a confused and confusing political strategy.

The idea for the special issue came about organically enough, according to Johnston. “Levine, by the way, has another madcap scheme for which I’m partly responsible,” she

⁹¹ Johnston, *Lesbian Nation*, 98-99.

⁹² Johnston, *Lesbian Nation*, 105.

proclaims in her *Village Voice* column of December 25, 1969, which took the form of a personal letter aired publicly to George Brecht. She continues,

I stopped in to see his [Levine's] new Irish-Jewish-Japanese-American-Canadian baby boy and there was a fellow there from the coast come to edit his newspaper called *Culture Hero*. With malice afterthought I remarked so this is the paper you didn't ask me to write for. Les said so would you write for it if I asked you?—No. Five minutes later,—would I like to take over the next issue.—Write a whole issue?—Too much work, I'm too busy. Then I'm thinking about it, and how about if we got twenty to thirty people to contribute, each person have a page. . . Now I'm writing to all these people, including you requesting fifteen-hundred words about me if you can manage it, any style any thoughts, and with photo(s) of yourself, deadline January 15. I think it's very blatant but I don't care anymore. I mean what anybody else thinks.⁹³

Another of Johnston's letters (this one sent privately) is preserved in Lil Picard's archive (**Fig.**

2.14). Written with pink marker in loopy print on a large piece of pink tissue paper, it reads:

Dear Lil, After everything else this is.... But Les & I request you contribute 1500 words if possible about me for his 'Culture Hero' newspaper to come out on stands Jan. 25th. Deadline 15th. Any style personal etc. & with photo(s) of yrself. He's calling it the J.J. catalogue. Would appreciate yr contribution. It was good seeing you. Hap Holy Days to your husband also. Love, Jill.

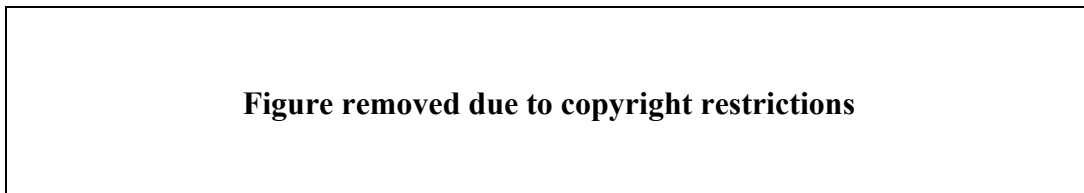


Fig. 2.14. Jill Johnston, letter to Lil Picard, c. 1969. Papers of Lil Picard, University of Iowa Special Collections.

* * *

“Of all the special people inhabiting the New York cultural zoo, Jill Johnston is in some way the most special,” Les Levine proclaims (recall) in his “Publisher Note” on the first page of the special issue, now rechristened *Jill Johnston Exposed: A Life Dominated by Strange Arts, Consuming Desires, and Ego-Eroticism*. . . “Because Jill has been a number one topic for gossip

⁹³ Johnston, “Until We’re 90,” *Marmalade Me*, 308.

and discussion for many years,” Levine continues, “*Culture Hero* decided to find out if any of the assorted gossipers had anything to say about her for the record. Thirty-four of them did and what follows is a collection of their testimony.”⁹⁴

If in 1968 through the start of '69 Johnston was “so angry,” as she put it in *Lesbian Nation*, “that I was conducting a one woman revolution through a very slow calculated but unrelenting exposure of myself in the guise of a literary code hopefully so challenging and fascinating and entertaining and difficult to read that any premature retaliation from a hostile society would be discouraged,”⁹⁵ by 1970 that code was beginning to shift and crack, with her exposures becoming more brazen and explicit. The thirty-four art-world contributors to *Culture Hero* respond to Johnston’s unevenly-coded exposures in different ways and to varying degrees: some expose themselves in turn, aping her style, adopting devices from her “literary code” to enact their own messy processes of slouching publicly toward consciousness; others hold Johnston’s practice at arm’s length, analyzing its significance at a more disinterested remove; and still a handful of others balk at the request, at the unseemly embarrassment of it all. *Culture Hero* thus furnishes a revealing snapshot of an art world impacted variously by Johnston’s unsettled practice of criticizing, exposing herself, and slouching unevenly toward lesbian feminist consciousness all at the same time—a practice that resulted in, as Battcock put it in the introduction to *Marmalade Me*, “the vision of a new possibility for artistic expression.”⁹⁶

* * *

Of the contributors who backed away from Johnston’s request—including Jasper Johns and Grace Glueck, who both contributed terse, polite regrets (likely not intended for

⁹⁴ Levine, “Publisher Note,” *Culture Hero*, 2.

⁹⁵ Johnston, *Lesbian Nation*, 97.

⁹⁶ Battcock, “Introduction,” *Marmalade Me*, 11.

publication)—Barbara Rose stands out for going out of her way to express her dismay (**Fig. 2.15**). “Dear Jill,” her contribution begins, “As per our New Year’s Day conversation, I’m giving you a piece of my mind as promised.” “It’s nice to keep your promises, too,” Rose concludes. “Behaviour is only an example.” Rose writes,

I should start by saying I used to think you were a great Culture Heroine. When I was a student you were a glamorous critic, and I read your column religiously. You used to talk more about art than about yourself in those days. Did you really finally decide criticism was hopeless, or meaningless or impossible? Or did you just begin to think you were more interesting than what you were looking at? As I followed your via dolorosa out of art and into life, I could never quite decide why you chose to go that way. Or as Carl Andre used to say (and he used to say many things before he too became a Culture Hero): Not all the ways out of the darkness lead into the light.⁹⁷



Fig. 2.15. *Culture Hero: JILL JOHNSTON EXPOSED: SPECIAL ISSUE: A life dominated by Strange Arts, Consuming Desires, and Ego-Eroticism. . .* (February 1970), page 11.

⁹⁷ Barbara Rose, contribution to *Culture Hero*, 11.

Barbara Rose's straightforward exasperation throws into sharp relief Gene Swenson's poetic adulation, printed on the same page (**Fig. 2.15**). Written in May 1969, just three months before his death in August, Swenson begins,

How are we going to catch the rhythms of our time?

Jill Johnston knows one of the answers: free association, automatic writing, total and post-Freudian (to dot the i) honesty. Honesty? Who, in this era of the wheeler-dealer and his successor, Mr. Empty Mind, would ever think? See how catching Jill is? Only, where I stop for punctuation, she goes on.⁹⁸

Published posthumously, Swenson's words take on the uncanny quality of being spoken in death. And it's true that Johnston did pick up pieces of Swenson's curtailed projects both while he was alive—for example, by convening a whole panel to extrapolate the crisis of authority he provoked as “uninvited bully” at Robert Morris's panel—and after his death, dwelling with the excruciating, queer demand of the unanswered question mark that Swenson wielded outside MoMA: the demand to show up anyway, to be confused and confusing in public, to fuck up the status-quo even as the promise of reciprocity feels broken beyond repair and resistance might very well be futile. Or, as Lucy Lippard puts it in her eulogy for Swenson, “In his last years, Gene was the ‘innocent criminal’ of the art world, a role Jill Johnston may have inherited.”⁹⁹

But as a statement issued while he was alive, Swenson's refrain “Only, where I stop for punctuation, she goes on,” reflects his recognition that Johnston pushes writing in a direction he does not. As Swenson intones his anger in declarative sentences from the pages of the *New York Free Press* in the late '60s, Johnston (also writing “from the standpoint of anger”¹⁰⁰) drains her language of rules, letting words mix, mingle and mean together in multivalent ways until the

⁹⁸ Gene Swenson, contribution to *Culture Hero*, 11.

⁹⁹ Lucy Lippard, contribution to “Gene Swenson: A Composite Portrait,” *The Register of the Museum of Art, University of Kansas*, vol. 4, no. 6-7, 18. Special issue to accompany the exhibition *Gene Swenson: Retrospective for a Critic* (24 October – 5 December 1971).

¹⁰⁰ Johnston, *Lesbian Nation*, 81.

Village Voice has on its hands something unrecognizable as art criticism, but keeps publishing it every week anyway. “And all I can do,” Swenson continues on, “is dry her prose, hang it out on a cold day and hope it does not freeze. For her sap is of an early summer morn, hot as bee’s wax.”¹⁰¹

“Sex too is an issue”—as John Perrault writes in his contribution to *Culture Hero*. “Jill does not apologize for her unorthodox love life, in fact, she celebrates it – in print, at that, from week to week. She just doesn’t give a fuck.”¹⁰² Sex, too, is an issue that permeates *Culture Hero*. It seeps into every corner of the newspaper, with fantasy and disclosure woven together often indistinguishable. Helen Ansell describes having sex with Johnston in steamy, pulpy prose: “An image of nipple and breast are touched onto my mouth by her mouth, and I am reminded. She has buttoned her shirt for me to unbutton and she watches me, becoming me finding her”¹⁰³ ...and Ansell goes on. Wynn Chamberlain describes sex with Johnston in sophomoric prose: “so we parked up by the reservoir, popped open a couple of beers, and she said ‘lets play Doctor’, I wound up givin’ her an internal and she didn’t even blush. I blushed at first, but then it all got kind of groovy, y’know, and she told me what a doctor was supposed to do and I did it.”¹⁰⁴ Rosalyn Drexler discloses that she won’t have sex with Johnston: “Jill thinks I’m chicken because all I ever do is hug and kiss her, but never meet her clandestinely to go all the way. I love her; I love the way she writes and the way she looks, and the way she talks, and she has the most beautiful legs in town. But so what.”¹⁰⁵ Ann Wilson reveals juicy tidbits about the sex Johnston has with other people: “If she can’t get a woman she’ll take a man in certain instances,

¹⁰¹ Gene Swenson, contribution to *Culture Hero*, 11.

¹⁰² John Perrault, contribution to *Culture Hero*, 9.

¹⁰³ Helen Ansell, contribution to *Culture Hero*, 15.

¹⁰⁴ Wynn Chamberlain, contribution to *Culture Hero*, 21.

¹⁰⁵ Rosalyn Drexler, contribution to *Culture Hero*, 9.

like the night she slept with Orlovsky with Ginsberg in the next room on the phone. [...] She will proposition a girl in a bar, ‘Do you feel adventurous tonight?’ and make love then for seven hours like a spider in an eternal hysteria to break through sorrow—to break through the separation in living. Jill is trying to break through sorrow.”¹⁰⁶ Swenson declares, “But here she is, as erotic as a flower, a chrysanthemum all fingers and openings. Not wanting me, there is no disagreement.”¹⁰⁷ And Picard writes,

On October 17, 1968, Jill Johnston quoted Brecht in her column “Dance Journal” in the *Village Voice*: “The world is governed by the badly fucked.” In the same column, she also quoted Norman O. Brown: “There is no way to avoid murder except by ritual murder.” The column was titled: “The Unhappy Spectator.” As a curious and despairing observer of New York’s Art World, Art Style, Art Circus, I felt that Jill seems to think that our life—at the end of the sixties, and surely now—was and is governed by sex and violence (see quotations by Brecht and Brown).

I dig Jill Johnston’s writing because it expresses sex, violence and a romantic, ego-erotic consciousness. Her violence is very much like the ones in cartoons, a kind of Western-cowboyish violence. It has humour, it does not kill.¹⁰⁸

There is no upshot, no consensus among the contributors to *Culture Hero* about how to deal with Johnston’s “unorthodox love life” or how it matters to her criticism. Sex in the *Jill Johnston Exposed* special issue of *Culture Hero* is queer that way. Unsettled and fluid, sex exists everywhere but nowhere is it pinned down, cordoned off, or figured out. Johnston’s invitation to contribute “1500 words” about her, “any style any thoughts” furnishes a platform—and, it seems, the requisite permissiveness—for people around her to let erotic, dark, personal, embarrassing language and disclosures percolate to the surface of their own public writing.

* * *

¹⁰⁶ Ann Wilson, contribution to *Culture Hero*, 7.

¹⁰⁷ Swenson, contribution to *Culture Hero*, 11.

¹⁰⁸ Lil Picard, contribution to *Culture Hero*, 12.

The *Jill Johnston Exposed* special issue of *Culture Hero* opens a space where a vision of the “scandalous feminism” that Jacqueline Rose calls for comes into a provisional focus, where “the most painful, outrageous aspects of the human heart,” as Rose writes, can have a “place at the very core of the world that feminism wants to create.” Rose continues,

Certainly it will be a different world from the one that feminism is meant to aspire to—sane, balanced reasoned, where women are granted their due portion. [...] We need to go back to the original wager—that the personal is key—and give it a new gloss. Feminism should make it a matter of principle to tell the world what it has to learn from the moment when we enter the landscape of the night.¹⁰⁹

Each of the women in Rose’s study “trawls the darkness of their inner life, where their own most anguished voices reside, in order to understand what impedes them but also in search of the resources to defy their own predicaments.”¹¹⁰ Rose also states, “One reason women are often so hated, I would suggest, is because of their ability to force to the surface of the everyday parts of the inner life—its visceral reality, its stubborn unruliness—which in the normal course of our exchanges we like to think we have subdued.”¹¹¹

The *Jill Johnston Exposed* special issue of *Culture Hero* furnishes a glimpse of how a “painful, outrageous,” scandalous feminist world might look and feel: messy, racy, cacophonous, creative, confessional, and anguished. The question is (and it’s a question I feel like I’m still in the throes of figuring out): What possibilities exist in this kind of world? What resources does it offer and what political visions might it afford?

In her contribution to *Culture Hero*, Ann Wilson writes (**Fig. 2.16**),

Jill scans the events and dialogue of her life for colors and happenings that pertain to the direction of her ongoing lines; one of her lines is insanity in general and her own insanity in particular. [...] She says, “They MURDER you in those hospitals, I was MURDERED two times in Bellevue.” Who among us hasn’t been? [...] Jill

¹⁰⁹ Rose, *Women in Dark Times*, ix-x.

¹¹⁰ Rose, *Women in Dark Times*, 2.

¹¹¹ Rose, *Women in Dark Times*, 5.

has another fantasy to get to the final perfect state of INSANITY and maintain herself there—her vibrations in contact with all the waves happening around her. Because essentially JILL JOHNSTON IS ABOUT TOTAL PERCEPTION OF THE MOMENT. [...] Jill Johnston is about violence done to the spirit and its survival of itself. She gave up her loft and ran to Europe after an idea of love and now has no place to live. Her clothes were stolen, her car was stolen, she ran into a truck drunk with another car, she screams, she cries [sic.] and she writes in that little black book about all of it.¹¹²



Fig. 2.16. *Culture Hero: JILL JOHNSTON EXPOSED: SPECIAL ISSUE: A life dominated by Strange Arts, Consuming Desires, and Ego-Eroticism. . .* (February 1970), page 7.

¹¹² Ann Wilson, contribution to *Culture Hero*, 7.

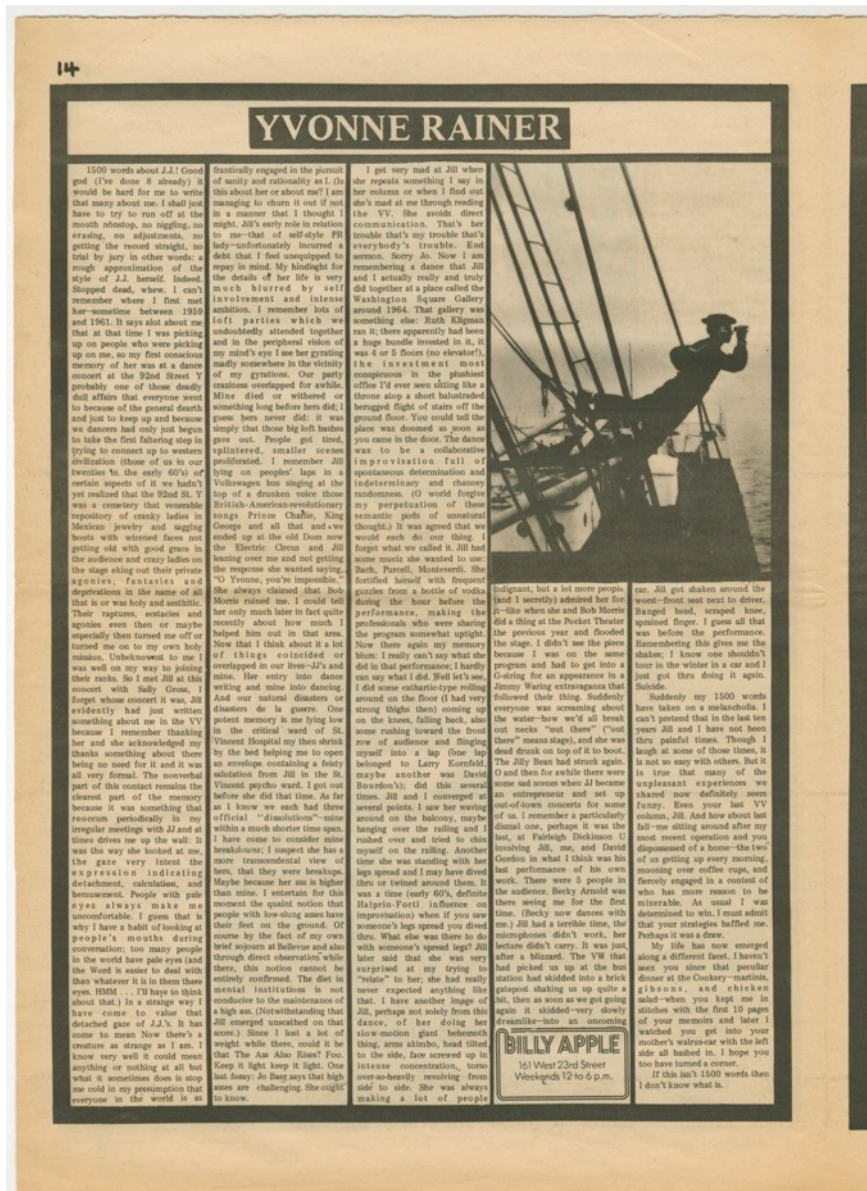


Fig. 2.17. *Culture Hero: JILL JOHNSTON EXPOSED: SPECIAL ISSUE: A life dominated by Strange Arts, Consuming Desires, and Ego-Eroticism. . .* (February 1970), page 14.

Alongside Ann Wilson's contribution to *Culture Hero*, Yvonne Rainer's stands out as being the most ambitious and earnest, painful and confessional (**Fig. 2.17**). Adopting a "run off at the mouth nonstop, no niggling, no erasing, no adjustments, no getting the record straight, no

trial by jury [...] rough approximation of the style of JJ herself,”¹¹³ Rainer weaves together a history of her and Johnston’s intertwined lives, painful encounters, and difficult friendship.

“Now that I think about it, a lot of things coincided or overlapped in our lives—JJ’s and mine,” Rainer writes.

One potent memory is me lying low in the critical ward of St. Vincent Hospital, my then shrink by the bed helping me to open an envelope containing a feisty salutation from Jill in the St. Vincent psycho ward. I got out before she did that time. As far as I know we each had three official “dissolutions,” mine within a much shorter time span. I have come to consider mine breakdowns; I suspect she has a more transcendental view of hers, that they were breakups.¹¹⁴

Rainer’s contribution to *Culture Hero* thus stands out as a telling anomaly within her work at the time, as it cuts through the “structural supports” and dispenses with the “rigorous formal means”¹¹⁵ that Rainer tended to erect around her autobiographical disclosures at the close of the ’60s and in the early ’70s, as she was making her first forays into feature-length filmmaking.

Writing in 1975 in the *Feminist Art Journal*, Cindy Nemser comes down pretty hard against “the convoluted, enigmatic, suggestive confusion of Rainer’s *Film About a Woman Who. . .*,” saying that Rainer “puts barriers of form and style between herself and any kind of open expression” and that “Rainer is indeed the epitome of the alienated artist tormenting herself with her own intellectual pretensions, unable to get back to her living source and as a result producing endless zombie-like avatars of her ongoing unresolved state.”¹¹⁶ In the years since 1975, scholars and critics have pushed back against the seeming myopia of Nemser’s feminist condemnation of *Film About a Woman Who. . .*, in order to recuperate feminist strategies and politics inherent to this difficult, layered structuralist film. For example, in a 2015 essay titled “Structures of

¹¹³ Yvonne Rainer, contribution to *Culture Hero*, 14.

¹¹⁴ Rainer, contribution to *Culture Hero*, 14.

¹¹⁵ Yvonne Rainer, quoted in Lucy Lippard, “Yvonne Rainer on Feminism and Her Film,” *Feminist Art Journal* 4, no. 2 (Summer 1975): 5-11.

¹¹⁶ Cindy Nemser, “Editorial: Rainer and Rothschild, an Overview,” *Feminist Art Journal* 4, no. 2 (Summer 1975):4.

Feeling: Yvonne Rainer circa 1974,” Siona Wilson locates an “emergent political aesthetic” in Rainer’s *Film About a Woman Who. . .*, arguing that Rainer’s “play with filmic form” actually “captures the structures of feeling that feminism was beginning to exert on social experience at that time.”¹¹⁷ Wilson writes, “Affect is wrested free from its secure source in a particular subject, making Rainer’s turn to feeling decisively *nonsubjective*.”¹¹⁸ After tracing in detail “the complex *nonsubjective* way in which Rainer stages the politics of feeling,” Wilson concludes that “Rainer’s *Film About a Woman Who. . .* begins to unpack the complex social changes and conflicts embedded in that simple slogan ‘The personal is the political.’”¹¹⁹

In *Culture Hero*, Rainer’s turn to feeling could be described as decisively subjective. In this particular work, Rainer embraces the painful and irrational parts of her lived experience and gives them a place at the heart of her writing. “In a strange way,” Rainer writes, “I have come to value that detached gaze of JJ’s. It has come to mean, ‘Now there’s a creature as strange as I am.’ I know very well it could mean anything or nothing at all, but what it sometimes does is stop me cold in my presumption that everyone in the world is as frantically engaged in the pursuit of sanity and rationality as I.”¹²⁰ Rainer describes a dance that she and Johnston “actually really and truly did together at a place called the Washington Square Gallery around 1964” (**Fig. 2.18**). “Jill and I converged at several points,” Rainer writes. “Jill later said that she was very surprised at my trying to ‘relate’ to her; she had really never expected anything like that.”

¹¹⁷ Siona Wilson, “Structures of Feeling: Yvonne Rainer Circa 1974,” *October* 152 (Spring 2015): 18.

¹¹⁸ Wilson, “Structures of Feeling,” 15.

¹¹⁹ Wilson, “Structures of Feeling,” 25.

¹²⁰ Rainer, contribution to *Culture Hero*, 14.

Figure removed due to copyright restrictions

Fig. 2.18. *Improvisation*, Washington Square Galleries, 1964. Jill Johnston and Yvonne Rainer dancing. Photo by Peter Moore.

Near the end of her contribution to *Culture Hero*, Rainer recalls a car accident she and Johnston were in together,

It was just after a blizzard. The VW that had picked us up at the bus station had skidded into a brick gatepost shaking us up quite a bit, then as soon as we got going again it skidded—very slowly dreamlike—into an oncoming car. Jill got shaken around the worst—front seat next to driver. Banged head, scraped knee, sprained finger. I guess all that was before the performance. Remembering this gives me the shakes; I know one shouldn't tour in the winter in a car and I just got thru doing it again. Suicide.

Rainer concludes her contribution by addressing Johnston directly, to describe another, very different scene of her difficulty in “trying to ‘relate’” to Johnston:

Suddenly my 1500 words have taken on a melancholia. I can't pretend that in the last ten years Jill and I have not been thru painful times. Though I laugh at some of those times, it is not so easy with others. But it is true that many of the unpleasant experiences we shared now definitely seem funny. Even your last *vv* column. And how about last fall—me sitting around after my most recent operation and you dispossessed of a home—the two of us getting up every morning, mooning over coffee cups, and fiercely engaged in a contest of who has more reason to be miserable. As usual I was determined to win. I must admit that your strategies baffled me. Perhaps it was a draw.¹²¹

After it was published in 1970, Rainer's contribution to *Culture Hero* dropped out of sight (unlike many of her writings from the period, it was never anthologized) until 2006. At the center of her memoir *Feelings are Facts: A Life*, Rainer reproduces her contribution to *Culture Hero* in full, with no edits, corrections, or adjustments. In the introduction to *Feelings are Facts*, Rainer explains, “I started this memoir because I was stumped, caught up short, at a loss. On

¹²¹ Rainer, contribution to *Culture Hero*, 14.

September 11, 2001, American Airlines Flight 11 roared close enough to my building in lower Manhattan to seem directly overhead.” Rainer continues, “Our current regime has surpassed any in living memory for meanness and blatant disregard for social good. I found the present situation overwhelming. I could not begin to envision dealing with it in terms of an art practice. It curdled my imagination, it stopped me cold.”¹²²

It is telling that when Rainer hits an impasse—“stumped, caught up short, at a loss,” curdled, stopped cold—she turns inward for the resources to keep working when the world has stopped working for her. In the memoir she dwells on some of the darkest episodes of her past, including the anguished scene of her nearly successful suicide in October 1971. “I wait for prescriptions to arrive in the mail,” she writes. “I tell no one. I visit Magda early in the week. I tell her nothing about my plan. The word ‘suicide’ has never come up.” Although it is worth noting that the word “suicide” did come up, prominently, a year earlier in Rainer’s contribution to *Culture Hero*. Rainer ended up in the hospital unconscious for almost a week. “I woke up on Thursday, six days after having tried to end my life.” She continues,

It was not a sudden awakening. For what seemed an eternity I was trapped in my coma, aware of being handled, turned, and manipulated, aware of voices, clamor, bright lights, but unable to move or speak. It was a nightmare, full of terrifying hallucinations. I was pinned to a wall, in a jungle with pygmies; there was loud drumming; there was no way out.¹²³

* * *

One of the most profound insights of Jacqueline Rose’s *Women in Dark Times* is that because each of the women in her book “draws her strength from the most disturbing parts of her history and her own mind,” it means “that they can, therefore, only be understood if we are

¹²² Rainer, *Feelings Are Facts: A Life*, xiii-xiv.

¹²³ Rainer, *Feelings Are Facts: A Life*, 374-5.

willing, unlike most of the people around them, to countenance—live with, one might say—what is most horrendous about their public and private worlds.”¹²⁴

Some of the artists, dancers, and critics around Rainer in the late 1960s and early ’70s were actually willing, I think, to countenance—live with—the darkest and most horrendous aspects of Rainer’s public and private worlds. Such countenancing can, however, be difficult to see and hear, as it often occurs between works and words, in spaces that have never been recuperated as important, in episodes that might never find their genre of event, and in situations that do not entirely cohere as art. Witness, for example, this exchange between Rainer and Lucy Lippard, published in the same 1975 issue of the *Feminist Art Journal* in which Nemser decries Rainer’s “intellectual pretensions” and inability “to get back to her living source”:

LL: You know, you’ve represented for a lot of women for a longtime, the epitome of the Strong Woman.

YR: I hope I’ve disillusioned them.

LL: At the same time, with all the problems you’ve had, you’ve also been the epitome of the victimized woman, not victimized by a single person or circumstance, but...

YR: But by my own...

LL: Maybe by your own strength. Women look for different things in your films, from what they know about you.¹²⁵

Countenancing happens in the ellipses here, in what passes unsaid in this published exchange.

Countenancing happens in what women “know about” Rainer, in how they come to know it, and in the “different things” that, according to Lippard, “women look for” in Rainer’s films—things that Rainer dwells on in her memoir many years later, things that she provisionally puts into words in her contribution to *Culture Hero* in 1970.

¹²⁴ Rose, *Women in Dark Times*, 9.

¹²⁵ Lucy Lippard and Yvonne Rainer, “Yvonne Rainer on Feminism and Her Film,” *Feminist Art Journal* 4, no. 2 (Summer 1975): 10.

In *Culture Hero*, Rainer is willing to countenance the dark, irrational, and unspeakable aspects of Johnston's public and private worlds. Perhaps it makes sense to think of countenancing as an inchoate feminist practice very much alive in the art world of the late 1960s and early '70s, albeit a practice that can be difficult to recognize, and even more difficult to reckon with. The *Jill Johnston Exposed* special issue of *Culture Hero* contains an archive of countenancing—one solicited and compiled in the months after Johnston's return to New York in 1969, after she was "dispossessed of a home" following her third "escape" in which she "went crazy again," as she writes, "and completed my trip for the first time unmolested by the psychiatric profession."¹²⁶ In this way, the *Jill Johnston Exposed* special issue of *Culture Hero* is one of the more improbable and remarkable feminist objects to emerge from the art world at the close of the 1960s.

The *Jill Johnston Exposed* special issue of *Culture Hero* is an object that does not succeed in any of the normal ways—it has not accrued value or prestige; it does not argue a recognizable feminist politics; and it has not endured, aside from a few copies scattered across libraries and archives. Instead, in the cacophony of its many voices, *Culture Hero* offers modes of writing and relating that pierce through the toxic productivity and rationality of everyday life to provide other options on offer—"alternative ways of knowing and being that are not unduly optimistic," to return to J. Halberstam's formulation, "but nor are they mired in nihilistic critical dead ends."¹²⁷

Two years after *Culture Hero*, in a *Village Voice* column titled "R.D. Laing: The Misteeek of Sighcosis" published November 1972, Johnston dwells on some of the most harrowing and

¹²⁶ Johnston, *Lesbian Nation*, 86.

¹²⁷ Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 24.

darkest episodes of the prior decade—episodes that some of the contributors to *Culture Hero* were willing to countenance. Johnston writes,

In 1965 for no reason other than that I had gone out of my mind (or into it) I was locked into a gray walled dungeon with no way out and a shot full of paraldyhyde and 1000 mcs of thorazine and locked into a cell within the dungeon a room containing a peestained mattress and the dents of bludgeoning heads and trussed up to a bed and laced up into a straightjacket and left to die for the night I did and I've never been the same since I'm just beginning to get in touch with the phobia I acquired in one night's time an elevator problem is the least of it and I stand as witness for thousands like me for whom [R.D. Laing's] *The Politics of Experience* came like a belated vindication against our censure and invalidation by the Modern Inquisition. I've written in this paper before that people like me were leaning out of our disaster areas waiting for *any* parchment of evidence to verify our trips, just to indicate that we had actually been someplace, never mind that we saw something interesting where we went and that there might be some value in it. The total invalidation of the "inner journey" by the psychiatric profession is a damnation from which few were lucky enough to recover.¹²⁸

* * *

"Not all the ways out of the darkness lead into the light."¹²⁹ Although she almost certainly did not mean it as a compliment, Barbara Rose was exactly right to write that in *Culture Hero*. "Indeed," as Jacqueline Rose writes, "rather than the idea of light triumphing over darkness, my women suggest that confronting dark with dark might be the more creative path. If there is such a thing as a knowledge of women, this, I would venture, is where we should go looking for it."¹³⁰ In this section, I have followed both Johnston and Rainer to the some of the darkest places imaginable, where each woman ends up alone, terrified and immobilized on a hospital bed. However I am most interested to dwell on the episodes in which they countenance the darkest parts of each other's worlds. I am interested in how such episodes proliferate and what forms they take, how and why they cluster around women like Johnston, and how they

¹²⁸ Jill Johnston, "R.D. Laing: The Misteeek of Sighcosis," *The Village Voice*, November 30, 1972. Reprinted in Jill Johnston, *Admission Accomplished: The Lesbian Nation Years (1970-75)* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1998): 178-199.

¹²⁹ Barbara Rose, contribution to *Culture Hero*, 11.

¹³⁰ Rose, *Women in Dark Times*, xiv.

spread. I am interested in the scene Rainer describes: “the two of us getting up every morning, mooning over coffee cups, and fiercely engaged in a contest of who has more reason to be miserable,” and I am interested in the content of Johnston’s “feisty salutation [...] from the St. Vincent psycho ward.”

IV. The improbable art of being a public nuisance

On April 30, 1971, Jill Johnston appeared in front of a star-studded audience “filled with the elite of a thousand intellectual battles,”¹³¹ according to Israel Shenker at the *New York Times*, on a panel moderated by Norman Mailer titled “A Dialogue on Women’s Liberation” at New York’s Town Hall theatre (**Fig. 2.19**).¹³² D.A. Pennebaker recorded the event using shaky handheld cameras, and his collaborator Chris Hegedus later edited the footage into a cinéma vérité documentary titled *Town Bloody Hall*. The panel was organized by Shirley Broughton as a benefit to support her ongoing “Theatre for Ideas”—a salon that the *New York Times* once heralded as “New York’s leading exercise in participatory autocracy.”¹³³ At the time of “A Dialogue on Women’s Liberation,” Mailer—a regular at the “Theatre for Ideas”—had reached a new height of notoriety for having just published “The Prisoner of Sex” in *Harper’s Magazine*, a caustic and bombastic fifty-page rebuttal to Kate Millet’s 1970 book *Sexual Politics*.

¹³¹ Israel Shenker, “Norman Mailer vs. Women’s Lib: ‘Discussion’ at Town Hall Changes Few Minds,” *New York Times*, May 1, 1971, 19.

¹³² Melissa Deem provides an excellent account of how Johnston’s role on the “A Dialogue on Women’s Liberation Panel” expresses a “politics of reinscription, mobility and interstiatality” that has much to teach us “about cultural memory and minoritarian political practices.” See, Melissa Deem, “Disrupting the Nuptials at the Town Hall Debate: Feminism and the Politics of Cultural Memory in the USA,” *Cultural Studies* 17, no. 5 (2003): 615-647.

¹³³ Israel Shenker, “Guests at Theater for Ideas Take Up Cerebral Gauntlet,” *New York Times*, October 9, 1968, 49, 51.



Fig. 2.19. Photos of *A Dialogue on Women's Liberation* panel discussion at Town Hall Theatre, NYC, April 30, 1971. L- Participants (left to right): Jacqueline Ceballos, Germaine Greer, Norman Mailer, Johnston's empty seat, Diana Trilling; R- Jill Johnston at the podium.

For “A Dialogue on Women’s Liberation,” Johnston got cast in the role of radical lesbian foil to fellow panelist Germaine Greer, the “saucy feminist that even men like,”¹³⁴ according to the next week’s cover of *Life* magazine (**Fig. 2.20**). The panel also featured literary critic Diana Trilling and Jacqueline Ceballos, president of the New York chapter of the National Organization for Women (NOW). “I always try to peek under the curtain before it parts,” Rosalyn Drexler reports in the *Village Voice*, “but all I saw was three pairs of boots: black shiny belonged to Norman, long fitted—Germaine, heavy workman type—Jill and two pairs of sensibles—Jacqueline and Diana.”¹³⁵



Fig. 2.20. Cover of *Life* magazine, May 7, 1971.

¹³⁴*Life Magazine*, May 7, 1971, cover.

¹³⁵ Rosalyn Drexler, “Theatre for Ideas: A night of Lib and let Lib, What happened to Mozart’s sister?” *The Village Voice*, May 6, 1971, 28.

“I had never seen Diana before and I supposed she despised me like the rest,” Johnston writes in *Lesbian Nation*. “I had met Ceballos the week before at a talk gig in Long Island at Hofstra College and she seemed to have the same attitude as Betty Friedan who’d declared the year before that I was the biggest enemy of the movement.” “So the question was what was I doing there,” Johnston continues. “I was a culture star from the Bowery and the Bellevue. I was not a feminist in any proper sense of the term whatever that was, either by activity or by consciousness, although I was moving along in my consciousness. I did think that the only true feminist was the lesbian and I still do although at that time I was adamant and obnoxious in my assertions and intolerant of all the moderate approaches.”¹³⁶

The panel began with each of the panelists standing to deliver prepared remarks from a podium situated next to the long panel table. Poet Gregory Corso interrupted the proceedings by shouting from the balcony “All of Humanity! Not just Half!”¹³⁷—before storming out of the theater escorted by ushers. But this time, Johnston was not “deadlocked” by “divided sympathies” as she had been three years prior when Gene Swenson interrupted her very first panel by “screaming quotes from Mao or Ho Chi”¹³⁸ from another balcony in a remarkably similar scene. This time she came prepared “to fuck things up” in her own way.

Johnston spoke third, right after Greer. “I had the correct instinct to fuck things up but no political philosophy to clarify a course of action,” Johnston reflects back from the pages of *Lesbian Nation*. “And had I had such a philosophy,” she continues, “it’s doubtful I would’ve been able to educate enough people in a short time to make a real difference.”¹³⁹ So instead Johnston read aloud “a free verse, free association, pun infested, Bible-belting cry for the rites of

¹³⁶ Johnston, *Lesbian Nation*, 19-20.

¹³⁷ *Town Bloody Hall* documentary.

¹³⁸ Johnston, “Dance Journal: Cultural Gangsters,”

¹³⁹ Johnston, *Lesbian Nation*, 22.

lesbians,” as the *New York Times* describes it, from “handwritten pages (in red ink) curling in her hands,”¹⁴⁰ according to Roslyn Drexler’s report in the *Village Voice*.

“The title of this episode is new approach,” Johnston begins. “All women are lesbians except those who don’t know it naturally they are but don’t know it yet [...]” And Johnston continues to read for about fifteen minutes, until Mailer interrupts her to say “Jill, you’ve read your letter, now mail it.” That’s when two of Johnston’s friends mount the stage to begin kissing, groping, and rolling around on the floor with each other (**Fig. 2.21**).



Fig. 2.21. Photo of Jill Johnston kissing Robyn on stage at *A Dialogue on Women’s Liberation* panel discussion at Town Hall Theatre, NYC, April 30, 1971. Photo by Fred W. McDarrah.

“It’s great that you pay 25 bucks to see three dirty overalls on the floor, when you can see a lot of cock and cunt for 4 dollars down the street!” Mailer proclaims. And as he becomes increasingly exasperated, he excoriates Johnston, “Common Jill, be a lady!”—but to no avail (because it’s pretty much the most ridiculous thing he could have said). When someone from the audience shouts, “What’s the matter Mailer, you’re threatened because you found a girl you can’t fuck?” Mailer responds, “Hey cunt, I’ve been threatened all my life, so take it easy.” To get himself out of the situation, Mailer decides to call a vote on whether or not Johnston should be permitted to finish her statement. After he declares the “no” votes to be the winners, Johnston leaves the theatre and does not return. “All women are lesbians? Get that woman outa here!,” Johnston writes in *Lesbian Nation*. “And by my own volition I left.”¹⁴¹

¹⁴⁰ Drexler, “Theatre for Ideas: A night of Lib and let Lib, What happened to Mozart’s sister?” 70.

¹⁴¹ Johnston, *Lesbian Nation*, 37.

But Johnston dominated newspaper coverage of the event nonetheless, even eclipsing (in some cases) the more famous and fabulous Greer. Johnston went on to publish the entirety of her address (now of considerably more interest) in the next week's *Village Voice*, where it was featured alongside two long accounts of the panel, by Drexler and another by Frederic Morton. And then Johnston republished her address, along with her own extended analysis of the panel discussion in *Lesbian Nation: The Feminist Solution*.

“The Town Hall affair of May 1971 billed chiefly as a dialogue between Norman Mailer and Germaine Greer was a disaster for women and a minor triumph for me since my notoriety as a swimmer was briefly eclipsed by the greater infamy of public sapphism,” Johnston writes on the first page of the first chapter of *Lesbian Nation*.¹⁴² Johnston gained notoriety as a swimmer a year before the “Town Hall affair,” when she stripped down to her “black panties” (as the *New York Times* put it) in the middle of a high-profile benefit for the Women’s Strike for Equality hosted by art collectors Robert and Ethel Scull to swim a few laps in their pool, topless.¹⁴³ Johnston writes, “so town hall was just another swimming pool at easthampton, just another boarding school, just another swanky artists loft party at which to ruin yer dress and lose yer shoes hanging upside down from the pipes, just another readymade set to practice the improbable art of being a public nuisance and a maverick or a martyr at the service of the principle of chaos and corruption or whatever we can call the urgent necessity of swinging from the tree at cocktails and clacking hideous noises to stop all the polite chatter and see the faces register amazement or disgust or *something* behind the tin foil masks at the disturbance in the trees, I dunno...”¹⁴⁴

* * *

¹⁴² Johnston, *Lesbian Nation*, 15.

¹⁴³ Charlotte Curtis, “Women’s Liberation Gets Into the Long Island Swim,” *The New York Times*, August 10, 1970, 32.

¹⁴⁴ Johnston, *Lesbian Nation*, 39.

In the book *Acts of Gaiety: LGBT Performance and the Politics of Pleasure* (2012), Sara Warner argues that Johnston's queer antics and theatrics constitute "expatriate acts of joker citizenship,"¹⁴⁵ which Warner defines as "an anarchic and antiassimilationist gesture of civil disobedience that provides an opportunity and occasion for subaltern agency [...] a spirited, seditious and militantly erotic mode of insurrection that challenges audiences to question, if not transform, the criteria for social belonging."¹⁴⁶ When it comes to Johnston, Warner proclaims: "I want to pull this joker into contemporary LGBT politics [...] I want to tarry with this controversial figure in lesbian herstory who resisted the siren song of integration and defied pressure—from factions on both the left and the right—to assimilate."¹⁴⁷

In contrast to Warner, I do not want to pull Johnston into contemporary LGBT politics. Rather, I want to dwell on what happened on the ground in the 1960s and '70s, to trace how Johnston's practice—her "improbable art of being a public nuisance"—grew up in negotiated distinction with the demands of art, criticism, liberation movements, and so many psychiatrists. As politics, Johnston's critical practice is myopic in a lot of ways—on issues of race, certainly, which Johnston acknowledges in *Lesbian Nation*. In a column published March 4, 1971 titled "Lois Lane is a Lesbian," which Johnston includes at the heart of *Lesbian Nation*, Johnston writes, "My initial reaction to the black movement was hey wait a minute I didn't *choose* to be born white, and let me tell *you* about the problems of a white homosexual female in a . . . et cetera. Now I suggest you go up to a black person and say White People Have Problems Too and see what kind of response you get."¹⁴⁸ But then what? In that same column, Johnston writes,

¹⁴⁵ Warner, *Acts of Gaiety*, 110.

¹⁴⁶ Warner, *Acts of Gaiety*, 107.

¹⁴⁷ Warner, *Acts of Gaiety*, 115.

¹⁴⁸ Johnston, *Lesbian Nation*, 137.

My “confessional gush” is consecrated to no other proposition than that of collecting all of my selves that I can raise to consciousness in the shape of current experiences into some form of literary energy at the moment I sit down most every week to write that damn column. Sometimes I get a masterpiece seizure and work very hard for a structural coup. Sometimes I’m unsuccessfully trying to merge my literary ambition with my cause concerns. It’s *always* a dilemma. What to say and how to say it. And you have to perpetuate the illusion that it means something to somebody besides yourself. Otherwise why the hell would you be publishing it?¹⁴⁹

Working inside that dilemma, Johnston improvises her way along, slouching, contriving new ways to use language and her body, bending the genre of criticism beyond recognition, and inventing new queer forms of artistic practice suspended in states of becoming. “*This is your local reporter always ‘looking elsewhere’—for the nonthing of the thing—for whatever isn’t settled, labeled, canned, caulked, cherished, claimed, and consumed. ‘Take me disappearing through the smoke rings of my mind.’*”

V. On Lesbian Feminism...

If this chapter responds to Sara Ahmed’s call for “a revival of lesbian feminism,” it does so by assembling archival objects to trace the activities of one exemplary lesbian feminist, in order to figure out what her lesbian feminism was all about, down on the ground as a complicated, messy practice of living and creating things through the heady days of the 1960s and ’70s as a critic, artist, performer, and brilliant writer. As Ahmed reminds us, “By holding on to the figure of the lesbian as full of potential, we are not giving up on queer; rather, we are refusing to assume being queer means giving up on lesbian feminism.”¹⁵⁰ But I want to be clear: this chapter does not call for a revival of Johnston’s specific *Lesbian Nation* era lesbian feminism. All of the lessons that have been foregrounded since 1973 regarding race and

¹⁴⁹ Johnston, *Lesbian Nation*, 140.

¹⁵⁰ Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, 224.

intersectionality and transfeminism are of course vital for us now. If we learn anything from Johnston, we learn that “slouching towards consciousness” is perpetually unfinished business—for Johnston it certainly was, she says it over and over again, and for us it probably is too. I take it for granted that Johnston got a lot wrong, that her politics were mired and myopic; I take it for granted that mine are too—furious feminists now and in the future will show that to be the case.

In a blog post from February 2016, feminist scholar Kyla Wazana Tompkins writes, “Jill Johnston’s ball-busting outrageousness can’t really be treated as a gesture isolated from a politics that had terrible consequences.”¹⁵¹ Fair enough, but Tompkins also makes a plea to listen to those “ball-busting dykes,” as she puts it, “the old-school women who got the shit kicked out of them by cops, who were raped and abused and fired, and who drank and loved and fought like fuck to have the right to really love other women in the ways that they wanted to. The ones who showed up to listen to Jill Johnston, to puzzle their ways towards collective political theory.” Writing from an in-between position—“as someone who yelled at and protested white radical feminists” now on the receiving end of transfeminist fury that decries “ball-busting” as “violence towards trans women’s embodiment”—Tompkins makes a plea for listening to the fury, especially when it’s hard to hear. “Here I want to deploy what I think is one of the most profound insights that Berlant’s *Cruel Optimism* affords us,” Tompkins writes, “that thinking with affect allows us, as readers and critics, to listen to political formations—to the event—before we can name what they are. An emergent formation, in Raymond Williams’ words; capacity in Deleuze’s terms; potentia for Spinoza. *Something is happening.*” Tompkins continues: “Fury is the point: inchoate fury is the affective crossroads at which the articulation of political injury and

¹⁵¹ Kyla Wazana Tompkins, “Ball Busters and the Recurring Trauma of Intergenerational Queer/Feminist Life,” Bully Bloggers (blog), 20 February 2016, <https://bullybloggers.wordpress.com/2016/02/20/ball-busters-and-the-recurring-trauma-of-intergenerational-queerfeminist-life/>.

opposition finds itself before it has a chance to be recuperated into the legibility that is power.”¹⁵² This chapter has dwelled on episodes when inchoate fury and speculative feeling erupt as art.

¹⁵² Tompkins, “Ball Busters.”

Chapter 3

Gregory Battcock's *Last Estate*

The anti-worker has to liberate himself from prevailing terminology, classifications and categorizations. In criticism (quiticism) only Jill Johnston and Gene Swenson have so far, been able to do it. In Journalism SCREW, N.Y.R.S., GOTHIC BLIMP WORKS, OTHER SCENES have done it.

—Gregory Battcock, July 1, 1969¹

I. Battcock and the underground press

On March 13, 1969 the *New York Free Press* published a long, rambling text by Gregory Battcock titled “Art: My Retirement Message” (**Fig. 3.1**). “Today I got a letter from Jill Johnston written on the back of a place mat from the Old Adobe Inn in Taos New Mexico asking for the print of a photograph of her smoking a cigar that was run in the Free Press ages ago,” Battcock begins. “Nobody at the Free Press can ever find anything, which is why nobody can ever find the Free Press,” he continues. “This is the sort of article Nicolas Calas will tell me I shouldn’t write because it doesn’t have a point. Calas is supposed to be a Surrealist. Surrealism has a point.”²

Figure removed due to copyright restrictions

Fig. 3.1. Gregory Battcock, “Art: My Retirement Message,” *New York Free Press*, March 13, 1969. Gregory Battcock papers, 1952-circa 1980. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

¹ Gregory Battcock, “The Last Estate,” *New York Review of Sex & Politics*, July 1, 1969. Gregory Battcock papers, 1952-circa 1980. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

² Gregory Battcock, “Art: My Retirement Message,” *New York Free Press*, March 13, 1969, 13. Gregory Battcock papers, 1952-circa 1980. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

“So Battcock is retiring from Art Criticism,” Battcock writes, a few paragraphs down—which wasn’t actually true. Before March 13, 1969 and after Battcock continued to produce criticism for the both underground press and the art magazines, and to edit critical anthologies for publisher E.P. Dutton & Co. without skipping so much as a beat. Battcock’s “Retirement Message” did, however, herald the demise of the *New York Free Press*. Battcock began writing art criticism for the paper in 1967, when it was published under the heading *Westside News*. In December ’67 the paper changed its name, and by March 1969 it was in dire financial straits—but with a possible-seeming solution on the horizon. A few months prior, in November 1968 Jim Buckley (managing editor of the *New York Free Press*) and Al Goldstein produced the first issue of *Screw...A Sex Review* (**Fig. 3.2**), working out of the *Free Press* offices. *Screw* was New York City’s “first porn paper”—according to journalist Claudia Dreifus, in an extended analysis of the new “pornzines” as they were called, published in *New York Scenes* (another short-lived ’69-era underground magazine). “A small photo-offset tabloid, *Screw* emerged out of the wet dreams of two underground writers, Al Goldstein and Jim Buckley,” Dreifus writes. “It was their vision to put together a newspaper free from violence, sadism or guilt, and devoted exclusively to the topic of sex.”³ Dreifus quotes Goldstein: “The underground papers had been doing that kind of thing for years. The *East Village Other* [*EVO*] was carrying pages of ‘bodies wanted’ ads, and it really seemed like there was a demand.”⁴

³ Claudia Dreifus, “The Sex Newspapers: High Profit in Porn,” *New York Scenes*, July, 1969, 19.

⁴ Al Goldstein, quoted in Dreifus, “The Sex Newspapers,” 19.



Fig. 3.2. L- Cover of *Screw ... A Sex Review*, no. 1, November 29, 1968.

“Suddenly classified advertising became revolutionized,” Dreifus confirms. “Readers bought *EVO* just to gander at the outrageous and often terribly funny personal ads. [...] Homosexuals. Sado-masochists. Foot fetishists. Wife-swappers. Father-rapers. You name it, you could find it in *EVO*’s classifieds. Incredible! Sex had finally become so open that you could advertise for it!”⁵ This phenomenon—the proliferation of new underground papers making possible and fueling demand for queer content and classifieds, which in turn fueled demand for the underground papers—was widespread across the United States. As Art Kunkin, editor-publisher of the *Los Angeles Free Press*, put it in 1969 to journalist John Burks for a long piece called “The Underground Press: A Special Report” in *Rolling Stone*,

I don’t dig some of the film or books ads that we run, but (the point is) that one of the financial bases for the underground press has been the sex ad. This has given the underground press a base of advertising which doesn’t care what we say politically. If we said anything pro-Arab, for example, the liberal businessmen would pull their ads out immediately. But the homosexual personals couldn’t care less. They’re just happy to be able to survive in the community.⁶

“The fact is, all the pornzines have emerged from the underground,” Burks surmises. “Joel Fabrikant, business manager of the *East Village Other*, is publisher of *Kiss*, *Screw*—the pioneer

⁵ Dreifus, “The Sex Newspapers,” 23-4.

⁶ Art Kunkin in John Burks, “The Underground Press: A Special Report,” *Rolling Stone*, October 4, 1969, 17-18.

in the field—was the child of the *New York Free Press*, when the latter folded. *The New York Review of Sex* also bears a filial relationship to the *New York Free Press*; it is almost Son of *New York Free Press*, in fact.”⁷ Although the *Rolling Stone* “Special Report,” is more concerned to analyze the personalities behind the papers than the technologies that undergird the underground, it does note: “Nearly all underground papers utilize offset printing, whereby you simply paste down everything onto a page form exactly as you want it to look, and the printing plate is an exact photographic reproduction of what the printer receives. A far cry from working with lead slugs of type, and working with a printer as *he* laid out the page for you. Much cheaper, too.”⁸

Even though the first issue of *Screw* “engendered protest from every imaginable quarter,” according to Dreifus, it was a near instant commercial success. So as *Screw* was picking up steam at the start of 1969, the *New York Free Press* was barely treading water. Dreifus writes,

The *Free Press*, a rather interesting muckraking journal, somehow had never managed to pick up enough readership to make it go. Months of debts had taken their toll and the paper was about to go out of business. [...] In the midst of the death throes of the *New York Free Press*, [Sam] Edwards and [Jack] Banning [publishers of the *Free Press*] hit upon the idea of putting out another sex paper. *Screw*’s success seemed to prove that there was a ready market.⁹

After an (apparently) bitter dispute, many of the *Free Press* writers, including some on the masthead of *Screw*, decamped to start a new pornzine which they titled the *New York Review of Sex (NYRS)* (**Fig. 3.3**). Steven Heller, art director for the *Free Press* (at the precocious age of 17), left *Screw* for the *NYRS*. He tells Dreifus, “What I wanted to do was something different, more

⁷ Burks, “The Underground Press: A Special Report,” 18.

⁸ Burks, “The Underground Press: A Special Report,” 22. Emphasis original.

⁹ Dreifus, “The Sex Newspapers,” 21.

like tabloid *Eros*—a paper filled with beautiful erotic art, muckraking, and great erotic literature. Our paper was to be political. Goldstein was down on politics.”¹⁰



Fig. 3.3. L- Cover of *The New York Review of Sex*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (February 21, 1969).

So after publishing a long, rambling “Retirement Message” in the pages of the *New York Free Press* on March 13, 1969, Battcock simply moved his column over to the *NYRS* without skipping a week. In June 1969, Battcock retitled his *NYRS* column “The Last Estate”—signaling its position far outside the establishment press and also as a final check on it, or perhaps the last thing left when the whole system goes to pot anyways. With “The Last Estate,” Battcock includes a running commentary on the possibilities for criticism in the underground papers and the pornzines amid rapid changes on the ground—both in terms of the publishing landscape and in terms of the consolidation, politics, and visibility of New York’s gay scene leading up to and following the Stonewall riots of June 28, 1969.

“This is a new column which will run as long as my interest in it lasts, or the paper gets busted,” Battcock writes in his first “The Last Estate” column, published in the *NYRS* June 1, 1969 with the subtitle “Filth and Degregation [sic].” He continues,

Things like *East Village Other*, *Rat*, *New York Free Press* aren’t really anti-establishment papers, because they subscribe to major demands that the establishment insists upon. One of these demands is “morality,” and along with it

¹⁰ Steven Heller, quoted in Dreifus, “The Sex Newspapers,” 23.

we find “truth,” “reputation,” “career,” etc. Before this column gets too fucked up, these are the points I will stick to:

1. New York Review of Sex
2. Morality and Herbert Marcuse
3. Jill Johnston, modern criticism, and miscellaneous notes.¹¹

When the *NYRS* folded at the end of 1969, Battcock moved “The Last Estate” to the new post-Stonewall underground newspaper *GAY* (founded by activists Jack Nichols and Lige Clarke, and funded by *Screw*’s Al Goldstein), where he published the column regularly through 1974. In 1975, Battcock began writing for *SOHO Weekly News* and in 1977 he published his own underground paper *Trylon & Perisphere*, a small, staple-bound newsprint zine which ceased publication in 1978 after just three issues. During the same years, Battcock published art criticism in *Arts Magazine*, where he served as editor-in-chief from 1973-75. He wrote regularly for the London-based magazine *Art and Artists* and the Milan-based *Domus*.



Fig. 3.4. Gregory Battcock Speaks At SVA at the Art Workers’ Coalition (AWC) first open hearing, New York, New York, April 10, 1969. Photo by Fred W. McDarrah.

In 1969 Battcock was a founding member of the Art Workers’ Coalition (AWC). He was one of seven signatories to the group’s initial “13 Demands” delivered January 28, 1969 to MoMA’s director Bates Lowry, and he was a loud presence at the AWC’s first Open Hearing of April 10, 1969 (**Fig. 3.4**). Julia Bryan-Wilson describes Battcock as “a perpetually confrontational voice in this time period”¹² and characterizes his role within the AWC as being

¹¹ Gregory Battcock, “The Last Estate,” *New York Review of Sex & Politics*, June 1, 1969, 17. Gregory Battcock papers, 1952-circa 1980. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

¹² Julia Bryan-Wilson, *Art Workers: Radical Practice in the Vietnam War Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 150.

marked by a kind of slapdash pragmatism—a willingness to fudge around the edges of a theory to justify, for example, those “artists in the AWC” who “wanted their art to be political without having to compromise its nonrepresentational, esoteric form,” as Bryan-Wilson puts it.

“Minimalists did not have a thinker like Clement Greenberg to defend their art’s estrangement or autonomy from popular culture as a critical, even political task,” Bryan-Wilson writes. “The minimalists of the AWC did have Herbert Marcuse, however,” she continues. “Or, to be more precise, they had a set of critics who appropriated Marcuse’s theories to justify the relevance of minimal art. Gregory Battcock was at the center of this appropriation, although in practice it often meant creatively misinterpreting Marcuse himself.”¹³ However, in a 1977 essay reflecting back on the era, Battcock draws a different line between Greenberg and Marcuse, placing minimal art in Greenberg’s camp. Battcock writes, “And just as Clement Greenberg became the major aesthetic definer of Abstract Expressionist and Minimal Art, we discover that a *political* philosopher, Herbert Marcuse, became the major *aesthetic* definer of a new kind of art.”¹⁴

Bryan-Wilson is right to suggest that Battcock did not worry overmuch about precision, fidelity, or consistency—and it is true that his writings from the late ’60s and early ’70s did offer plenty of suggestions for how “the minimalists of the AWC” could use Marcuse “to justify the relevance of minimal art.” However, as this 1977 statement indicates, Battcock was more committed to identifying and advancing “a new kind” of art than he was to championing minimalism. And in this chapter, I describe Battcock’s often-fraught project to identify and foster queer forms of art unacceptable to the establishment that strive loosely toward a

¹³ Bryan-Wilson, *Art Workers*, 62.

¹⁴ Gregory Battcock, “Herbert Marcuse” in *Why Art: Casual Notes on the Aesthetics of the Immediate Past* (New York: E.P. Dutton and Co., Inc., 1977), 35.

Marcuseian vision premised on pleasure and play—a project that ultimately leads Battcock to stray far from Marcuse himself.

Battcock completed his PhD at New York University in Art Education in 1978 with a dissertation titled “Constructivism and Minimal Art: Some Aesthetic, Theoretical, and Critical Correlations,” all the while teaching at Hunter and Queens Colleges, Fairleigh Dickinson University, and William Paterson College. He edited widely-read anthologies of modern art criticism for publisher E.P. Dutton and Co., including *The New Art* (1966/72), *The New American Cinema* (1967), *Minimal Art* (1968), *New Ideas in Art Education* (1973), *Idea Art* (1973), *Super Realism* (1975), *New Artists Video* (1978)—with two more, *Breaking the Sound Barrier* (1981) and *The Art of Performance* (1984) published posthumously. As art historian David Joselit notes, “I, like many of my generation, learned the history of post-war art by reading Battcock’s collections in college.”¹⁵ Battcock was murdered on December 26, 1980. He was found stabbed to death on a balcony in San Juan, Puerto Rico—which most of New York City probably found out about by way of a *SOHO Weekly News* cover story with lurid details and the sensational title “Blood of a Critic: The Strange Life and Even Stranger Death of Gregory Battcock” (**Fig. 3.5**).



Fig. 3.5. *SOHO News* 9, No. 1 (October 7-13, 1981). David Bourdon papers, 1941-1998. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Taking stock of this storied career, Joselit lauds Battcock’s “intellectual promiscuity”—his “consistent effort to broaden the circulation or distribution of information in and around

¹⁵ David Joselit, “Transformer: Gregory Battcock,” *Artforum International* 51, no. 1 (September 2012): 507.

art.”¹⁶ According to Joselit, Battcock’s greatest achievement was the prescient role he played in heralding “a shift in values from objects (as reservoirs of artistic intention and semiotic complexity) to situations (characterized by ephemeral, and often flamboyant, open-ended communication).” “Art objects now perform similarly,” Joselit writes, “they are temporary halts or arrested conjunctions of information flows. Such is the real legacy of Conceptual art.” Joselit concludes: “Battcock not only knew this—he acted on it.”¹⁷

On the other side of the scholarly spectrum, Anne M. Wagner describes Battcock as “a minor man of letters and art world weathervane”¹⁸—furnishing a not-so-flattering caveat as she cites the content of Battcock’s criticism. According to Wagner, Battcock’s greatest achievements happened in spite, not because of his best efforts. “[S]ome of the significance of Battcock’s anthologies lies precisely in the lack of great significance of at least some of their contents,” Wagner writes in an introduction to Battcock’s 1968 *Minimal Art* anthology, reissued in 1995. Wagner describes the result as “singularly fortunate for the student of this period of American art”—thanks to Battcock’s distinct lack of “editorial astuteness.”¹⁹

It seems to me that both Wagner’s dismissal and Joselit’s resuscitation of Battcock are overstated. Neither a prophetic herald of conceptual art’s “real legacy,” nor a mere “minor man of letters,” Battcock was instead a complicated figure who got some things right and other things wrong, and who embarked on fascinating, if fraught, project to forge his own way forward. But he paid attention to the people and things happening around him, both major and minor, and he managed to capture currents and trends that other critics missed. And it is worth noting that

¹⁶ Joselit, “Transformer: Gregory Battcock,” 507.

¹⁷ Joselit, “Transformer: Gregory Battcock,” 511.

¹⁸ Anne M. Wagner, *A House Divided: American Art Since 1955* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2012), 29.

¹⁹ Anne M. Wagner, “Reading *Minimal Art*” in Gregory Battcock, ed. *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995), 5.

throughout this dissertation I have relied on Battcock's assessments as a credible witness when he says, for example, "Jill Johnston is one of the most important, radical, and innovative writers of her time"²⁰ or "Neither Swenson nor his picketing was as crazy as everyone thought at the time, and he was one of the first to introduce poetry and style into political and cultural protest."²¹ Or, for example, when he proclaims in his "The Last Estate" column for the *NYRS*, "The anti-worker has to liberate himself from prevailing terminology, classifications and categorizations. In criticism (quiticism) only Jill Johnston and Gene Swenson have, so far, been able to do it."²² A question that drives this chapter is whether Battcock ever managed to "do it" too.

In what follows, I trace Battcock's activities around his commitments to "anti-work" and "quiticism"—activities that flout pretty much every "polemical redefinition of artistic labor" that, as Bryan-Wilson argues, came to define the "radical practice" of the era.²³ I argue that Battcock enacts a wholly different kind of "polemical redefinition of artistic labor" rooted in pleasure, play, and sex rather than any political program or theory with demands and accountability. I also continue to rely on Battcock as a witness and chronicler of the particular, shifting circumstances within which criticism without authority became possible. Battcock, it seems, anticipated this role. He archived every single thing he published—from letters to the editor, to columns for the underground, to features in the art magazines—in meticulous scrapbooks, with the date and place of each publication pasted or jotted down. By dint of luck, and quick action on the part of contemporary artist Joseph Grigely, these scrapbooks, along with several boxes of Battcock's

²⁰ Gregory Battcock, "Introduction," *Marmalade Me*, ed. Jill Johnston (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1971), 10.

²¹ Gregory Battcock, "The Art Critic as Social Reformer—with a Question Mark?," *Art in America* 59.5 (1971), 27.

²² Gregory Battcock, "The Last Estate," *New York Review of Sex & Politics*, July 1, 1969, 17. Gregory Battcock papers, 1952-circa 1980. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

²³ Bryan-Wilson, *Art Workers*, 1.

papers, are now preserved at the Smithsonian Archives of American Art. In 1992 Grigely discovered Battcock's papers abandoned, "scattered across the 4th floor of 111 1st street" in Jersey City, when a storage company called "Shalom" was evicted from the building—an old cigarette factory where Grigely's studio was also located. Grigely writes, "it became a matter of saving what could be saved, when at any moment the entire contents of the floor could have been swept into trash trucks, removed and then disposed forever." "For my part," Grigely continues, "I kept some duplicate texts, and a selection of photographs and correspondence."²⁴

Since 2010, Grigely has exhibited this material across the U.S. and Europe in a changing installation titled *The Gregory Battcock Archive*, and in an anthology titled *Oceans of Love: The Uncontainable Gregory Battcock* (2016). Grigely casts Battcock as an enigmatic "shapeshifter." "Between highbrow and lowbrow," Grigely writes, "between the halls of NYU and the shrubs in Riverside Park, between the glossy color pages of *Arts Magazine* and the newspaper greys of *GAY*, Battcock moved fluidly between extremes."²⁵ "Battcock was at his best when most enigmatic," Grigely concludes, "and he was most enigmatic when he was most ironic."²⁶ Encasing Battcock's papers in reconfigurable vitrines and between the covers of an anthology, Grigely makes vivid the question of what these archival remains can tell us about the life Battcock lived and, just as importantly, what they can't—what remains "uncontainable" no matter how many drafts, clippings, photographs, letters, journals, and little scraps of paper are salvaged and brought into the bright light of the present.

²⁴ Joseph Grigely, "Preface" in *Oceans of Love: The Uncontainable Gregory Battcock*, ed. Joseph Grigely (London: Koenig Books, 2016), 7-8.

²⁵ Joseph Grigely, "Introduction: The Battcock Factor" in *Oceans of Love: The Uncontainable Gregory Battcock*, ed. Joseph Grigely (London: Koenig Books, 2016), 20.

²⁶ Grigely, "Introduction: The Battcock Factor," 38.

But in addition to making this enigmatic excess (Battcock's 'uncontainability') visible and pressing, Grigely's intervention—and the decision to give Battcock's papers to the Smithsonian where they are now processed with a comprehensive finding aid—makes possible a very different kind of patient, meticulous archival research focused on recovering what happened on the ground, filling in the historical account with queer texture that was quite nearly "swept into trash trucks, removed and then disposed forever." Tracing Battcock's writings in and out of the art magazines, and through a succession of underground papers as each was founded, floundered and eventually folded—from the muckraking *New York Free Press* in 1967, to the polymorphous '69-era *New York Review of Sex*, to the post-Stonewall identity-based *GAY* in the early '70s, then eventually to his own mashup, satirical late-'70s zine *Trylon and Perisphere*—furnishes a detailed index (one very particular index) of fast-changing, turbulent times. These times were, of course, marked by escalation in Vietnam, the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., the election of Richard Nixon, Black Power, Women's Liberation, the Stonewall riots, and formation of the Gay Liberation Front—and then all the reckonings, fissures, and retreats that occurred as these identities and movements were being formalized. Writing nearly every week for the underground papers, and nearly every month for the art magazines, Battcock registers these events, shifts, and ruptures as he experiences them, and often with a heavy dose catty, acerbic wit. Battcock's writings posit the hope and possibility that criticism can become an improbable site for new forms of art—for queer experiments, practice, and play—amid the turbulence of the late-60s and early-70s, and the welter of underground papers that grew up within that turbulence. But at the same time, Battcock throws into sharp relief some of the blind-spots, problems, and pitfalls of such a project. Attending closely to Battcock's writings, this chapter describes both sides of that coin.

II. Writing in the off-set idiom

Battcock's long, rambling "Retirement Message" of March 13, 1969 touches on a host of topics, everything (it seems) that came to mind as he was typing it. Near the end, Battcock includes a rant about the newly formed Art Workers' Coalition (AWC). "One problem about the current protest activity is the very list of 13 demands presented to the Museum's curators," Battcock writes—without noting, however, that he was among the seven art workers who signed on to a letter presenting these demands to the Museum's curators (and director, Bates Lowry) just six weeks prior, on January 28th. Indeed, Battcock published this "Retirement Message" amid the first wave of AWC activity, as plans were being made for a demonstration at MoMA on March 30th and for the AWC's first Open Hearing on April 10th at the School of Visual Arts (Battcock participated in both).²⁷ "They are such ordinary demands," Battcock continues, "probably most of them would be affected by the Museum on its own sooner or later." He goes on,

The most interesting demands and really the only ones that are worth bothering about, are those requesting a black wing for showing work of black artists, and demanding the involvement of the Museum with black and Puerto Rican communities. And you should hear everyone scream when these "black" demands are discussed. [...] And they say, "well, isn't that just more segregation?" All of a sudden (you might have noticed) segregation is wrong, even when it isn't a question of segregation but simply of trying to give someone an even break, which isn't easy when they've never had even the hope of that even chance (at least in the art world) and still don't. Someone actually said that what's more important than black artists are women artists in general who have never been encouraged to be in art, and are never given an even break, trodden upon. God, if I hear that line again. If anything, women have too much power, in the art world and every other world in modern America. And, there are so many Rich American Women Artists that one should make a list starting off with Helen Frankenthaler

²⁷ For an account of the AWC's early activities, see: Julia Bryan Wilson, "From Artists to Art Workers," in *Art Workers: Radical Practice in the Vietnam War Era*, 13-39; and Conor Badcoe Hannan, "'Mere Helpless Protest is Not Enough': The Art Workers' Coalition, the Guerrilla Art Action Group, and the Vietnam War" in *Out of the Studio and into the Street: Art and Artists for Social Change, New York City, 1966-1976* (PhD diss., The University of Sydney, 2013), 206-260.

now showing top quality stuff at the Whitney, and then add women artists like Lee Krasner, Lee Bontacou [sic.], Louise Nevelson, Elaine DeKooning, Marisol, Mitchell, Pat Johansen, Silvia Stone, Nell Blaine, Kusama, Strider, Riley, Hartigan, so now how many rich, suggestful [sic.], professional, high quality black artists can you name?²⁸

It is worth pointing out that by March 13, 1969 Battcock had edited three critical anthologies of modern art criticism—*The New Art* (1966), *The New American Cinema* (1967), and *Minimal Art* (1968)—that include (in total) approximately sixty-nine writings by men and only nine by women, scarcely any writings by black authors, and none that pose direct questions about the art world’s structural racism. Also note that Battcock wrote this “Retirement Message” in the thick of increasing activism in New York among black artists and critics with the founding of the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition in January 1969 as (among other things) the Whitney Museum mounted the exhibition *The 1930’s: Painting and Sculpture in America* with no black artists, and then the Metropolitan Museum mounted the exhibition *Harlem on My Mind: Cultural Capital of Black America, 1900-1968* with no art.²⁹

With this rant, Battcock publicly airs and exacerbates tensions around issues of race and gender simmering within the newly forming AWC. In the spring of 1969, women within the AWC began meeting separately and soon formed the group Women Artists in Revolution (W.A.R.). “Suddenly W.A.R. began exactly a year ago, without a name, in answer to an unstated need among women in the Art Workers Coalition,” Juliette Gordon writes in an essay published May 2, 1970. “After some of us openly expressed our displeasure over the existing situation,” she continues, “men patted us in mascot fashion and even put women into the changing

²⁸ Battcock, “Art: My Retirement Message,” 13.

²⁹ For historical accounts of the protest activity in response to these exhibitions, see Susan E. Cahan, *Mounting Frustration: The Art Museum in the Age of Black Power* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016) and Conor Badcoe Hannan, “*Out of the Studio and into the Street*”: *Art and Artists for Social Change, New York City, 1966-1976* (PhD diss., The University of Sydney, 2013).

chairmanship roles occasionally, denying all the while that any ‘real’ problem existed.” She continues,

The Black and Puerto Rican problems had been such an accepted fact that three out of the ten demands to be presented to the museums dealt with them. Now an extra demand was added to encourage female artists toward greater equality, but even that had been modified by the male who rewrote it since we really couldn’t be serious about asking for 50% representation in all art shows even though we comprised 65% of the professional art schools.³⁰

Battcock’s overt, kneejerk misogyny, even if intended as satire, irony, or deliberate provocation, wouldn’t have landed particularly well (to say the least) given his glib dismissal of those real problems. His assertion that women in the art world “have too much power” is belied immediately by the fact that several of his most exemplarity “Rich American Women Artists” were overshadowed by their richer, more successful artist husbands, and of course by the fact that it simply was not true. The 1969 Whitney Annual, for example, included 138 men and only five women. The following year, a demand by the Ad Hoc Committee of Women Artists (signed by Poppy Johnson, Lucy Lippard, Brenda Miller, and Faith Ringgold) that “50% of the artists exhibiting in the Whitney Annual Exhibition must be women” was met with a dismissive, patronizing letter from a museum administrator named Stephen E. Wile, who concludes by proclaiming in quasi-legalese: “In view of the foregoing, we do not see that any constructive purpose would be served by meeting to discuss your demands.”³¹ As Bryan-Wilson surmises, “By late 1971 Lippard was part of a wider trend in which the women wandered away from the AWC to form feminist groups like WAR, the Ad Hoc Women Artists’ Committee, and Women

³⁰ Juliette Gordon, “The history of our WAR from beginnings to today or, life under fire in the Art World Dear Workers,” *Manhattan Tribune*, May 2, 1970, reprinted in Jacqueline Skiles and Janet McDevitt, eds., *A Documentary Herstory of Women Artists in Revolution* (New York: Women Artists in Revolution, 1971), 4.

³¹ Letter from Stephen E. Wile to Lucy Lippard, dated October 19, 1970, reprinted in Jacqueline Skiles and Janet McDevitt, eds., *A Documentary Herstory of Women Artists in Revolution* (New York: Women Artists in Revolution, 1971), 37-8.

Students and Artists for Black Artists' Liberation—a large-scale defection that, according to her, led to the eventual unraveling of the AWC.” And then she quotes Lippard: “The women became politicized and the men went back to their careers.”³²

Battcock's rant also betrays a tendency in which, as historian Conor Hannan notes, “the New Left used radical white women as a ‘foil’ against which to affirm the integrity of its own racial politics—namely, by charging them with racism.”³³ And on top of that, Battcock's terse question, “so now how many rich, suggestful [sic.], professional, high quality black artists can you name?” echoes exculpatory appeals to “quality” from powerful art-world people to justify the paucity of works by black artists in museum exhibitions and collections. Susan E. Cahan summarizes the issue this way: “Thus as soon as artists of color began to actively seek their place in major museums, progress became mired in what has been called ‘the quality debate,’ a debate about whether or not such discrimination existed at all. [...] African Americans, they said—often directly with no shame—simply lacked the education and opportunities to improve themselves and reach the level of accomplishment of their white counterparts.” Cahan concludes, “Their own ignorance was projected outward.”³⁴ Battcock's accusatory question (projecting an inability to name a “high quality” black artist outward onto an imaginary “you”) is, at the end of the day, also just remarkably tone deaf to the tenor of the demand that AWC members Faith Ringgold and Tom Lloyd actually put forward in the spring of 1969 for a “Martin Luther King Jr. Wing for Black and Puerto Rican Art” at MoMA. They proclaim: “But Black and Puerto Rican art are alive! In search of museum retrospectives! Of major exhibitions, international representation,

³² Bryan-Wilson, *Art Workers*, 180. The quote comes from a phone interview Bryan-Wilson conducted with Lippard in November 2001.

³³ Conor Badcoe Hannan, “*Out of the Studio and into the Street*”: *Art and Artists for Social Change, New York City, 1966-1976* (PhD diss., The University of Sydney, 2013), 224. See also, David Barber, *A Hard Rain Fell: SDS and why it Failed* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2008), 95-144.

³⁴ Cahan, *Mounting Frustration*, 6.

and all the exposure which museum publications, commissions, grants, and sponsorship can give!”³⁵ Shooting from the hip, so it seems, Battcock misses all the salient marks.

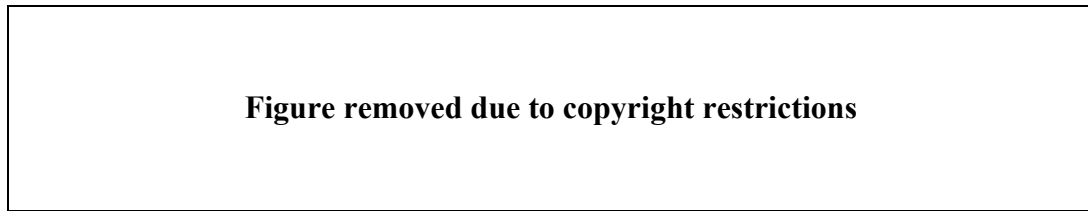


Fig. 3.6. Gregory Battcock, Art: Battcock Accused of Corrupting Youth, *New York Free Press*, February 6, 1969. Gregory Battcock papers, 1952-circa 1980. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Moreover, Battcock’s “Retirement Message” represents a sharp reversal of opinion. Just a few weeks prior, on February 6, 1969, Battcock published those same “13 demands” in his column for the *New York Free Press* titled “Art: Battcock Accused of Corrupting Youth” (**Fig. 3.6**), but with a completely different caveat about which demand is “worth bothering about.” “Most important is the first proposal,” Battcock writes on February 6th, “which requests a public hearing, sponsored by the museum [...] Before anything else can be done, all those who have a thought concerning the museum, its function and role, indeed its very license, must be heard, even if they’re full of shit, it doesn’t matter.”³⁶ But before he gets to this serious business regarding the 13 demands, Battcock begins this February 6th column on a cattier note: he jibes fellow critic Nicolas Calas (a frequent target) for his prudish, overly-earnest reaction to a previous column. Battcock writes, “but what is really shocking is that people like Nicholas Calas called me up and said that the piece was ‘pure camp’ and that really how do I expect him to defend me when I write things like that. He also said that my university would find out and there would be complaints. I said complaints about what and he said corrupting the youth. Well, as

³⁵ Faith Ringgold and Tom Lloyd, “Students and Artists for a Martin Luther King Jr. Wing for Black and Puerto Rican Art at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City,” flier, April 1969, reprinted in *Art Workers’ Coalition Documents I*, 64-65.

³⁶ Gregory Battcock, “Art: Battcock Accused of Corrupting Youth,” *New York Free Press*, February 6, 1969, 10. Gregory Battcock papers, 1952-circa 1980. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

long as I corrupt only one at a time I suppose it's all right: at that pace I can't do too much damage."³⁷

The “piece” in question—a column published January 30, 1969 titled “Art: Letter from Martinique” (**Fig. 3.7**)—includes a slapstick story of Battcock’s attempt (and failure) at “making it” on an airplane from Miami to Puerto Rico with a guy he calls “Big Eyelashes,” on his way to Martinique. “Later,” Battcock writes, “Big Eyelashes goes to the john, comes back and hands me a note which says: ‘Are you looking at me or the guy next to me.’ I got out pad and pencil, wrote the appropriate reply, and added a little proposition.”³⁸ Later in the same column Battcock explains, “I spoke to Takis last week and he told me that as a result of his taking his sculpture out of the exhibition at the Modern Museum that Bates Lowry, the new director, had agreed to meet with a delegation of artists and critics and would I come. I said I was going to Martinique instead and he said he just got back and that it was really a dreadful place.”³⁹



Fig. 3.7. Gregory Battcock, “Art: Battcock Letter from Martinique,” *New York Free Press*, January 30, 1969. Gregory Battcock papers, 1952-circa 1980. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

The event Battcock glosses in passing in this January 30th column turned out to be no less than the watershed moment in the history of art and activism in New York in the late sixties. “It all started with a kidnapping,” Bryan-Wilson writes by way of opening the first chapter of her book titled “From Artist to Art Workers.” “On January 3, 1969, artist Vassilakis Takis marched into New York’s Museum of Modern Art, unplugged his kinetic piece *Tele-sculpture* (1960), and

³⁷ Battcock, “Art: Battcock Accused of Corrupting Youth,” 10.

³⁸ Gregory Battcock, “Art: Letter from Martinique,” *New York Free Press*, January 30, 1969, 12. Gregory Battcock papers, 1952-circa 1980. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

³⁹ Battcock, “Art: Letter from Martinique,” 12.

retreated to the MoMA garden with the piece in hand.”⁴⁰ “Friends and supporters quickly rallied around Takis,” Bryan-Wilson continues. “Together they adopted a group name—the Art Workers’ Coalition (AWC). Within a few months, the AWC was busy telegraphing the need for comprehensive changes throughout the New York art world.”⁴¹ Bryan-Wilson argues that such activity heralded “a polemical redefinition of artistic labor vital to minimalism, process art, feminist art criticism, and conceptualism”—a redefinition that was central “to artists’ attempts to intervene, through their activism and art making, in a profoundly turbulent moment: the Vietnam War era.”⁴²

But instead of going with Takis to MoMA to participate in-person in this seminal event that engendered a “polemical redefinition of artistic labor,” Battcock decided to go to Martinique where, as he puts it in his published column, “One nice thing about the French Antilles is that there is no art.” Even worse, he continues on: “I wasn’t getting enough sun and wonder if some of the black of the inhabitants might rub off but I don’t think I will have the chance to get close enough to find out. They’re very puritanical and that’s very boring.”⁴³

What do we do with that?

Battcock’s decision to proclaim in print in casually racist terms that he went cruising in the Caribbean rather than petitioning at MoMA doesn’t feel much like a viable political strategy. Nor does his decision to publish a polemical, misspelled rant calling out others’ hypocrisy without worrying overmuch about his own—an unacceptable rant intended, it seems, to deepen divisions and piss off pretty much everybody. Battcock’s priorities, ethical commitments, and political allegiances circa 1969 are difficult to discern—they are confused and confusing,

⁴⁰ Bryan-Wilson, *Art Workers*, 13.

⁴¹ Bryan-Wilson, *Art Workers*, 14.

⁴² Bryan-Wilson, *Art Workers*, 1.

⁴³ Battcock, “Art: Letter from Martinique,” 12.

capricious and flippant. In his writing for the *New York Free Press*, culminating in his “Retirement Message” of March 15, 1969, Battcock experiments with a new kind of critical project, with columns that test the waters with explicit stories of gay cruising, and that swing from gossipy reports on art parties and travel to earnest accounts of art, politics, and protest.

Battcock concludes his “Retirement Message” with a reflection on new possibilities for the offset, underground press. “Hollywood taught modern man that deception is all right,” Battcock writes. “The off-set printing press taught deception doesn’t matter. Yet we still write for the off-set medium as if the words, the ideas, will be illuminated on the manuscript and chained to the pillar in the cathedral to be publicly inspected by all, forever.” Battcock continues,

The only enemy of today’s writer for the off-set medium is the editor who demands the text five days before printing. [...] When off-set was first invented, what did we do with it at first? Random House reprinted only the classics, works that were already available in letter press (Modern Library). They had to, as the frightening potential of the new medium could not be digested, at least initially. [...] There are few writers today among those who write in the off-set idiom and all it implies. They do not fear the judgment of history because history cannot judge something that will not exist. And off-set is not supposed to exist after next Thursday, because then the new edition appears and the thoughts, observations, interpretations and conclusions of history are new again. The good writer today writes not with an awareness of history, but rather a disregard for history.⁴⁴

After his “Retirement Message,” as he moves his column from the *Free Press* to the *New York Review of Sex (NYRS)* in the spring of 1969, Battcock makes a project of figuring out how to “write in the off-set idiom and all it implies.” As Battcock explains in an essay on Les Levine’s short-lived underground, off-set paper *Culture Hero: A Fanzine of Stars of the Superworld*: “Levine, and to a lesser extent editors Sam Edwards (*New York Review of Sex*), Jeffery Shero (*RAT*), Jim Buckley (*Screw*), and Andy Warhol (*Interview*) exploited the unique and flexible graphic maneuvering that the off-set press and the IBM typesetting machinery made

⁴⁴ Battcock, “Art: My Retirement Message,” p. 13.

possible. Thus a new *genre* was born, emphasizing fast, loose design and fast, loose editorial structure.”⁴⁵

In 1969 through the '70s, Battcock enacts his own “polemical redefinition of artistic labor” that involves pulling Herbert Marcuse’s theories of Eros, Anti-Art, and Liberation down into the fray with all their contradictions and inconsistencies intact. Battcock’s redefinition of artistic labor rejects all of the AWC’s competing programs and paradigms in one fell swoop—it is a redefinition centered on pleasure, practice, and play, one that makes light of racist and misogynistic tropes rather than taking them seriously, and shrugs off the demands of “‘morality’ [...] ‘truth,’ ‘reputation,’ ‘career,’ etc.,”⁴⁶ as Battcock puts it in the *NYRS* in June 1969. Battcock’s redefinition of artistic labor picks “making it” with Puerto Rican guys over petitioning at MoMA any day of the week, with all of the pleasures and problems such a choice entails.

III. “Art in the One-Dimensional Society”

“Polymorphous sexuality” was the term which I used to indicate that the new direction of progress would depend completely on the opportunity to activate repressed or arrested *organic*, biological needs: to make the human body an instrument of pleasure rather than labor. The old formula, the development of prevailing needs and faculties, seemed to be inadequate; the emergence of new, qualitatively different needs and faculties seemed to be the prerequisite, the content of liberation. [...] Today the fight for life, the fight for Eros, is the *political* fight.

-Herbert Marcuse, “Political Preface 1966,” *Eros and Civilization*

⁴⁵ Gregory Battcock, “‘Culture Hero’: Truth and its Place in Journalism” in *Les Levine: Language ÷ Emotion + Syntax = Message*, catalogue published to accompany a Les Levine retrospective exhibition at The Vancouver Art Gallery, March 13 – April 14, 1974.

⁴⁶ Gregory Battcock, “The Last Estate,” *New York Review of Sex & Politics*, June 1, 1969, 17.

“In terms of day-to-day effect, Herbert Marcuse may be the most important philosopher alive,” proclaims a *New York Times* headline from October 27, 1968, by way of introducing a ten-page interview with the philosopher. “For countless young people,” the *Times* continues, “discontented, demonstrating or fulminating, on campus or in the streets, here and abroad, this 70-year-old scholar is the angel of the apocalypse. ‘Away with the world’s mess,’ his message seems to say. ‘Let us have a clean, revolutionary, new start.’”⁴⁷

Marcuse’s seminal book, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud*, first published in 1955, was reissued in 1966 with a new “Political Preface.” In *Eros and Civilization*, Marcuse famously advances a utopian vision for a regressive yet forward-looking polymorphous perversity, putting forward his own Freudian-Marxist solution to “a ‘political’ problem: the liberation of man from inhuman existential conditions.”⁴⁸ “The play impulse is the vehicle of this liberation,” Marcuse writes. “The impulse does not aim at playing ‘with’ something; rather it is the play of life itself, beyond want and external compulsion—the manifestation of an existence without fear and anxiety, and thus the manifestation of freedom itself.”⁴⁹ In this transformation of work into play, Marcuse envisions a “genuinely humane civilization” premised on “play rather than toil”⁵⁰—in which civilization manages to “undo the channeling of sexuality into monogamic reproduction and the taboo on perversions.”⁵¹ Marcuse writes,

With this restoration of the primary structure of sexuality, the primacy of the genital function is broke—as is the desexualization of the body which has accompanied this primacy. The organism in its entirety becomes the substratum of sexuality, while at the same time the instinct’s objective is no longer absorbed by

⁴⁷ Jean-Louis Ferrier, Jacques Boetsch, Francoise Giroud, and Herbert Marcuse, “Marcuse Defines his new Left Line,” *New York Times*, October 27, 1968, 30.

⁴⁸ Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (1955; repr., Boston: Beacon Press, 1966), 187.

⁴⁹ Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, 187.

⁵⁰ Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, 188.

⁵¹ Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, 199.

a specialized function—namely, that of bringing ‘one’s own genitals into contact with those of someone of the opposite sex.’ Thus enlarged, the field and objective of the instinct becomes the life of the organism itself. This process almost naturally, by its inner logic, suggests the conceptual transformation of sexuality into Eros.⁵²

However, by October 1968, Marcuse was pretty blunt in his public statements about the distinct unlikelihood of an actual (as opposed to “conceptual”) “transformation of sexuality into Eros”—which is to say, he was blunt about the impossibility of achieving down on the ground any type of “genuinely humane civilization” in which “the organism in its entirety becomes the substratum of sexuality.” In the *New York Times* interview, in response to the question, “Do you believe in the possibility of revolution in the United States?” Marcuse replies: “Absolutely not. Not at all.”⁵³ He continues, “the need to continue the competitive struggle for existence—the need to buy a new car every two years, the need to buy a new television set, the need to watch television five to six hours a day. This is already a vital need for a very large share of the population and it is an aggressive and repressive need.”⁵⁴

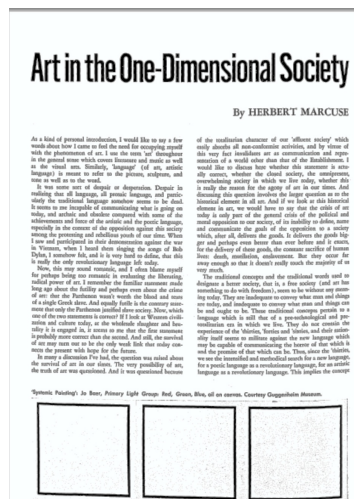


Fig. 3.8. Herbert Marcuse, “Art in the One Dimensional Society,” *Arts Magazine*, May 1967. Reproduction of Jo Baer, *Primary Light Group: Red, Green, Blue*, 1964-65, oil on canvas, triptych, each panel 152 x 152 cm, Museum of Modern Art.

⁵² Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, 205.

⁵³ Marcuse, “Marcuse Defines his new Left Line,” *New York Times*, 87.

⁵⁴ Marcuse, “Marcuse Defines his new Left Line,” *New York Times*, 87.

In May 1967, *Arts Magazine* published an essay by Marcuse titled “Art in the One-Dimensional Society” (Fig. 3.8), based on a lecture that Marcuse gave a few months prior at the School of Visual Arts organized by critic Dore Ashton. Marcuse asserts that it was “some sort of despair or desperation” that drove him to take up the “phenomenon of art”—“[d]espair in realizing that all language [...] somehow seems to be dead” given the “the totalitarian character of our ‘affluent society’ which easily absorbs all non-conformist activities, and by virtue of this very fact invalidates art as a communication and representation of a world other than that of the Establishment.”⁵⁵ According to Marcuse, art can resist by assuming a “new form and function”—one that is “consciously and methodically destructive, disorderly, negative, nonsense anti-art.”⁵⁶ “Anti-art” is accomplished “in terms of negation of the established system” and (eventually) the formation of a new system “of needs and satisfactions in which the aggressive, repressive, and exploitative instincts are subjugated to the sensuous assuasive energy of the life instincts.” The “end” of art, then, is the “imaginary realization of such a universe [...] without ever being able to reach it.” Marcuse lauds the aesthetic value of silence: “the silence of the picture and statue; the silence that permeates the tragedy; the silence in which the music is heard. Silence as medium of communication, the break with the familiar. [...] Noise is everywhere the companion of organized aggression. The narcissistic Eros, primary stage of all erotic and aesthetic energy, seeks above all tranquility.”⁵⁷

Marcuse’s 1967 “Art in the One-Dimensional Society” is a treatise still full of romantic language about art’s power to liberate civilization from the totalitarian character of the established capitalist system. Light on prescriptions or specifics, it offers more in the way of

⁵⁵ Herbert Marcuse, “Art in the One-Dimensional Society,” *Arts Magazine* 41 (May 1967): 26-31.

⁵⁶ Marcuse, “Art in the One-Dimensional Society,” 28.

⁵⁷ Marcuse, “Art in the One-Dimensional Society,” 29.

aspirational paradigms and optimistic platitudes. According to Marcuse, “it [art] could free the perception and sensibility needed for the transformation.” “And,” Marcuse continues, “once a social change has occurred, art, Form of the imagination, could guide the construction of the new society. And in as much as the aesthetic values are the non-aggressive values par excellence, art as technology and technique would also imply the emergence of a new rationality in the construction of a free society, that is, the emergence of new modes and goals of technical progress itself.”⁵⁸ Who wouldn’t want that?

In their book *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (1999), Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello note that the “utterly unexpected success in France of [Marcuse’s] *One-Dimensional Man*—initially published in a small print run in the months preceding the May events, but then reprinted many times to meet demand—marked the high point, followed by a rapid decline, of this critique of inauthenticity [as a massification and standardization of persons].”⁵⁹ They write,

In effect, we find in Marcuse an opposition between a free consciousness, capable of knowing its own desires, and the man of “advanced industrial civilization,” “cretinized” and “standardized” by mass production and “comfort,” rendered incapable of acceding to the immediate experience of the world, wholly subject to needs manipulated by others.

Capitalism’s response to the intense demand for differentiation and demassification that marked the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s was to internalize it.⁶⁰

This Marcuseian “artistic critique” of capitalism, of course, then “failed,” as Boltanski and Chiapello write, “inasmuch as the liberation of desire has not sounded the death knell of capitalism, as heralded by Freudo-Marxism between the 1930s and the 1970s.”⁶¹ According to Boltanski and Chiapello, one response to this failure is conservative retrenchment: “one can

⁵⁸ Marcuse, “Art in the One-Dimensional Society,” 29.

⁵⁹ Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Gregroy Elliott (New York and London: Verso, 2005; first published in French in 1999): 441.

⁶⁰ Boltanski and Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, 441.

⁶¹ Boltanski and Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, 467.

register capitalism's ability to 'recuperate' anything and everything," they write, thereby "demonstrating a 'lucidity' presented as the only posture still worth adopting in the face of the impending apocalypse (in a tone that often recalls the catastrophist prophecies of the Weimar avant-gardes preceding and heralding the conservative revolution)." They continue,

One can announce the end of all value, and even of any reality (the domination of the virtual), the entry into an age of nihilism, and at the same time, in a rather paradoxical gesture, once again don the aristocratic but utterly threadbare garb of the lampoonist, the solitary 'conscience' confronting the cretinized masses. One can then steel oneself in reactionary nostalgia for an idealized past, with its warm human communities (as opposed to individualist isolation), its freely consensual discipline, often dubbed 'republican' (as opposed to educational anarchy and the disorder of the suburbs), its genuine and honest love (as against indiscriminate sexuality), its easel-painting (as against the installation of any old thing), its long-lost landscapes, its solid fare, its country produce, and so on.

To escape from this dead end, perhaps the artistic critique should, to a greater extent than is currently the case, take the time to reformulate the issues of liberation and authenticity, starting from the new forms of oppression it unwittingly helped to make possible.⁶²

As early as the summer of 1969, as we will see, Battcock begins to develop in his writing a sense that the Marcuseian project to liberate "the sensuous assuasive energy of the life instincts" from the "totalitarian character" of "one-dimensional society"⁶³ fails, and that (at least in the guise of Marcuse himself) such failure ends in conservative retrenchment—a "reactionary nostalgia" for "easel-painting." The question becomes: How does Battcock cope with the need "to escape from this dead end," as he begins to come to terms with it in the summer and the autumn of 1969? And then, what resources might Battcock's writings from that time offer in terms of a project to "take the time to reformulate the issues of liberation and authenticity"?—even if Battcock never succeeds fully in doing that himself. In the early '70s, Battcock opts instead to embrace "a slavish devotion to a neo-capitalistic pleasure principle" and "a remarkable

⁶² Boltanski and Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, 467-8.

⁶³ Marcuse, "Art in the One-Dimensional Society," 28.

commitment to consumerism,”⁶⁴ as he writes in 1972, and to level his own critique in the guise of parodies and pretenses that offer much more in the way of nihilistic indulgence than critique.

VI. Marcuse and Anti-Art (in two parts)

Battcock turns his attention to Marcuse in the summer of 1969, following the publication of *An Essay on Liberation*, which includes many of Marcuse’s sentiments from his 1967 lecture/essay “Art in the One-Dimensional Society.” In fact, Marcuse begins *An Essay on Liberation* by acknowledging its belatedness—noting that it is based on “lectures delivered in recent years” and “was written before the events of May and June 1968 in France.”⁶⁵

In an article titled “Marcuse and Anti-Art,” published in the summer 1969 issue of *Arts Magazine*, Battcock gloms onto Marcuse’s optimism and presents it to the art world—even though that optimism had already begun to crack in Marcuse’s interviews in the popular press. “Marcuse and Anti-Art” is one of Battcock’s most earnest pieces of writing. According to Battcock, Marcuse labels as “anti-art” those artworks that “have been created within the modern culture that best conform to the requirements for total revolutionary change,”⁶⁶ but as Battcock points out, Marcuse does not explain what anti-art actually is or give any examples of work that might fit the criteria. Battcock thus sets out to “explore some of the possibilities for ‘anti-art’.” He suggests that “the new underground ‘sex’ papers that have recently emerged upon the newsstands” might be considered “a genuine ‘anti-art’ agent.”⁶⁷ Unlike the “traditional sex oriented tabloids,” the new pornzines (including *NYRS* and *Screw*) view “sexual matters as

⁶⁴ Gregory Battcock, “The Last Estate,” *GAY*, January 24, 1972. Gregory Battcock papers, 1952-circa 1980. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

⁶⁵ Herbert Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), ix.

⁶⁶ Gregory Battcock, “Marcuse and Anti-Art,” *Arts Magazine* 43, no. 8 (Summer 1969): 17-19.

⁶⁷ Battcock, Marcuse and Anti-Art,” 17.

outside the sphere of morality guilt,” Battcock writes. “They do not accept the established definition of ‘obscenity’ and their editors publicly subscribe to Marcuse’s dictum that ‘Obscenity is a moral concept in the verbal arsenal of the establishment, which abuses the term by applying it, not to expressions of its own morality but to those of another.’”⁶⁸

“At any rate,” Battcock writes in the pages of *Arts Magazine*, “it is clear that something is happening even if we don’t know what it is.” He continues,

The activation of the imagination found within the new morality and reflected within the new press (and more generally, the new left) has apparently broken through the rigid framework of capitalist repression and it clearly is experiencing new freedom. Perversion and subversion, once taboo subjects for serious, practical speculation are now legitimate areas for moral investigation. [...] In order for a statement to be awarded the “anti-art” label such a statement must in some way, demand (require) a change in prevailing receptive capabilities. Therefore, it must not only be difficult to accept as art, but *it must be unacceptable as art*. The assumption is that only the work that is unacceptable is capable of forcing a readjustment, a change, a disruption, a revolution of those capacities and faculties that ultimately determine the meaning and effectiveness for the individual of all information received.⁶⁹

The films of Andy Warhol also make the “anti-art” cut—in fact, they are the only example Battcock offers “of an aesthetic provocation that is legitimately entitled to the ‘anti-art’ label that comes from within the art field.” According to Battcock, Warhol’s films “do not accommodate themselves to the commercial structure and procedures for cinema”—they are “too boring, too ridiculous, just plain stupid [...] too ‘outrageous’ and ‘indecent.’”⁷⁰ Other recent “art trends” that, according to Battcock, “only partially succumb to ‘anti-art’ tendencies yet remain establishment art” include “Pop Art, and its apparent social implications, ‘Junk’ and ‘Assemblage’ Art that discarded the word ‘fine’ and offered instead ‘brut’ (at least materially)

⁶⁸ Battcock, Marcuse and Anti-Art,” 18.

⁶⁹ Battcock, “Marcuse and Anti-Art,” 18. Emphasis original.

⁷⁰ Battcock, “Marcuse and Anti-Art,” 18.

and Minimal Art that rejected illusion and encouraged the factual and real as opposed to the expressionistic.”⁷¹

Overall, “Marcuse and Anti-Art” conveys Battcock’s romantic faith in the “awesome responsibility” Marcuse gives to artists, and his abstract hope that the artists will get there eventually. Battcock proclaims, “Unless the artist, who is handed an awesome responsibility by Marcuse—the responsibility to structure the new sensibility—meets his new role of technological, cultural and political subversion thoroughly and with a keen understanding of the dangers and criticism that will inevitably fall his way, he cannot hope to remain a relevant factor determining the direction of the revolution and the very environment of real freedom.”⁷²

* * *

Around the time Battcock’s “Marcuse and Anti-Art” was published in the summer of 1969, two things happened. First, Battcock attended a lecture by Marcuse at the Guggenheim Museum titled “Art as Form of Reality” as part of a lecture series titled *On the Future of Art*.⁷³ Second, Battcock met Marcuse on a summer trip to Cannes, France. In an interview with John Perrault, published in *Culture Hero*, Perrault asks Battcock, “You recently had an article in *Arts* about anti-art, with particular emphasis on the thoughts of Marcuse. Didn’t you meet Marcuse this past summer?” According to the transcript, Battcock replies,

Yes. I wrote the article and then I met Marcuse. It turned out I was completely wrong in my article. I took Marcuse’s theories and I led them to their inevitable conclusions. But at least when it comes to art, in other words, Marcuse is a total reactionary. He knows nothing. He’s just an... He has old-fashioned conservative taste. He likes paintings of flowers and things.⁷⁴

⁷¹ Battcock, “Marcuse and Anti-Art,” 19.

⁷² Battcock, “Marcuse and Anti-Art,” 19.

⁷³ See Herbert Marcuse, “Art as Form of Reality” in *On the Future of Art: Sponsored by the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum*, ed. Edward Fry (New York: The Viking Press, 1970), 123-134.

⁷⁴ Gregory Battcock and John Perrault, “Interview with G. Babcock [sic.],” *Culture Hero*, vol. 1 no. 2 (n.d.), 11.

* * *

Battcock sets the record straight in *Arts Magazine* in November 1969, with a follow-up article titled “Marcuse and Anti-Art II.” At the end of the article, Battcock puts the matter bluntly: “In the above notes I have attempted to demonstrate that Marcuse’s theories concerning society are considerably different than one might have expected. His thoughts concerning Anti-Art and Living-Art, once they are understood, must be challenged. They are certainly at odds with the artistic theories of the radical artists and critics of our time.”⁷⁵

Battcock moves methodically through the text of Marcuse’s 1969 Guggenheim lecture to refute point-by-point the “somewhat claustrophobic dilemma”⁷⁶ Marcuse sets for art. Marcuse’s title “Art as Form of Reality” envisions a new reality brought into being *as* and *by* Art. Indeed, Marcuse writes that “if Art is still to be anything at all, it must be real, part and parcel of life—but of a life which is itself the conscious negation of the established way of life.”⁷⁷ But this aim is “self-defeating,”⁷⁸ according to Marcuse, because “in this universe, the work of art, as well as anti-art, becomes *exchange* value, commodity.”⁷⁹ Marcuse elaborates, “Art cannot become reality, cannot realize itself without cancelling itself as Art in *all* its forms, even in its most destructive, most minimal, most ‘living’ forms.” Unless, of course, “*reality itself* tends toward Art as reality’s own Form, that is to say, in the course of a revolution, with the emergence of a free society.”⁸⁰

* * *

⁷⁵ Gregory Battcock, “Marcuse and Anti-Art II,” *Arts Magazine* 44, no. 2 (November 1969): 20-22.

⁷⁶ Battcock, “Marcuse and Anti-Art II,” 20.

⁷⁷ Marcuse, “Art as Form of Reality,” 124.

⁷⁸ Marcuse, “Art as Form of Reality,” 131. Marcuse writes, for example, “I believe the aim of the ‘new art’ is self-defeating because it retains, and must retain, no matter how ‘minimally,’ the Form of Art as different from nonart, and it is the Art-Form itself which frustrates the intention to reduce or even annul this difference, to make Art ‘real,’ ‘living.’”

⁷⁹ Marcuse, “Art as Form of Reality,” 125.

⁸⁰ Marcuse, “Art as Form of Reality,” 131.

“What then is the legitimate function of the authentic avant-garde today?” Battcock asks in his article. “Why are ‘anti-art’ and ‘living art’ self-defeating?”⁸¹ Without offering definitive answers, Battcock elucidates how disappointing Marcuse’s responses to those questions seem. According to Marcuse, the “authentic *oeuvres*, the true avant-garde of our time, far from obscuring this distance, far from playing down alienation, *enlarge* it, and harden their incompatibility with the given reality”—“In other more brutal words,” Marcuse writes, “Art is not (or is not supposed to be) a use-value to be consumed in the course of the daily performances of men; its utility is of a transcendent kind, utility for the soul or the mind which does not enter the normal behavior of men and does not really change it—except for just that short period of elevation, the cultured holiday.”⁸²

“Brutal words indeed,” Battcock affirms. The notion of “the cultured holiday” could hardly be farther from Battcock’s own ambitions for “the new underground ‘sex’ papers” to become a “genuine” Marcuseian “anti-art” that could “demand (require) a change in prevailing receptive capabilities,” as Battcock writes in *Arts Magazine* back in June.⁸³ Or, as Battcock put the matter to John Perrault, “Marcuse is a total reactionary. He knows nothing.”⁸⁴ According to Battcock, Marcuse leaves art in an impossible bind. “Thus the case for Anti-Art looks pretty hopeless,” Battcock concludes. “Marcuse’s attack is serious and well founded—the Anti-Art, Conceptual and *Arte Povera* artists will have to confront this first assault upon their social commitment and aesthetic integrity.”⁸⁵

* * *

⁸¹ Battcock, “Marcuse and Anti-Art II,” 20.

⁸² Marcuse, “Art as Form of Reality,” 126.

⁸³ Battcock, “Marcuse and Anti-Art,” 17.

⁸⁴ Gregory Battcock and John Perrault, “Interview with G. Babcock [sic.],” *Culture Hero*, vol. 1 no. 2 (n.d.), 11.

⁸⁵ Battcock, “Marcuse and Anti-Art II,” 22.

Battcock's about-face on Marcuse—from extolling the “awesome responsibility” Marcuse hands artists to proclaiming that artists should fight back against Marcuse’s “assault upon their social commitment and aesthetic integrity”—happened remarkably quickly, over the course of just a few months from June to November, 1969. Battcock's about-face also coincides exactly with the formation and consolidation of the new post-Stonewall gay liberation movement. The history is well-known (to the point that it has become a kind of folklore⁸⁶), but in brief: in the wee-hours of the morning on June 28, 1969, police raids at the mafia-run Stonewall Inn incited three days of riots and protests in Sheridan Square, accompanied by headlines in New York's newspapers like “Gay Power Hits Back” (*Village Voice*) and “Homo Nest Raided, Queen Bees are Stinging Mad” (*New York Daily News*).⁸⁷ After that initial eruption, the Gay Liberation Front (GLF) was founded in July 1969. And following that, a number of competing underground movement papers hit newsstands in quick succession in the fall of '69, including *Gay Power* (an offshoot of *East Village Other* and *Kiss*, first published September 15, 1969), and then a month later *Come Out!* (the GLF's paper, first published November 14th), and *GAY* (an offshoot of *Screw*, first published November 15th) (**Fig. 3.9**).

⁸⁶ See, Elizabeth A. Armstrong and Suzanna M. Crage, “Movements and Memory: The Making of the Stonewall Myth,” *American Sociological Review* 71, no. 5 (October 2006): 724-51.

⁸⁷ See, for example, Terence Kissack, “Freaking Fag Revolutionaries: New York's Gay Liberation Front, 1969-1971,” *Radical History Review* 62 (1995): 104-34, and Richard Meyer, “Gay Power Circa 1970: Visual Strategies for Sexual Revolution,” *GLQ* 12, no. 3 (2006): 441-64.



Fig. 3.9. The new underground Gay Liberation Movement papers. L- *Gay Power* vol. 1, no. 1, September 15, 1969; Center- *Come Out* vol. 1, no. 1, November 15, 1969; R- *Gay* vol. 1, no. 2, September 22, 1969.

At the same moment Battcock was reckoning with the realization that “Marcuse is a total reactionary” who “knows nothing,” he was also witnessing his own prediction for a “genuine” Marcuseian “anti-art” come to fruition—given the explosion of new possibilities for “[p]erversion and subversion” in the fall of 1969 within this brand new wave of explicitly gay “underground ‘sex’ papers” founded to fill the new space and needs created by the burgeoning gay liberation movement.⁸⁸ Battcock chronicles all of this—his conflicted hope for a Marcuseian “anti-art” and his disillusionment with Marcuse’s paradigm of liberation, as well as his thoughts on the new gay liberation movement and what it all means for art and the art world—in his “The Last Estate” columns for *The New York Review of Sex*, which, in the wake of Stonewall, changed its name to *The New York Review of Sex & Politics* before it folded at the end of 1969 and Battcock moved his “The Last Estate” column over to *GAY*.

It is worth pointing out that Battcock was, as it turns out, pretty spot-on in his expressions of disappointment in Marcuse’s disconnect from (even contempt for) radical practice happening

⁸⁸ Quotes from, Battcock, Marcuse and Anti-Art,” 17.

on the ground—within art, protest, gay liberation, and, most importantly for Battcock, in the undefined, “anti-” spaces outside and between those genres where the real liberatory, unacceptable-to-the-Establishment stuff happens. Some of the disillusionment Battcock expressed circa-’69 ended up being borne out in the writings of subsequent activists and critics. For example, in 1972 Jerald Moldenhauer, founder of Canada’s first gay paper *The Body Politic*, writes: “It is distressing to learn that Marcuse apparently considers our movement to be so insignificant as to escape his 1971 writings. Especially since many gay activists find such a strong ideological base in *Eros and Civilization*.” “Perhaps our day is yet to come,” Moldenhauer continues, “and even that great sage of political philosophers will respond to the ideas and actions of our revolutionary struggle.”⁸⁹ Thirty-five years later, in his book *The Reification of Desire: Toward a Queer Marxism* (2009), Kevin Floyd puts the matter in similar terms: “Marcuse is ultimately more interested in utopian, speculative figures of perversion than he is in real perverts.”⁹⁰ Floyd argues that within just “a decade of *Eros and Civilization*’s publication [...] Marcuse abandoned what was, finally, a more or less exclusively figural, speculative, impractical emphasis on the liberatory potential of the sexual reification of the body.” Floyd continues, “This abandonment becomes deeply ironic when one considers the collective effort, simultaneous with this backing away, to translate Marcuse’s erotic speculations into political action by at least one strain of New Left activism, the gay liberation movement.”⁹¹

Battcock’s “The Last Estate” columns provide a chronicle of the strange, uneven ways this “deeply ironic” abandonment by Marcuse resonated on the ground in the real, lived historical time of gay liberation. But rather than focusing overmuch on Marcuse’s abandonment,

⁸⁹ Jerald Moldenhauer, “Marcuse and the Gay Revolution,” *Body Politic*, Issue 6 (Autumn 1972), 9.

⁹⁰ Kevin Floyd, *The Reification of Desire: Toward a Queer Marxism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 139.

⁹¹ Floyd, *The Reification of Desire*, 122.

Battcock goes his own way beginning around August 1969—assembling and advancing his own kind of pseudo-Marcuseian “anti-” practice (or “quiticism”) focused on trivial, homoerotic, sensual, gossipy, unacceptable-to-everyone, fuck-off-I’m-having-fun sorts of things: food, wine, travel, and sex. Going intentionally against the grain of Marcuse’s conceptual argument, Battcock transforms Marcuse’s Freudian-Marxist theory for a regressive-yet-forward-looking “polymorphous perversity” into his own form of perverse practice: “to make the human body an instrument of pleasure rather than labor” ...but really to do it.

* * *

Battcock’s first “The Last Estate” column, published in the *NYRS* on June 1, 1969, coincides with the publication of his first “Marcuse and Anti-Art” article for *Arts Magazine* (**Fig. 3.10**). It conveys some of the same faith in the “awesome responsibility” Marcuse gives to artists, and confidence that the “the new underground ‘sex’ papers” might be “a genuine ‘anti-art’ agent.”⁹² Recall, Battcock begins that column: “This is a new column which will run as long as my interest in it lasts, or the paper gets busted.” He continues,

Things like *East Village Other*, *Rat*, *New York Free Press* aren’t really anti-establishment papers, because they subscribe to major demands that the establishment insists upon. One of these demands is “morality,” and along with it we find “truth,” “reputation,” “career,” etc. Before this column gets too fucked up, these are the points I will stick to:

1. New York Review of Sex
2. Morality and Herbert Marcuse
3. Jill Johnston, modern criticism, and miscellaneous notes.⁹³

⁹² Battcock, “Marcuse and Anti-Art,” 17.

⁹³ Gregory Battcock, “The Last Estate,” *New York Review of Sex & Politics* (June 1, 1969): 17.



Fig. 3.10. Gregory Battcock, “The Last Estate,” *New York Review of Sex & Politics*, June 1, 1969, 17. Gregory Battcock papers, 1952-circa 1980. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.



Fig. 3.11. Gregory Battcock, “The Last Estate,” *New York Review of Sex*, June 15, 1969, 17. Gregory Battcock papers, 1952-circa 1980. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.



Fig. 3.12. Gregory Battcock, “The Last Estate,” *New York Review of Sex*, July 1, 1969, p. 17. Gregory Battcock papers, 1952-circa 1980. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

In next two “The Last Estate” columns published June 15 and July 1, 1969, Battcock does pretty much that—then, it seems, the column does indeed get “too fucked up” (**Figs. 3.11-3.12**). In terms of Battcock’s entire oeuvre, these first three “The Last Estate” columns offer some of the richest resources for devising creative ways to move around and work within the “somewhat claustrophobic dilemma”⁹⁴ Battcock identifies. That is, the dilemma represented by Marcuse’s conservative retrenchment in simply registering “capitalism’s ability to ‘recuperate’ anything and everything”⁹⁵—or as Marcuse’s writes: “in this universe, the work of art, as well as anti-art, becomes *exchange* value, commodity.”⁹⁶ It is telling that Battcock composes these three columns during an in-between time, as he is coming to terms with a sense that “Marcuse is a

⁹⁴ Battcock, “Marcuse and Anti-Art II,” 20.

⁹⁵ Boltanski and Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, 467.

⁹⁶ Marcuse, “Art as Form of Reality,” 125.

total reactionary,” but before he consolidates and solidifies his own strategy of embracing “a slavish devotion to a neo-capitalistic pleasure principle”⁹⁷ that entails pursuing “trivia, the banal and the obvious,” as he puts it in *Arts Magazine* in November 1970.⁹⁸ In the space between Marcuse’s prescription for an art that is “consciously and methodically destructive, disorderly, negative, nonsense anti-art”⁹⁹ on the one hand, and Marcuse’s disregard for actual constructive practice on the other, Battcock begins to develop his own new criteria by which to describe and evaluate the most important “anti-art” happening down on the ground—which is another way of saying the most important *art* happening down on the ground.

Battcock identifies Jill Johnston as the foremost exponent of “anti-art” and of “anti-criticism”—without any clear demarcation between the two, which is the point. As Battcock writes in his 1970 introduction to *Marmalade Me*: “So Johnston introduced, by her writings, a new vision for criticism *without apology*, and for criticism claiming its own identification in the world of artistic expressions. [...] A major discovery by Jill Johnston is, simply, that criticism is a unique form that does not necessarily depend upon another specific object or phenomenon for its own existence and worth.”¹⁰⁰ At the end of his first “The Last Estate” column, Battcock proclaims,

What someone has to do is get out of all these identifications and categories but only Jill Johnston so far as I know, has really been able to do it. Its [sic.] very hard. Nobody wants you to do it. [...] Jill can do it because she’s smart and has learned to stop listening to what people say. Her work, which I think is criticism, doesn’t fit into any existent definition of criticism and that’s what makes it the best criticism around today.¹⁰¹

⁹⁷ Gregory Battcock, “The Last Estate,” *GAY*, January 24, 1972. Gregory Battcock papers, 1952-circa 1980. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

⁹⁸ Gregory Battcock, “A la Recherche du Temps Trivial,” *Arts Magazine* (November 1970): 40-41.

⁹⁹ Marcuse, “Art in the One-Dimensional Society,” 28.

¹⁰⁰ Battcock, “Introduction,” *Marmalade Me*, 10-11.

¹⁰¹ Battcock, “The Last Estate,” June 1, 1969.

“Jill isn’t nearly as fucked up as some people who read her column think she is,” Battcock asserts in his second “The Last Estate” column, published June 15th. He writes,

Today’s critic isn’t nearly so sure of himself. Subjectivity is tolerated. In art criticism, like in everything else, the formal procedures are questioned and, usually found wanting. So what is today’s critic doing? Criticism, be it artistic, literary, music or dance is nothing like it used to be. Who are the new critics? What does this new view mean? How is it related to art, and politics, and culture? The whole thing is really a mess. It’s extremely difficult to figger [sic.] out. Well something is happening and nobody is interested in finding out what it is I’m afraid. Everybody says they want to know but all they really want is to tell you how wrong you are.

For various reasons, the new criticism is, today best represented by Jill Johnston in her column “Dance Journal” which runs in the VOICE. [...] She comes to criticism from an extremely thorough background. She has been through the critical mill and comes out on top. Them that are fucked up are, as usual, them assistant professors again who can’t stand any authoritative assault against their precious conventions—conventions that simply mark them as the “kept intellectuals” they are.¹⁰²

For his third “The Last Estate” column, Battcock writes an extended analysis of his participation on the “Disintegration of a Critic: An Analysis of Jill Johnston” panel discussion. Laying out some criteria for “a panel that really is ridiculous” (which, according to Battcock is hard to do, since all panels are pretty much ridiculous) Battcock writes: “It has to be serious, have overtones of respectability. It has to be somewhat pompous, yet good taste dictates that, even if it is intended according to new, post-liberation values that don’t exist yet include an outrageous mixture—unbelievable, unconventional, esoteric.”¹⁰³

“This then is what anti-criticism is,” Battcock proclaims near the end of the column. He writes,

Today, the new artist must produce “anti-art”—that is art works that are so opposed to the values and terminology of the mainstream of Western artistic tradition that they cannot be accommodated [sic.] within the existing institutions;

¹⁰² Battcock, “The Last Estate,” June 15, 1969.

¹⁰³ Battcock, “The Last Estate,” July 1, 1969.

the prevailing values and criteria don't apply. In order to be awarded the "anti-art" label, these works must require different receptive faculties on the part of the observer; receptive faculties that for the most part haven't been developed yet. Obviously there is a problem. How can one even recognize anti-art when you see it. Well, usually you can't. As a matter of fact, it might well be the first criterion—at any rate a criterion for this time and place for art—that it not be recognizable, identifiable, that we not know it when we see it. That is, not know it's ART when we see it. Anti-art works must not only be difficult to accept as art, but they must be unacceptable as art. The anti-art notion doesn't stop with art, of course. All communicative forms must develop a negative, or "anti" expression. We must have "anti-journalism," which should not be recognized as journalism in any traditional definition of the term, an anti-fourth estate. And anti-criticism.

An "anti-art" must develop as it must accompany and more than that, it must create an over-all environment of true freedom. This is terribly important. It will meet with tremendous opposition—everybody thinks Jill Johnston is a quack, everybody respectable that is. [...] The new obstructionists delaying the advent of revolution will come from a class that, up until now, supported art, artistic freedom and has encouraged artistic license. However since "anti-art", (like "anti-journalism" and "anti-criticism") neither depends upon nor even cares about any of such traditional freedoms permitted within the capitalist class system. [...]

The anti-worker has to liberate himself from prevailing terminology, classifications and categorizations. In criticism (quiticism) only Jill Johnston and Gene Swenson have, so far, been able to do it. In Journalism SCREW, N.Y.R.S., GOTHIC BLIMP WORKS, OTHER SCENES have done it.

In art the "conceptual artists have done it, so has Ann Wilson. In book publishing Walter Gutman has done it. "Anti-Cinema" comes from Warhol, "anti-music" comes from John Cage.¹⁰⁴

* * *

In these three columns, Battcock assembles resources to move around and work within the "somewhat claustrophobic dilemma" in which "the work of art, as well as anti-art, becomes *exchange value, commodity.*"¹⁰⁵ One resource is "the new underground 'sex' papers" themselves. The idea here is that in the fleeting period while they are still "new"—before they either get busted, fold, or become acceptable and predictable—the sex papers furnish fragile, provisional spaces for artistic critiques that address "new obstructionists" and new forms of

¹⁰⁴ Battcock, "The Last Estate," July 1, 1969.

¹⁰⁵ Marcuse, "Art as Form of Reality," 125.

oppression in ways that are not immediately recuperable (as art, exchange value, etc.). These off-set papers—with their emphasis on “fast, loose design and fast, loose editorial structure,”¹⁰⁶ as Battcock writes—furnish platforms for artistic critiques that cannot quite be internalized by capitalism, at least not instantly, because they do not cohere well enough; or because they are too embarrassing, raunchy, or confessional; or because they are “too boring, too ridiculous, just plain stupid” (as Battcock writes of Warhol’s “anti-art” films); or any combination of these things.

Battcock also then turns to Johnston in search of creative resources for moving around and working within the dilemma. He dwells on the fact that Johnston manages to sustain her practice for so long in an unresolved state—that her work “doesn’t fit into any existent definition of criticism and that’s what makes it the best criticism around today.”¹⁰⁷ At the end of 1969, as Battcock moves his “The Last Estate” column from the *NYRS* to *GAY*, he establishes a new formula for the column that takes a lot of its cues from Johnston’s “Dance Journal.” Battcock adopts hallmarks of Johnston’s style: word play, first-person address, stream of consciousness rambling, and repetition. Like Johnston, he furnishes an ongoing chronicle of his daily encounters—where he goes, how he gets there, who he meets, who he fucks, and what he eats—full of gossipy tidbits about himself and the artists and critics in his circle. He peppers his columns with lines like, “What I’m trying to say, before I am accused, once again, by readers who, silly geese everyone of them imagine I’m imitating the great Jill Johnston, is that no matter where you are, there is some fool around who’ll remind you of home.”¹⁰⁸

However, Battcock also departs from Johnston in fundamental ways. In response to the “somewhat claustrophobic dilemma” that Battcock diagnoses, in which art can feel impossible,

¹⁰⁶ Gregory Battcock, “‘Culture Hero’: Truth and its Place in Journalism.”

¹⁰⁷ Battcock, “The Last Estate,” (June 1, 1969), p. 17.

¹⁰⁸ Gregory Battcock, “The Last Estate,” *GAY*, September 28, 1970, 13. Gregory Battcock papers, 1952-circa 1980. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Johnston “trawls the darkness of [her] inner life”¹⁰⁹ (to return to Jacqueline Rose’s formulation) in search of the resources to keep working. “It’s *always* a dilemma,” Johnston writes in March, 1971. Writing inside that dilemma, Johnston sustains tensions between her “literary ambition” and her “cause concerns”; between getting a “masterpiece seizure” and the need to “work very hard for a structural coup”; and, most importantly, between “collecting all of my selves that I can raise to consciousness in the shape of current experiences,” as she writes, and fixing them down “into some form of literary energy.”¹¹⁰ Battcock writes from an altogether more stable place; he does not sustain these kinds of generative tensions. Rather than trawling his inner life for resources to keep working, Battcock trawls the world in search of trivial things—“A la Recherche du Temps Trivial,” as he put it in the title of an *Arts Magazine* article published November, 1970 (his final follow up, I think, to “Marcuse and Anti-Art II”). Battcock proclaims, “Art is high, sex low, etc. Why should it be?” He writes,

Warhol, having sanctified the image of the Dollar Bill, the Coke Bottle and the Electric Chair in art—having placed these representations on a place with *St. Theresa* and her Ecstasy, *Mona Lisa* and her Smile and *Guernica* and its entirely Dissipated Political Plea, revealed the hypocrisy of the social system of art. Now Warhol will discover the communicative potential of trivia, and the meaning of the least common denominator.

What is the lowest common denominator? Have we really hit rock bottom? Let us rediscover trivia, the banal and the obvious.¹¹¹

* * *

After his disillusionment with Marcuse, and in the wake of the Stonewall Riots with the founding of the new gay papers, Battcock adopts a cynical stance toward the Marcuseian artistic critique of capitalism that calls for the liberation of “the sensuous assuasive energy of the life

¹⁰⁹ Rose, *Women in Dark Times*, 2.

¹¹⁰ Johnston, *Lesbian Nation*, 140.

¹¹¹ Gregory Battcock, “A la Recherche du Temps Trivial,” *Arts Magazine* (November 1970): 40-41.

instincts” (Eros) from the “aggressive, repressive, and exploitative” requirements of one-dimensional society.¹¹² He also adopts a cynical stance toward organized political activism. “We shouldn’t make compromises anymore I don’t think,” Battcock writes in a “The Last Estate” column published August 16, 1969—written in the aftermath of Stonewall, in the midst of a “truly open season on homosexuals,” as Battcock puts it, with “cops harassing homosexuals as usual.” “[I]n Queens,” Battcock continues, “by sitting there letting the pigs chop down the trees—lord knows what had gone on during the months preceding [sic] the tree choppings [...] how many people molested and beat up by the pigs; how many people were murdered I wonder? And what did the cops do, nothing of course.”¹¹³ But when it comes to the question of political activism, Battcock loosely advocates a kind of hands-off approach: let the whole thing go to shit so people will show their true colors, and then everyone else might get jolted out of complacency. “We need public figures that are repressive, reactionary and that cater to the home owners in Queens,” Battcock writes. “Only then can those reactionary elements that subscribe to quantitative rather than qualitative change be forced out into the open, so we can see who they are and do something about them.” He proclaims, “Rather no freedom, since half freedom is stupid. You can’t do anything. With half freedom we can’t move forward, instead we are stuck with the kept intellectuals constantly bewailing censorship, and trying to decide what is the difference between freedom and license, or some shit.”¹¹⁴

¹¹² Marcuse, “Art in the One-Dimensional Society,” 28.

¹¹³ Gregory Battcock, “The Last Estate: Queens in Queens,” *The New York Review of Sex*, August 16, 1969, 21. Battcock is referring to an incident in Queens in which, according to an article in the *New York Times*, a “vigilante committee” of 30 to 40 men had been set up in the neighborhood to “harass the homosexuals” in the park at night. The article quotes a woman as saying “Yeah, the vigs [sic.] would go out at night and pick on the fags until the fags couldn’t take it any more,” and then they chopped down the trees in an act of vandalism with no repercussions from the police.

See, David Bird, “Trees in a Queens Park Cut Down as Vigilantes Harass Homosexuals,” *New York Times* (July 1, 1969): 1, 29.

¹¹⁴ Battcock, “The Last Estate: Queens in Queens,” 27.

Without a high degree of rigor, Battcock calls out everyone's depravity and hypocrisy: the cops and the "pigs," of course, but also the "traditional liberal class" for maintaining the status quo with their squabbly, myopic infighting. So rather than engage with that "shit," Battcock becomes a "guru in search of the trivial," as he writes. In a "The Last Estate" column published in *GAY* on May 24, 1971, Battcock explains, in a parenthetical aside:

In case the reader wonders, I see MY contribution to society as being something of a 'guru in search of the trivial.' Largely due to my viewpoint concerning leisure time and how to kill it in the most efficient *profitable* way possible—as long as 'profit' has nothing to do with the capitalistic 'profit motive' and nothing to do with production of objects and possession of things but rather, in the Marxist view, profit in the experiences that exist without object, or in sensual experience of objects that cease to exist upon consumption (food, sex, wine).¹¹⁵

The way Battcock responds to the apparent failure of Marcuse's call for the liberation of Eros from repressive demands of one-dimensional society by embarking on a search for the trivial is, of course, problematic—there's no way around that. Battcock pushes the most problematic parts of his practice up to the surface—at times, it seems, as a middle finger (of sorts) aimed at the "kept intellectuals" and "traditional liberal class," with their the status-quo-maintaining, incessant hand-wringing, as Battcock sees it.

Take, for example, a pair of black-and-white photographs of Battcock with a man (teenager?) Battcock identifies variously as "José," his "research assistant," and his "houseboy"—one photo is located in Battcock's papers at Archives of American Art, and the other is at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, in the archive of Battcock's friend and fellow critic David Bourdon (**Figs. 3.13–3.14**). Bourdon took both photos at Battcock's apartment in May, 1971 (according to the date penciled on the back of the New York photo), as

¹¹⁵ Gregory Battcock, "The Last Estate," *GAY*, May 24, 1971. Gregory Battcock papers, 1952-circa 1980. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This quote is also reproduced in Joseph Grigely, "Introduction: The Battcock Factor," 3

part of a series of photos of Battcock and José staging various domestic scenarios with Battcock clothed and José completely naked. In another photo, Jose pours wine for Battcock—Bourdon’s penciled caption on the back of the photo reads, “Gregory Battcock dining at home, served by houseboy José” (**Fig. 3.15**). In other photos, José hands Battcock the telephone and Battcock sweeps the floor as José lounges on the sofa. Throughout the early 1970s, Battcock regularly used photos from the series to illustrate his “The Last Estate” column in *GAY* (**Fig. 3.16**).



Fig. 3.13. Photo of José and Battcock, May 1971. Photo by David Bourdon. Gregory Battcock papers, 1952-circa 1980. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.



Fig. 3.14. Photo of José and Battcock, May 1971. Photo by David Bourdon. David Bourdon Correspondence, 1952-1957. The Museum of Modern Art Archives.

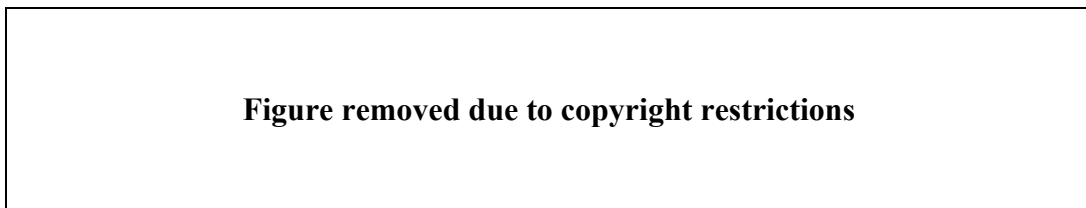


Fig. 3.15. Photo of José and Battcock, May 1971 (recto and verso). Photo by David Bourdon. David Bourdon Correspondence, 1952-1957. The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York, NY.



Fig. 3.16. Photo of José and Battcock as reproduced in various “The Last Estate” columns in *GAY*., Photos by David Bourdon. Gregory Battcock papers, 1952-circa 1980. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

In the pair of photos preserved in New York and DC, Battcock and José pull a copy of Marcuse's *One Dimensional Man* from Battcock's overflowing bookshelves. In the New York photo, José is pictured naked from behind, standing on a box (or stepstool) in perfect contrapposto and chiaroscuro. Battcock, for his part, looks "gay as a goose" (as he put it) wearing his standard gay cruising outfit of "white dungarees and a mod undershirt and all sun tanned."¹¹⁶ In the DC photo, Battcock and José stage a scene of reading together—José facing forward, still completely naked. With fingers intertwined, Battcock and José gaze together at a page from *One Dimensional Man* (with the iconic "1" recognizable on the cover). But who can reflect too hard on Marcuse's concept of Eros with a penis in your face? Which is, I think, Battcock's not-so-subtle point. These photos push to the surface the most problematic parts of Battcock's particular response to Marcuse's theory for a regressive-yet-forward-looking "polymorphous perversity" by pursuing a hedonistic practice of finding pleasure in sex, food, and wine. Here, the blatant objectification of a Puerto Rican teen by two older, white, gay New York art critics happens right out in the open—as text, not subtext, as a source of humor and exemplification of the pleasures Battcock gets to have.

It is possible to interpret Battcock's transformation of Marcuse's concept of Eros into a practice of actually seeking pleasure that, in Battcock's words, "has nothing to do with the capitalistic 'profit motive' and nothing to do with production of objects and possession of things"¹¹⁷ as something of a nostalgic throwback in 1971. In this same vein, it's possible to interpret Battcock's search for the "trivial" as a critique (at times subtle, at times not-so-subtle) of the direction gay liberation politics were moving circa '71 away from Eros as an aspirational

¹¹⁶ Battcock, "The Last Estate: Queens in Queens," 21.

¹¹⁷ Battcock, "The Last Estate," *GAY*, May 24, 1971. Gregory Battcock papers, 1952-circa 1980. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

paradigm—which is to say, away from undifferentiated, polymorphous pleasure—and toward “a formalizing and formatting of gay and lesbian identities,” as José Esteban Muñoz has put it.¹¹⁸ Jonathan D. Katz, for one, argues emphatically that the “minority identity model” of the “modern LGBTQ civil rights movement” obscures an “earlier paradigm of liberation premised not on the articulation of difference, but on its obverse”—on a Marcuseian notion of Eros, as Katz goes on to elaborate.¹¹⁹ Katz focuses on recovering the supposedly “radical politics” of this Marcuseian Eros before they were “blunted by an identity-based sexual revolution”—“Eros thus became a symbol for the pursuit of a non-productive, pleasure driven engagement in life [...] an uncommodifiable pleasure, with a use value but no exchange value.”¹²⁰ Katz goes on to cast “our contemporary queer dream” as a nostalgia for Eros—a wistful desire for that bygone “era when commonality challenged individual identity,” as Katz writes, “and to be progressive entailed not differentiation, but communion of the deepest, most intimate kind.”¹²¹

However, the image of Eros that Battcock produces and circulates in 1971—a photograph of his fingers intertwined with those of his naked, young “houseboy” José over the cover of Marcuse’s *One Dimensional Man*—is far from progressive or egalitarian. Even less ambiguously, Battcock includes in his “The Last Estate” column glib asides like, “My houseboy needed \$10.00 which I didn’t have so I explained how he could go out to Third Avenue and hustle—which he did.” Battcock continues, “one ‘friend’ who works for *Life* suggested that, since he was a good ‘friend,’ perhaps my houseboy would visit him for \$9.00! People just don’t

¹¹⁸ José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 10.

¹¹⁹ Jonathan D. Katz, “Naked politics: The art of Eros 1955-1975” in *Queer Difficulty in Art and Poetry: Rethinking the Sexed Body in Verse and Visual Culture*, eds. Jongwoo Jeremy Kim and Christopher Reed (London and New York: Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, 2017), 74-86.

¹²⁰ Katz, “Naked politics: The art of Eros 1955-1975,” 81-3.

¹²¹ Katz, “Naked politics: The art of Eros 1955-1975,” 85.

understand. I'm not running a service, only trying to get my house cleaned and the laundry done. One 'friend' commented '...no wonder your place is always a wreck.'"¹²²

It's possible to argue that Battcock represents a perversion of Eros, and that he's a marginal, racist historical figure who should stay marginalized. But it's not enough to claim that Battcock was marginal, especially if, as Bryan-Wilson asserts, Battcock "was at the center" of the "set of critics who appropriated Marcuse's theories" for artists of the late-60's and early-70's.¹²³ Also, Battcock did express utopian possibilities for a queer politics of communion. "To my mind, the last thing one should care about is acceptance by the straight world," Battcock writes in column from April 3, 1972, explaining his role as faculty advisor for the Gay Students Association at William Patterson University. "When the straight world liberates itself, it may become acceptable to the gay world."¹²⁴ In a column published a few weeks later, Battcock describes a dance that the students organized to celebrate the conclusion of their "Gay Day" programming:

And, before you knew it, everything was all right. The place filled up with blacks and whites, men and women, straights and gays. Everybody danced, the music got louder, the guards relaxed, the student organizers congratulated one another and here was a very successful, very well attended gay dance—a major event on a state college campus. The cops never appeared. The college administration played it cool. Of course, not many faculty showed up. But they never show up at dances. It was more than a dance; it was a giant step into the present for everybody involved.¹²⁵

This utopian image of queer communion, of what's possible for gay liberation in the present—

¹²² Gregory Battcock, "The Last Estate" *GAY*, May 18, 1970. Gregory Battcock papers, 1952-circa 1980. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

The "friend" who works for *Life* that Battcock references is, quite likely, David Bourdon, who was indeed the arts correspondent for *Life Magazine*.

¹²³ Bryan-Wilson, *Art Workers*, 62.

¹²⁴ Gregory Battcock, "The Last Estate" *GAY*, April 3, 1972. Gregory Battcock papers, 1952-circa 1980. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

¹²⁵ Gregory Battcock, "The Last Estate" *GAY*, May 1, 1972. Gregory Battcock papers, 1952-circa 1980. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

“blacks and whites, men and women, straights and gays” all dancing together as one—exists in Battcock’s columns alongside the images he creates and circulates of his young, naked Puerto Rican “houseboy” reading Marcuse as an object of (his) pleasure. One image doesn’t negate or invalidate the other—they coexist within the same ambivalent, fraught project.

In a sense, Battcock was ahead of the curve in quickly realizing that a Marcuseian artistic critique of capitalism fails in fundamental ways. His responses to that apparent failure are varied and contradictory. In works like his first three “The Last Estate” columns from the summer of 1969 and in the passage quoted just above, Battcock continues to express faith in Eros as a paradigm of liberation in the face of new forms of oppression, and a belief that art, or “anti-art,” can still pave the way for liberation by negating the established system and carving space apart for the (re)emergence of something like an authentic Eros. In other places, including in many of his “The Last Estate” columns from the ’70s, Battcock responds with a hardened cynicism to the realization that capitalism can so readily internalize a Marcuseian critique of inauthenticity—adopting an ‘if you can’t beat them, join them’ (so that you can continue to mock them) kind of attitude. Both types of response are full of potential pitfalls and possibilities for failure. One way to think of Battcock’s critical project is as a constant practice of coming up against crisis, coming to terms with oppression in new guises, and then searching for resources to move around and work within each new situation—with results that range from deeply creative to catastrophic.

The presence of such contradictions in Battcock’s practice is not an aberration unique to Battcock. It is often the case, I think, that announcing a desire for an undifferentiated queer world free of race, gender, and sexual hierarchies can abet the production of images and desires that uphold and trade on those oppressive hierarchies. As J. Jack Halberstam reminds us in the book *The Queer Art of Failure*, “gay and lesbian scholars have also hidden history, unsavory

histories, and have a tendency to select from historical archives only the narratives that please.”¹²⁶ Halberstam continues, “we cannot afford to settle on linear connections between radical desires and radical politics; instead we have to be prepared to be unsettled by the politically problematic connections history throws our way.”¹²⁷

V. A Trivial Diary

I should like to point out a few short cuts for the benefit of all the doctoral students of the future who will pore over these pages in search of truths and documentation about our benighted age [...] those in need of thoroughly misleading, pompous, egotistical and banal reportage—not to mention incessant repetition, boring lists, slavish devotion to a neo-capitalistic pleasure principle, a remarkable commitment to consumerism, undisguised racism and chauvinism—will have to content themselves with this column.

-Gregory Battcock, “The Last Estate,” *GAY*, January 24, 1972

In May 1972, Battcock sent out a proposal for a “novel” titled *The Last Estate: A Trivial Diary*, which would comprise fifteen chapters, all columns published previously in *GAY*. The proposal, it seems, never gained any traction.

Around the same time, Battcock guest edited two issues of the London-based magazine *Art and Artists* (February and March, 1972) and he published numerous articles on art and mobility/transportation in several art magazines, including: “The Wings of Man” (*Arts Magazine*, March 1971), “A Mobile Culture” (*Art and Artists*, February 1972), “The Greening of Televideo and the Aesthetics of Boeing” (*Domus*, April 1972), “Destination Art” (*Art and Artists*, May 1973), and “Aesthetics and/or Transportation” (*Arts Magazine*, September/October 1973). Across these articles, Battcock argues that experience will replace the artwork as the

¹²⁶ Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 148.

¹²⁷ Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 162.

primary object of critical analysis. “There will be a shift in aesthetics from attention toward the art object to attention toward the receiver,” Battcock writes. “It seems that art criticism in the future will be a branch of sociology.”¹²⁸ He continues on to argue that travel via outmoded, non-utilitarian forms of transportation—trans-Atlantic ocean liners, for example (Battcock’s own preferred mode of travel)—will be the paradigmatic art of the future, as an art of pure experience. “Thus travel becomes a likely vehicle for absorption by fine art,” Battcock writes. “The future idea of travel and what it is all about is, mainly, the functionless, un-economic sensual/cerebral idea of art itself.”¹²⁹ Or, as he puts it more tersely: “Thus getting there will be ALL (rather than HALF) the fun.”¹³⁰

This argument for a “shift of emphasis in art criticism,” as Battcock puts it, “from an aesthetic of ‘appreciation’ of an art object [...] to a pragmatic interpretation and sociological analysis of the effect of the experience upon the observer”¹³¹ represents one important culmination of Battcock’s critical project. As David Joselit argues, in these articles Battcock manages presciently to get “the real legacy of Conceptual art” right—during a time when, as Joselit writes, “Conceptual art had not yet devolved into the rather arid semiotic scholasticism so common today.”¹³² Joselit casts Battcock’s “dismissal of seriousness” as indicative of “a shift in values from objects (as reservoirs of artistic intention and semiotic complexity) to situations (characterized by ephemeral, and often flamboyant, open-ended communication).” “Art objects now perform similarly,” Joselit concludes, “they are temporary halts or arrested conjunctions of information flows. Such is the real legacy of Conceptual art. Battcock not only knew this—he

¹²⁸ Gregory Battcock, “A Mobile Culture,” *Art and Artists* 6, no. 11 (February 1972), 18.

¹²⁹ Gregory Battcock, “Destination Art,” *Art and Artists* 8, no. 2 (May 1973), 10.

¹³⁰ Gregory Battcock, “Destination Art,” 8.

¹³¹ Battcock, “A Mobile Culture,” 16.

¹³² Joselit, “Transformer,” 508, 510.

acted on it.”¹³³

Battcock’s theory regarding a shift from art objects to experience, and from art criticism to a kind of sociology is only one culmination of his critical project and his “dismissal of seriousness.” Battcock’s proposal for “*The Last Estate: A Trivial Diary*” represents another important culmination of his critical project as he developed it in the pages of the *New York Review of Sex* and then *GAY*—in this case, a failed one. The book proposal itself did not go anywhere. However, Battcock did see a version of the project to fruition with the publication in 1977 of the first issue of his own newsprint, art magazine *Trylon & Perisphere*, which represents a different kind of “trivial diary.” Only three issues of *Trylon & Perisphere* were published before the magazine folded, for reasons that are unclear (**Fig. 3.17**).



Fig. 3.17. *Trylon & Perisphere* vol. 1, November 1977; *Trylon & Perisphere* vol. 2, February 1978; *Trylon & Perisphere* vol. 3, Summer 1978. Gregory Battcock papers, 1952-circa 1980. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

An advertising copy for *Trylon & Perisphere* reads,

Q. What in the world is *Trylon & Perisphere*?

A. A humpy arts magazine—outrageous, provocative and a scream.

Q. What is it about?

A. Nothing. It’s about pretense. And posing. And the art world.

Q. How can you get it?

A. By subscription. Only \$14.00 for ten issues. It’s the *only* art magazine anybody reads.¹³⁴

¹³³ Joselit, “Transformer,” 510.

¹³⁴ Advertisement on *Trylon & Perisphere* letterhead with a detachable order form. Gregory Battcock papers, 1952-circa 1980. Folder 2.22. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

The editorial on the first page of the first issue of *Trylon & Perisphere* declares that the magazine is, “Dedicated to the world of tomorrow that will never be. *Trylon* is a celebration of the cynical, the profane and the droll.”¹³⁵ The description is accurate. In a letter dated May 15, 1977 Battcock specifies, “All pieces must be funny. They must succeed is [sic.] DEMOLISHING their subject, i.e. don’t write about something unless you hate it.”¹³⁶ The first issue of *Trylon & Perisphere* includes, among other things: a frivolous report on gallerist Judith von Baron’s return to New York; an account of the tchotchkes and concessions people bought at SOHO Artists Day festival; a report on the art historians who showed up to the Cézanne opening at MoMA and the goody-bags they received; and a rating of art galleries according to “décor, friendliness of staff, spaciousness, lighting, attire of personnel, quality of clientele, and last, but not least, quality of the artworks exhibited.”¹³⁷

The cover of the first issue of *Trylon & Perisphere* features a photo of Neftali Mendina—who, as Joselit notes in a disquieting and strange aside, was Battcock’s “companion at the time, who would later be a suspect in the critic’s unsolved and gruesome 1980 murder in San Juan, Puerto Rico.”¹³⁸ Just as unsettlingly, Grigely notes in passing: “Each cover featured a Puerto Rican male, all close friends—‘houseboys,’ as they were called—who lived with Battcock.”¹³⁹ On the cover of the first issue of *Trylon & Perisphere*, Mendina wears a tight white jockstrap, a cut-off Puerto Rican pride ringer t-shirt, and a hard-hat. As Battcock specifies in the letter of May 15th, “All cover photos will be done by Jack Mitchell, the celebrated photographer of

¹³⁵ “Editorial: A Statement,” *Trylon & Perisphere*, vol. 1 (November 1977), p. 3. Gregory Battcock papers, 1952-circa 1980. Folder 2.22. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

¹³⁶ Letter from Battcock addressed to “Dearest, Wittiest, and More Than Brilliant John George,” dated May 15, 1977. Gregory Battcock papers, 1952-circa 1980. Folder 2.22. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

¹³⁷ “Evaluations of Equality,” *Trylon & Perisphere*, vol. 1 (November 1977), p. 17. Gregory Battcock papers, 1952-circa 1980. Folder 2.22. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

¹³⁸ Joselit, “Transformer,” 508.

¹³⁹ Grigely, “Introduction: The Battcock Factor,” 34.

celebrities. All cover subjects will be black and Puerto Rican males.”¹⁴⁰ Each of these “black and Puerto Rican males” contributes an account of domestic work accompanied by gritty, sexy photos by Mitchell, and then by photographer Jimmy De Sana for issues two and three. These photos and articles are tucked in alongside all the art-world satire and in-crowd jokes: Mendina writes about cooking, Tony (his last name is not given) writes about car maintenance, and José Ramos writes about cleaning (**Fig. 3.18**).



Fig. 3.18. “Centerfolds” of *Trylon & Perisphere*. Gregory Battcock papers, 1952-circa 1980. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

All pretense without substance, *Trylon & Perisphere* is exploitative and racist without offering much in return. It indulges the trivial pleasures of art world gossip, parties, food, travel, and sex; it exudes an all-around “slavish devotion to a neo-capitalistic pleasure principle, a remarkable commitment to consumerism, undisguised racism and chauvinism,” as Battcock put it himself. By design, *Trylon & Perisphere* is not critical, sincere, or subversive. Within the context of this “humpy arts magazine,”¹⁴¹ Mitchell and De Sana’s photographs could function as textbook examples of “the ‘brown’ body commodified by dominant gay male culture,”¹⁴² in Hiram Pérez’s recent formulation. As Pérez diagnoses the situation: “Once available to cosmopolitan consumption, the brown body generates desire. [...] It provides cosmopolitan gay male subjects with objects of desire and with the superabundant raw material from which to

¹⁴⁰ Letter from Battcock addressed to “Dearest, Wittiest, and More Than Brilliant John George,” dated May 15, 1977. Gregory Battcock papers, 1952-circa 1980. Folder 2.22. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

¹⁴¹ “Humpy” is 1970s-era homosexual slang for hot and sexy. See: Tom Dalzell (ed.), *The Routledge Dictionary of Modern American Slang and Unconventional English*. (Taylor & Francis, 2015), 537.

¹⁴² Hiram Pérez, “You Can Have My Brown Body and Eat It, Too!” *Social Text* 84–85, Vol. 23, Nos. 3–4 (Fall–Winter 2005), 171.

compose the story of that desire. [...] He gets to have his brown body and eat it, too.”¹⁴³ Indeed, Mitchell and De Sana’s photographs in the context of *Trylon & Perisphere* provide pretty much that, without apology. And without demonstrating much (if any) of the potentially productive “radically polyvocal quality” that, for example, in a different context Kobena Mercer attributes to Robert Mapplethorpe’s erotic photographs of black men in the photobooks *Black Males* (1980) and *The Black Book* (1986).¹⁴⁴ In an essay from 1989 (in the thick of the “repressive cultural politics” spearheaded by Jesse Helms and the New Right), Mercer sets out to recuperate the productive ambivalence of “Mapplethorpe’s troublesome aesthetic strategy.” According to Mercer, Mapplethorpe’s photos convey an “ambivalent intermixing of textual references, achieved through the appropriation and articulation of elements from the ‘purified’ realm of transcendental aesthetic ideal and from the debased and ‘polluted’ world of racist stereotypes and pornography.” This polyvocal ambiguity then “throws the spectator into uncertainty and unfixity” and “enables a potential deconstruction of whiteness.”¹⁴⁵

Jack Mitchell’s photograph of Battcock’s “houseboy” Neftali Mendina on the cover of *Trylon & Perisphere* does not (I don’t think) convey a similar kind of productive ambiguity with the capacity to make the viewer/reader question who she is in response to the disruptive “shock effect” of the image. Here, the meaning of the photograph hinges in large part on the fact that the spectators—as art-world insiders privy to rumors and/or readers of Battcock’s “The Last Estate” columns in *GAY*—are already in on the joke, or will be once they’re done reading the magazine. In the context of *Trylon & Perisphere*, these photos of “black and Puerto Rican males” are “outrageous, provocative and a scream” because they posit Battcock’s transgressive sex practices

¹⁴³ Pérez, “You Can Have My Brown Body and Eat It, Too!” 185-6.

¹⁴⁴ Kobena Mercer, “Reading Racial Fetishism: The Photographs of Robert Mapplethorpe” in *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 194.

¹⁴⁵ Mercer, “Reading Racial Fetishism,” 199, 201.

(and perhaps also the transgressive fantasies of the art world's many variously-closeted white, gay men) front and center where they do not belong amid gossipy, satirical accounts of galleries, openings, and art-world parties. It's a one-note shock premised on the incongruity of Battcock's transgressive desire—provocative to be sure, but not ambivalent or destabilizing.

Trylon & Perisphere's dedication "to the world of tomorrow that will never be" announces less a world-building project than an abdication of any such project. I think it's fair to say that *Trylon & Perisphere* gives up, not only on the art world—which, as Battcock notes elsewhere, "in each and all of its many parts, industries, investment agencies, educational, museum, aesthetic institutions is corrupt"¹⁴⁶—but also on art. As a "humpy arts magazine" that is "outrageous, provocative and a scream" all about "nothing," "pretense," and "posing," *Trylon & Perisphere* represents one possible end point or result of "criticism without authority"—a result in which the space left behind by discrete works of art, judgment, and analysis gets filled with trivia, frivolity, pleasure, and edgy erotic indulgence. It represents a failure—and not the artful, kind of failure that "allows us to escape the punishing norms that discipline behavior and manage human development" and "provides the opportunity to use negative affects to poke holes in the toxic positivity of contemporary life,"¹⁴⁷ as Halberstam elucidates in the book *The Queer Art of Failure*. It's just failure, an end point with nowhere else to go.

Moments of productive, queer failure do exist in Battcock's oeuvre—when "alternative ways of knowing and being" that are not "mired in nihilistic critical dead ends" come into provisional focus.¹⁴⁸ They tend, I think, to occur when he is in the throes of figuring it out, and of juggling competing imperatives—when Battcock realizes that the existing concepts and

¹⁴⁶ Document titled "Outline for a Novel on the Art World" dated December 30, 1979. Gregory Battcock papers, 1952-circa 1980. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

¹⁴⁷ Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, pp. 2-3.

¹⁴⁸ Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 24.

vocabularies for the ways we experience art are impoverished, incapable of capturing even just his own queer way of experiencing art outside codified genres, and then takes up the mantle of searching for the resources to assemble new concepts and vocabularies. Such moments also tend to cluster around Battcock's attention to Gene Swenson and Jill Johnston, when—in the course of assembling new ways of writing, knowing, and being—Battcock turns to Swenson and Johnston's examples. In these moments, language about ethics and morality punctuate Battcock's vocabulary. For example, in a 1970 interview conducted by David Bourdon for the fifth issue of Les Levine's *Culture Hero*, Burdon asks Battcock, "Who is your favorite art critic?" Battcock replies, "The late Gene Swenson. Through him, I learned all I know about politics and ethics [...] [I asked] Gene Swenson to write guest columns for the *New York Free Press*. Nobody else would publish him and I thought what he had to say was very important."¹⁴⁹

In an unpublished, 1973 text intended as a possible introduction to an anthology of Johnston's criticism, Battcock writes,

You always hear complaints about Jill's writing. They say "Did you read Jill Johnston this week? I didn't understand it." For many, Johnston's writings are difficult because they are frequently painful and cutting, full of sharp provocations toward easy values and commonplace motivations. Johnston consistently demands a higher, stricter and, indeed, extravagant morality that many people cannot easily afford.¹⁵⁰

Battcock's sense that Johnston "consistently demands a higher, stricter and, indeed, extravagant morality that many people cannot easily afford" echoes Lucy Lippard's reaction to Swenson when she writes, "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

¹⁴⁹ "Gregory Battcock interview by David Bourdon," *Culture Hero* vol. 1, no. 5 (ND), 11.

¹⁵⁰ Gregory Battcock, document titled "INTRODUCTION TO JILL JOHNSTON," included with letter addressed to Danny Moses dated November 25, 1973. Folder 2.33. Gregory Battcock papers, 1952-circa 1980. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

himself and I couldn't meet his demands.”¹⁵¹ And Battcock reflects, “When Swenson died, many of us felt as though we had lost our conscience.”¹⁵² Whether Battcock met the demands of Johnston's “higher, stricter and, indeed, extravagant morality” or of Swenson's intense “commitment” remains an open question—sometimes, probably, he did; many times, it seems, he did not. However, it is also true that he did not accept “easy values and commonplace motivations.” Rejecting every competing “polemical redefinition of artistic labor” that, as Julia Bryan-Wilson argues, came to characterize “radical practice” of the late '60s and early '70s,¹⁵³ Battcock forged his own messy, at times questionable way forward and filled it with food, wine, travel, sex, and careful generous attentiveness to the artists and critics working around him. At a time when, as Lucy Lippard writes, “even in 1969, as we were imagining our heads off and, to some extent, out into the world, I suspected that ‘the art world is probably going to be able to absorb conceptual art as another ‘movement’ and not pay too much attention to it,’”¹⁵⁴ Battcock managed to sustain a critical practice shot through with shrewd assessments of the claustrophobic dilemma they were working within and with resources to keep working.

¹⁵¹ Lippard, contribution to “Gene Swenson: A Composite Portrait,” 18.

¹⁵² Gregory Battcock, “The Art Critic as Social Reformer—With a Question Mark,” *Art in America*, Vol. 59 (September-October 1971), 26-27.

¹⁵³ Bryan-Wilson, *Art Workers*, 1.

¹⁵⁴ Lucy Lippard, “Escape Attempts,” *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997): xxi.

Conclusion

Coda: An Art Critic's Farewell Address

Apart from providing a basis for the paternalistic virtue dominant cultures claim when dissident movements fold, what does it mean for a movement, a politics, a social theory to fail? How might political breakdown work as something other than a blot, or a botched job?

—Lauren Berlant, “’68, or Something,” 1994¹

I. “There is anger in my tone”

On March 28, 1968, upon the conclusion of his solitary question mark protest outside MoMA, Gene Swenson published a column titled “An Art Critic's Farewell Address” in the *New York Free Press* (**Fig. 4.1**)—a platform that Gregory Battcock made available to him at a time when, as Battcock states, “Nobody else would publish him and I thought what he had to say was very important.”² Battcock describes “An Art Critic's Farewell Address” as “a curious, sensitive document that isn't really a farewell address at all, but another plea for ethical reevaluation of modern esthetics, containing ‘personal’ experiences that were anathema to the orthodoxies of current art-writing.”³

Figure removed due to copyright restrictions

Fig. 4.1. Clipping of “An Art Critic's Farewell Address” pasted into Gregory Battcock's scrapbook. Gregory Battcock Papers, 1958-circa 1980. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

¹ Lauren Berlant, “’68, or Something,” *Critical Inquiry* 21, no. 1 (Autumn 1994): 127.

² “Gregory Battcock interview by David Bourdon,” *Culture Hero* vol. 1, no. 5 (ND), 11.

³ Gregory Battcock, “The Art Critic as Social Reformer—With a Question Mark,” *Art in America*, Vol. 59 (September-October 1971), 26-27.

Addressing the art world in general, and MoMA specifically, Swenson begins, “On the eve of their defeat—they know whom I mean—I would speak a few words on their behalf. There is anger in my tone, for they have treated the soul of art foully. I hope that in the future I will have as little to do with them as possible, in or out of glory.”⁴ Swenson continues,

My warning and my hope for art lies in this: soon we will begin listening to our own hearts again. That is the only way the arts can recover from this crisis. ‘They’ have been mistaken. Let them admit it. [...]

Paul Signac once wrote a letter, anarchist that he was, praising the virtues of keeping politics and art separate. I have until now done so in my work and life. Let me, however, call upon poetry for advice in this crisis.

How sharply our children will be ashamed
taking at last their vengeance for these horrors
remembering how in so strange a time
common integrity could look like courage.

Our poets, at least, have something to learn from that. I wish I could have found the proper lines in American instead of in an English translation of the Russian.⁵

What advice does Swenson find in these lines? Although Swenson does not cite them, the lines come from Yevgeny Yevtushenko’s poem “Talk” (1960). The poem begins, “You’re a brave man they tell me. / I’m not. / Courage has never been my quality.”⁶ In one sense, the poem conveys resignation to the lower bar of “common integrity” and to the constant sinking feeling of living in “so strange a time” in which modern “horrors” of war, US imperialism, police brutality,

⁴ Gene Swenson, “An Art Critic’s Farewell Address,” *The New York Free Press*, March 28, 1968, 8. A typed, annotated draft of this text is preserved in Swenson’s archive. The text was written originally as a direct address, beginning with “My Fellow Colleagues.” I suspect that Swenson intended to disrupt, and then deliver this “Farewell Address” at an event titled “A Symposium on the Possibilities & Responsibilities of Art Criticism” that took place at MoMA on February 14, 1968, at 8:00 p.m. and included William S. Rubin (as moderator), Thomas B. Hess, Max Kozloff, Hilton Kramer, and Philip Leider. At the time of the symposium, Swenson would have been in the midst of his question mark protest outside the Museum. A recording of the symposium is preserved in the archives at MoMA. Max Kozloff makes passing reference to the protest (though he does not name Swenson)—he says: “Actually, this whole panel and the museum itself was attacked by someone demonstrating for some time now outside of the museum as being involved in a conspiracy of the establishment. My reaction was, I couldn’t imagine four people whose opinions varied as much as the people on this panel. But that may be merely an illusion, maybe they don’t. Perhaps there is another art world that is really outside the kin of the people here and that in fact, willy nilly, there is an establishment. I’d like to have the views of the speakers on this...”

⁵ Swenson, “An Art Critic’s Farewell Address,” 10.

⁶ Yevgeny Yevtushenko, “Talk” in *Yevtushenko: Selected Poems*, translated by Robin Milner-Gulland and Peter Levi (Middlesex: Penguin Books Ltd, 1962), 81.

etc. are just accepted among decent people in the course of daily work and life, including among artists. In another sense, the poem conveys painful optimism in its anticipation of a not-so-distant future in which “common integrity” will be the rule and real bravery the expectation—a future in which “children will be ashamed” when they look back on the complacency of their parents who were unwilling to take real risks on behalf of the courage of their convictions.

Following “An Art Critic’s Farewell Address,” Swenson published in the *New York Free Press* scathing indictments of artists and the art world (which I discuss in chapter one), including the columns titled “The Corporate Structure of the American Art World” (April 25); “Why Have None of My Fellow Artists Spoken a Word in Behalf of the Revolution?” (June 20); and “We Must Overthrow the Administrators of Art Museums” (August 1). Reflecting back in 1971 on Swenson’s writings and actions from the spring and summer of 1968, Battcock writes,

[Swenson] was thus the first art-world personality to protest publicly the policies and administration of the museum—protests that were revived on a broad scale by the Art Workers’ Coalition in 1969 and 1970, and which ultimately brought about some reforms. [...] Swenson’s gestures, writings and political stance confused and alarmed many people. His challenges to art-world figures (Thomas Hoving, Clement Greenberg, Henry Geldzahler), his linking of the prestigious Castelli Gallery with capitalist exploitation, his attacks on the Museum of Modern Art—all identified targets that had hitherto been immune from social and political scrutiny. It was a time when people were unwilling to believe that the prevailing artistic scene was indeed the product of a larger imperialistic system.⁷

With the benefit of just a little hindsight, Battcock is able to recuperate a soundness and sensibleness in Swenson’s condemnations—to claim that Swenson was actually one step ahead of the Art Workers’ Coalition as a whole, and that he was correct in his assessment that the art world is “indeed the product of a larger imperialistic system.” But Swenson’s condemnations were not sound or reasonable; they came wrapped up in anger, paranoia, and naïve optimism. In

⁷ Battcock, “The Art Critic as Social Reformer—With a Question Mark,” 27.

a sense, Battcock's real achievement happened before he could claim in hindsight that Swenson was right about certain major things—when in the spring and summer of 1968, at a time when almost no one was willing countenance Swenson's gestures, writings, and political ravings because they were confusing and alarming, Battcock gave him a platform to sound off anyway, and to put into words his unvarnished rage and naïve hope.

II. "The art world sucks cock"

In May 1972, Battcock invited Jill Johnston to contribute an article to a special issue of the magazine *Art and Artists* that he was guest editing. In his "The Last Estate" column in *GAY*, Battcock explains what happened: "In the beginning Jill agreed (and accepted pre-payment) to do a piece on sculptor Lynda Benglis. [...] Jill never got around to writing the article, but word got around that she *may* write the article." This, in turn, prompted Benglis to send a telegram to the magazine's editors that begins, "CANCEL JOHNSTON ARTICLE ON BENGLIS AS UNDERSTOOD SLANDEROUS STOP." Battcock explains, "Of course the telegram was from Lynda Benglis, terrified by the thought that Jill Johnston might write about her art (and her personal life), no doubt." Battcock continues,

The telegram was not necessary. Jill never did the article. However, upon the afternoon of my departure for England, Jill did indeed arrive. "Make some coffee please. I'm writing your article now. Where can I sit?" She followed me out to the taxi and handed me a bunch of 3x5 index cards covered with green magic marker scrawls. "I think card seven is missing. I dropped it in the elevator. Somebody will have to retype all this. Maybe you can do it on the plane," she suggested.

Battcock did retype all of it, and then *Art & Artists* promptly rejected it. Battcock reports that the editors of magazine wrote to him, "'haven't published Jill's piece, partly because it was so stupid and the possibility of libel suits so great...'" And finally: "Will return Jill Johnston ramblings to

you. Hope you can con someone into publishing them all.” Battcock did not, as it turns out, “con” anyone else into publishing them all—although he did request that his readers “write letters to the editors of *GAY* urging they print the thing in its entirety.”⁸ The typed up, taped together, hand annotated, food stained manuscript titled “Notes on Women & Art” is preserved in Battcock’s archive (I print it here for the first time) (**Fig. 4.2**).

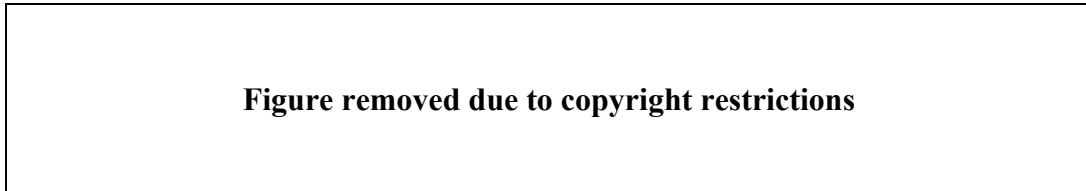


Fig. 4.2. Jill Johnston, “Notes on Women and Art,” typed manuscript. Gregory Battcock Papers, 1958-circa 1980. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Johnston wrote “Notes on Women & Art” at a time when feminism wanted nothing to do with her. In 1969 Betty Friedan, founder and president of the National Organization of Women (NOW) declared lesbians a “lavender menace,”⁹ and decried Johnston specifically as “the biggest enemy of the movement.”¹⁰ In 1970 a group called Radicalesbians formed to protest NOW, but it had disbanded by May 1972, as other lesbians pursued more accommodationist stances—and anyhow, as Johnston puts it, “the most radical people I knew were the radicalesbians and the message I got from them was that they had already done their lavender menace actions and they were tired of them and they didn’t work anyway since the media always distorted everything and the best thing to do was to retreat and get your own shit together and build lesbian nation from the grass roots out of your own community of women.” But Johnston “wasn’t a member of the group or of any group” and therefore, as she writes, “could hardly

⁸ Gregory Battcock, “The Last Estate,” *GAY*, May 15, 1972. Gregory Battcock papers, 1952-circa 1980. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

⁹ See, Stephanie Gilmore and Elizabeth Kaminiski, “A Part and Apart: Lesbian and Straight Feminist Activists Negotiate Identity in a Second-Wave Organization,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 16, no. 1 (January 2007): 95-113.

¹⁰ Johnston, *Lesbian Nation*, 19.

expect support from a group that for me didn't exist."¹¹ As a polemic "Notes on Women & Art" is certainly not recuperable or legible in terms of a politics of lesbian separatism or of grass-roots community building.

By May 1972 much of the art world, it seems, did not want anything to do with Johnston either—if the responses from Benglis and the editors at *Art & Artists* are an indication, Johnston's work was feared and dismissed, in no uncertain terms, as slanderous, stupid libel. And yet, at this moment when almost no one was willing to countenance Johnston's gestures, writings, and political ravings because they were confusing and alarming, Battcock attempted to get them published in an art magazine anyway—in this case, even going so far as to make space in his apartment for Johnston to sit and write, and then typing it all up himself.

"Notes on Women & Art" is at turns angry, hilarious, confessional, troubling, sophomoric, piercing in its analysis, outrageous, and accurate in its glib assessments. Johnston's willingness to come out and say, regarding Eva Hesse, that "they were a bunch of cocksuckers for waiting so long" until Hesse was terminally ill before they would put her work on the cover of *Artforum* feels right, for example, as does her willingness to say, regarding Lee Lozano, "I think she's one of the very best painters and I don't think she ever got to be a token." "Notes on Women & Art" constitutes a sophisticated deployment of conceptual art strategies. As a document it reflects the form and repetitive structure of works like Yvonne Rainer's "NO Manifesto" (1965), Richard Serra's *Verb List* (1967), Lee Lozano's *Dialogue Piece* and *General Strike Piece* (1969), Sol Lewitt's *Sentences on Conceptual Art* (1969), and so on. "Notes on Women and Art" resists readymade classification. It exists in the world without a home, as a political document that no movement would ever claim, a conceptual document that no curator

¹¹ Johnston, *Lesbian Nation*, 22-23.

would display, and a critical document that no art magazine would publish. As a chronicle of Johnston's fury at a sexist, abusive, cocksucking art world that dismisses any language about lesbianism as slanderous, stupid libel, "Notes on Women & Art" is an important feminist document and an important work of art as well.

* * *

In the end, this dissertation stakes a claim that Johnston's "Notes on Women & Art" and Swenson's "An Art Critic's Farewell Address"—along with so many other intense manifestations of creative, affective, speculative energy such as Swenson's question mark protest, "The Disintegration of a Critic" panel discussion, "The Last Estate," and *Culture Hero*—are works of art, even as they do not sit easily with that designation. "Criticism without Authority" is an ill-fitting mantle as it names a genre of art that does not cohere. But at the same time, as a phrase that can hold things contingently together, "Criticism without Authority" has a descriptive force that has helped direct my own energy to dwell on moments when something is happening that exceeds readymade explanation—something that might feel initially confusing or troubling but also creative, heartfelt, and vital. These tend to be moments when Swenson, Johnston, and Battcock—each one just trying to make a queer life within a straight, rigid, oppressive bureaucratic world—encounter one another and manage to push in the same direction without a shared goal, to create just a little more space in which to work and breathe. In these moments of improbable alliance, alternative ways of being, knowing, dithering, slouching, and wandering manage to pierce through all the other noise of the era, and new art can emerge.

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