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Liking Andy Warhol: An Interview with Jonathan Flatley

Felix Bernstein interviews Jonathan Flatley

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JONATHAN FLATLEY'S Like Andy Warhol presents a compelling alternative to the preconceived conception of Warhol as a cold, crass materialist making affirmative icons to bolster transcendent, glamorous, consumer identification. Flatley instead shows Warhol thinking through ways to approach and share in the feelings of loss, failure, and disidentification that the United States's glossy consumerist iconography generates. Paradoxically, Warhol opened up affective pathways through liking rather than

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hating, dismissing, or ironizing. Flatley integrates Warhol into a radical approach to homo-eros that suggests how the desire for sameness in homoeroticism permits a multifarious openness to others and to difference, recalling like-minded theories proposed by Samuel Delany, Michel Foucault, and Leo Bersani. Flatley's Warhol joyously attaches to the world and others through chains of likeness:

experiences of non-identical, shared similitude that bind subjects in and through difference and similarity. Refusing to overcome abjection through masculine heroism, the Warhol revealed in Flatley's study is unselfconsciously focused on debased objects, in spite of the possible injury or insult that often attend them. In this way, he created an open invitation for viewers to be "embarrassed and stigmatized" together.

For Flatley, Warhol's famous screen tests don't deliver exacting portraits of stable, iconic identities but rather they dramatize "the singular way each sitter fails to hold onto an identity, the way each person comes together and falls apart." Warhol's flamboyant, transgressive encounter with the notion of universal masculine interiority posed by both abstract expressionism and the straight-acting industry of late modernist critique uniquely outline the contours of his work against the fixity of modern art and masculinity. Where Warhol imitated the mechanics of industry, industry has subsequently imitated him, in a turn from comedy to tragedy. While Hal Foster famously called Warhol's dystopian mimicry "traumatic realism," Flatley points out that rather than shutting affect down, Warhol opens receptivity up by allowing for "a relaxation of the mimetic shock-defense dynamic, enabling transferences of affect from everyday life into the space of the art work."

Flatley does not tiptoe around the dystopian aspect of the "liking" culture explored by Warhol, especially as it currently manifests in a standardized part of the social media landscape. Rather, he demonstrates that Warhol's wish to "like" everything was more of a unique cog in the late capitalist machine than the seamless, banal tool for monetizing aesthetic experience that powers social media. This refreshing take on Warhol reveals the artist's work as predicated in part by fostering the comingling of queer outsiders, rather than just a homo-normative conception of

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consumer-oriented camp, offering a chance to rethink the often-caricatured artist ahead of a forthcoming retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art.

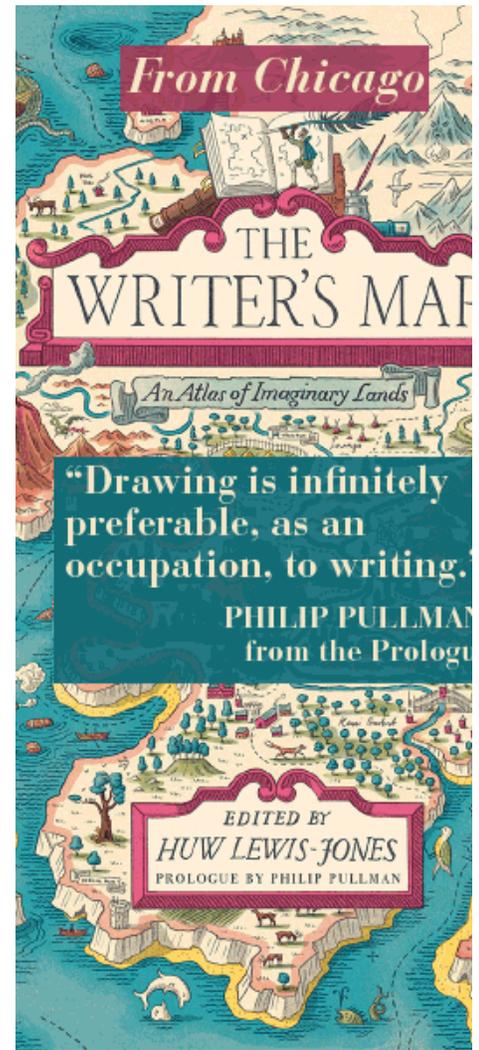
I talked with Flatley over email about Warhol's prophetic relation to social media and branding and about the ways that homophobia continues to inflect canonical interpretations of his work.

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FELIX BERNSTEIN: Your opening quote, from a 1963 interview Warhol did with Gene Swenson, is particularly interesting with regard to how it destabilizes the interview: “Someone said that Brecht wanted everybody to think alike. I want everybody to think alike.” Thinking of Warhol’s evasive yet pungent responses as aesthetic decisions, what effect does this have on the retrospective interpreter of Warhol’s statements?

JONATHAN FLATLEY: Great question! In that interview, I really like the way that what Warhol wants (“I want everybody to think alike”) arises in relation to a report (“someone said”) about what somebody else (Brecht) wants. His “own” ideas and intentions and feelings arise here in a chain of imitations. In later interviews, Warhol literalizes this mimetic impulse by saying to the interviewer things like, “You should just tell me the words and I can just repeat them.” Or, at other times, he will just say, “What?” or, “Uh, yes,” or, “Uh, no,” in response to long, involved questions. (Indeed, the filmed interviews give a vivid sense of Warhol as a talented comic performer.) In such situations it becomes impossible to avoid thinking about the productive presence of the interviewer, the degree to which the “interview” is an ensemble performance. On the whole, I think that Warhol’s insistence on being alike thwarts what Foucault called “the will to know,” destabilizing the protocols of the interview, especially if one approaches the interview as a technique for producing truths about the self. (See also Nicholas de Villiers in *Opacity and the Closet* on Warhol’s refusal to participate in the interview’s will to knowledge.)

I think Warhol’s interview style is destabilizing, especially if you — as



interviewer or “retrospective interpreter” — are looking to find some nugget of personal truth or moment of self-disclosure in the interviews. (Is he really smart or is he stupid? What is he “really saying” about Marilyn Monroe or Campbell’s soup? What is his real sexual identity? Is he “for” or “against” consumer culture?) Throughout the book, I mainly see in the interviews Warhol’s ongoing efforts to be open to the people around him, his tendency toward attraction, his indiscriminate approval, and his interest in finding ways to be alike. Together, these might be said to create an openness to the environment.

There is a lot of documentation and disclosure surrounding Warhol, including his own cassette recordings, but there is also a lot of mystery and misinformation. How does the history of homophobia and censorship impact the picture we have of Warhol?

At least in this interview with Swenson, he was openly queer, but all the queer content was edited out, probably (at least in part) by the editor of *ARTnews*. Jennifer Sichel’s amazing recent discovery of the cassette tapes with recordings of Swenson’s original interview with Warhol reminds us of the very significant role of homophobic editing in the publication of Warhol’s interviews. [1] So, the interview does not begin with the statement about Brecht. Instead, remarkably, it begins with this exchange:

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...

This is then followed by gossip about “these girls” (the Abstract Expressionist closet queens), Swenson’s critique of the Abstract Expressionists for being “moralists,” and Warhol’s insistence that the whole interview “should just be on homosexuality.” And then, we get the following:

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.

As Sichel points out, in the printed interview

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

That is, Warhol's liking and his imitation of the machine are here explicitly presented as queer sexual practices.

Clearly, this should alter our sense of Warhol's apparent reticence about sexuality. The editing of the interview is an example of Warhol being "de-gayed" by the institution of art right from the start (to borrow the language Jennifer Doyle, José Esteban Muñoz, and I used years ago in *Pop Out: Queer Warhol*). In fact, a large part of the interview is taken up with Warhol's repeated insistence that Swenson should also have conversations with other Pop Artists — James Rosenquist, Bob Indiana, Claes Oldenburg, and Jim Dine are suggested — "on homosexuality." At one point Swenson says, "Do you think Pop Art's queer? [Laughing] I'll ask Rosenquist that." Warhol responds very enthusiastically: "Yessss!

That would be fantastic!” In other words, Warhol is clear, open, and even ebullient about the possibility of Pop — precisely as queer — making a place for an open discussion about homosexuality in the art world.

The closet, the homophobia of the Abstract Expressionists, the queerness of Pop are all here fully, directly, extensively considered. Had this material been published, it would also have been a kind of ambient destabilization!

It is interesting to juxtapose that affective openness with the very monolithic way that Warhol is often characterized. In the book, you note that he enjoyed seeing people react to him acting swish and “fey.” Yet, Warhol is also portrayed (especially in movies) as having a flat affect — being sinister, cold, flippant, ironic; if not villainous. What is the relationship between Warhol’s perceived flatness and the flamboyance?

Honestly, I think that the critical focus on Warhol’s flatness or his repudiation of feeling may just be a homophobic misreading, an unwillingness or inability to recognize or acknowledge his queerness. It is as if because people could not (or would not) recognize Warhol’s queer feelings, they acted as if he had no feelings at all. If you watch his various interviews or listen to tape recordings or read through his diaries what comes through is a shy, sometimes awkward but recognizably queer, campy, faggy, swishy, or effeminate mode of being in the world. I mean, Warhol did sometimes play up a kind of distanced affect, especially in order to ward off hostile interlocutors. But, even if people did not see him as nice, his friends and colleagues — people who knew him well — did not characterize him as cold or nonaffective, even if they did sometimes describe him as shy and as not liking to be touched. I think Warhol did sometimes wish that he had no emotions, mainly because of his repeated experiences of romantic disappointment, but he also acknowledged that this was impossible. So instead he tried to like everything and like everybody.

How does Warhol’s capacity to like *everything* stand in congruence and/or dissidence with the monopolized marketization of culture we see in the “liking” regime of market-driven social media?

As we all know, Amazon, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and so on all instrumentalize their users' liking in order to "harvest" information about its users' tastes, turn-ons, anxieties, and emotional ties (our "data") that is then valuable to advertisers, marketing departments, political campaigns, and everyone else interested in shaping consumer behavior. Moreover, Facebook knows how to use this attention and the information it gathers about our emotional lives to change, quite directly, how we feel.

One response to this situation — a reasonable self-protective one, I think — is to withdraw from social media. But, if we see liking as the most basic form of affective openness to the world, essential to any engagement with the world, then I think it is worth thinking about how we might expand our abilities to like rather than withdraw and delimit them. Here is where Warhol's effort to like everything and like everybody is interesting. Instead of a withdrawing from liking, Warhol aims to de-instrumentalize liking. His is an expanded, maximalized (I want to say Whitmanian) liking: "I think everybody should like everybody." In doing this, he looked for places where liking is already present — in consumption, fandom, pornography, collecting practices, the use of technologies like cameras, video, or tape recorders — and looked for ways to affirm and expand that liking.

How can we decouple this homoerotic maximized liking from social media, and recover different modes of affirmation?

To affirm liking does not require that one also affirm its instrumentalization. In fact, the profit model for mass culture and social media depends on users liking some things and not liking others. Unselective liking, such as Warhol's, is not valuable, is not instrumentalizable, in the same way. Liking everybody and everything — especially if everybody did it — would not only disrupt Facebook's financial model, it would challenge the basic model for mass culture more generally, where the audience attention that is sold to advertisers is valuable only to the extent that it is selectively exercised, indicating preferences that could be directed toward a purchase.

Even if liking everybody and liking everything is an impossible task (which I think it is), in a world such as ours where disillusionment, anxiety, depressive ambivalence, and alienation are as present as ever, where remaining interested and open to the world presents itself as an ongoing challenge, I am inspired by the unexpected connections and anticipatory hope opened up by Warhol's de-instrumentalized liking. Such a liking is not just a passive acceptance of the world as it is. Inasmuch as such liking is itself imitative, it brings likenesses into being; it changes the liked and the liker in ways it can be hard to predict in advance. Thus, in the present moment, I keep returning to the question: what resources do we have for de-instrumentalizing our liking?

The archive you draw on to discuss Warhol is vast and his collection is immeasurable and celebrated. The Warhol Museum archives both his collection and his art. However, museums don't typically attribute authorship to items in an artist's collection that have not been purposely curated as art by the artist. Jean-Michel Rabate, in *The Pathos of Distance*, has recently pointed to how, after modernism, the author's signature remained a dominant framing device for art that questioned originality. But with Warhol, there is not just the indexical signature but a post-mortem brand that authorizes official merchandise sold at most museum stores in New York. Does his transmutation of "liking" *itself* into art change the way that we should consider his authorship?

This is an interesting and difficult set of questions, in part because "authorship" is a concept with so many valences and meanings. I think you are right that Warhol's collecting carries with it its own odd sense of authorship. Does the collected object count as a "work" authored by Warhol? If we see Warhol's artistic practices as a kind of archive of his liking, how does this change what we see as a Warhol "work of art"? Is the very act of "liking" a kind of artistic creation? In a way, I take Warhol's challenge to authorship for granted in the book, as I see him participating in a "non-compositional" tradition going back to Duchamp. Of course, when he became a well-known painter in the early 1960s, it was not his collecting that disrupted received ideas about artistic

creativity and authorship, but his appropriation of already recognizable images of stars and consumer objects, and his mechanically reproduced repetitions on the canvas. The negation of the then-dominant Abstract Expressionism could hardly be more acute.

Yet, collecting is at an interesting liminal space between authorship and non-authorship. If it does not fit into usual conceptions of art-making, it is still the case that any given collection does seem to suggest a subjectivity behind it, an “I” liking things and putting them together into a group of things that “belong together.” Isn’t that a form of authorship? In the book, I sidestep the question of the authored *work* by focusing on collecting as a *practice*. I see Warhol’s career as being shaped by the effort to like things by assembling groups of likenesses, by producing and proliferating similarities, seeing and making similarity in as many ways as he could. Relating to the world as a collector was a way to ask of each object of perception: What collection do you belong to? What are you similar to?

Warhol tried to have a collector’s relationship with as many objects of perception that he could. His collections — whether we are talking about his perfumes, his celebrity photographs, his drawings of male genitalia, his art deco furniture, his watches, his rugs, the screen tests of people who came through the Factory, his hundreds of hours of tape recordings of his conversations, the series of images of similar-but-not-identical images of Marilyn Monroe or an abstract shadow in a painting, or the cardboard boxes he filled mainly with mail, photographs, newspaper clippings, poems, invitations, magazines, along with drawings, clothes, toys, the occasional food item, and just about anything else he did not want to throw out or did not have another collection for and called “Time Capsules” — are the record and map of the way of relating to the world that his collecting establishes. Some of his collections, however, were not for others to experience, but were there and valuable inasmuch as they allowed him to keep relating to the world as a collector, to help him maintain his state of ongoing liking. But even here, after his death, with his watches or perfumes, it is not hard to see or imagine the person who has “liked” the things in the collection, and thus to assimilate these collections into an expanded

notion of authorship.

Films like *Empire* are notoriously hard to watch completely (Anthology Film Archives gives a reward to those who can sit through it) and yet Warhol's difficulty in the avant-garde film context can translate to ambient easy watching in a gallery context (*Sleep*, for instance, played on loop in a Guggenheim show on Zen art). How does context and attention economy morph the reception of Warhol's work? How does he foster an affective attentiveness in the viewer, as you argue occurs in the watching of his durational films?

I think those durational films retain their power, at least in the setting of the film theater. I saw *Sleep* a couple years ago in Frankfurt with my friend Marc Siegel, and it was really fantastic as an aesthetic experience. I mean, setting aside that much time to sit and look at something — whatever it is — already means that something is going to happen. But the film so dramatically disappoints one's usual spectatorial habits that one has to be in the mood, ready to relax, and let the rhythm of the film structure your perception. Once that happens, one's sense of time and of perception more generally shifts into a kind of hallucinatory mode where the body of John Giorno in *Sleep* loses its identity, or shifts its identity over and over again. The squiggles and blips of the grain of the film come in and out of the center of one's attention. Patterns of light and shadow start to look like other things, like when you are staring at clouds and see "ice cream castles" and "feather canyons" (to borrow from Joni Mitchell). This all sounds fairly straightforward, but as a mode of experience, as a mood, a way of being in the world and of experiencing time, it feels like quite a departure from everyday life, even a negation of it, and in this sense it seems modernist. It draws you to other people, too, to ask them if they noticed those weird shapes in the corner or wonder with them if that was Giorno's underarm, or what was it? Or, is that his crotch right there, and if so, where is his knee? Are we looking up at the body of Giorno from the point of view of someone giving him a blowjob?

Warhol's serialism accumulates difference over time but also breaks apart the same-difference binary. From his drawings of various penises to his

multiple iterations of Marilyn, his serialism is never monotonous. As you put it, “[A]ffects and attractions never occur for the first time.” But can we pick out an original aptitude or event? Is it just a hall of transferential relations?

For Warhol, I think it is all imitations all the way. There is no original. We all come into being as subjects through imitation. What we imitate is also an imitation. But all these imitations fail in the sense that we never become what we imitate. In any imitation, there are mistakes, mistakes of contingency, or mistakes introduced by the medium. Whatever the medium is, whether it is paint on canvas or film or tape recorder or the human body itself, it always distorts and changes the model according to its own systems and logics and static. Warhol’s practice seems designed to highlight these deviations or distortions and to value them. He seems to be especially interested in the way that mass culture creates a situation in which many people will be imitating the same celebrity models (“think of all the James Deans and what it means”), thereby also becoming like each other. By way of Warhol, we can see how it is the intense imitation-encouraging liking of the fan that constitutes the glamour and “ideal” status of the star. The star’s glamour is the effect rather than the origin of mass fan idealization and imitation. Mass liking makes the star.

When you have lots of people imitating the same star in their own ways, as, for instance, at the Beyoncé concert I attended last spring, it can create a glorious, joyous sense of singularities fitting and misfitting together. Such a plural imitative spectatorial liking was one source of Warhol’s interest in drag queens as “ambulatory archives of ideal movie-star womanhood.” In their very comportment, drag queens make an archive, performing a scholarly service, in the ways that they have incorporated the gestures, looks, gaits, postures, and styles of stars. Warhol admired the mimetic talents required for the reshaping of one’s body in this way, as well as the affective intensity behind it. But Warhol was also drawn to the mode of conviviality or togetherness that shared imitation produced, a togetherness Warhol represents in his *Ladies and Gentlemen* series of paintings and prints of Black and Latinx drag queens. Among his sitters was the great Marsha P. Johnson, who remarked that

“[u]sually most transvestites are friendly towards one another because they’re just alike.” This friendliness, Johnson knew, could also be the basis of a politically active collectivity, which Johnson helped to form and create as a participant in the Stonewall Riot and co-founder with Sylvia Rivera of the Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries, or STAR. This actualized the political potential of this particular way of being in a group formed by likeness.

You talk about how Warhol was very alert to competition — for instance, altering his style when he saw Lichtenstein doing something too similar with comics. How did he respond to rivalries and falling-outs? What about those whom he had such shared affinity but difficulty collaborating with, like Jack Smith? How important was the regularity of Warhol’s finding himself hated, judged, and disliked to his practice of “liking”?

It is tough to say what motivated his liking, but it does seem like it mitigated, at least partially, his sense of rivalry, jealousy, and his experience of being disliked. He seemed to be unhappy with those falling-outs, though not as unhappy as he was with romantic breakups. I don’t know if Smith was a rival in Warhol’s view, although Warhol certainly loved his films, and took ideas and stars from him. José Esteban Muñoz told me that John Giorno (Warhol’s boyfriend for a while and the star of *Sleep*) said that he and Warhol saw *Flaming Creatures* every night for like two weeks or something like that. He took the idea of the “superstar” from Smith, who coined the term. But they had a hard time getting along and collaborating — this is dramatized in Warhol’s film *Camp*.

He was always jealous of Lichtenstein, noting, for instance, in his *Diaries*, how much Lichtenstein’s paintings sold for at auction in comparison to his. Lichtenstein’s always sold for more. He talks openly about his general tendency toward jealousy — which was a feeling he did not like having. His liking may have been an effort to compensate or redirect his feelings about those he felt similar to. The more envious he felt of those who were similar to him, the more he tried to like them.

You deftly show how Warhol's cultural miming was not an attempt to neatly blend in but rather about standing out, oddly, and at odds; what Warhol called being *atypical*. You highlight how the singularity of the *Screen Tests* is paradoxically plural in its openness to a multitude of subject positions that are never resolved by a catchall identity. How was he able to give the viewer a sense of enigmatic, if not auratic, originality?

I think Warhol's work shows us how singularity appears in fields of similarity. This is easiest to see in his collections, which are themselves techniques for the production of such fields. If one sees a teapot on a table one thinks, "Oh, there's a teapot." But if one sees one teapot among other teapots, features such as its oddly shaped spout with a little chip in the porcelain at the tip, the commonness of its color, the elegance of its handle, the particularity of its size all become apparent. It does not tend, when next to other teapots, to be perceived in its identity as a teapot so readily. Seeing them all together one might think: "Oh, I had not appreciated how many different ways there were of being a teapot!" I think that Warhol was attracted to collecting (and to collecting the flawed rather than the perfect object) in part because it allowed him to relate to the world in terms of similarity and singularity.

Warhol's 472 *Screen Tests* (filmed between 1964 and 1966) also form a group of similars. These portrait films are all like each other in their basic format, but the singularity of each sitter emerges in the particular way that each one fails — as they all do — to remain still. Even Ann Buchanan, who rather miraculously manages to not blink, cannot prevent her eyes from tearing up in a physiological response to the failure of her eyelids to re-lubricate her eyes. Which is to say that each sitter is brought together into a field of similarity — made alike — not only by the formal principles of the *Tests*, but also by her or his failure to fulfill an (impossible) request. The *Tests* set up everyone to succeed in failing. I see here an allegory for an idealized queer collectivity, one in which its members "misfit together" (in Warhol's phrase, also elaborated brilliantly by Douglas Crimp in his book on Warhol's films) inasmuch as its members fail (each in their own way) to meet the demand to fit into the given "stock roles."

Warhol was obviously attracted to groups brought together by voluntary practices of becoming-alike that create a way to belong and be with others without depending on one's capacity to be an identity or fit a role. Take, for instance, Warhol's interest in the "A-men" or "mole people" who hung around the Factory, a group brought together by their shared devotion to taking amphetamines. Because amphetamines predictably alter sensation and feeling in similar ways, taking them was a way to become like the others also taking the drug creates a kind of magic circle of lived similarity. One might see his whole career as an ongoing exploration of the creation of such magic circles and the modes of becoming they permitted and promised.

I was just rereading Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts*, where she takes note of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's call to "pluralize and specify" as one way to think about how "people are different" and to make room for that difference. I know that it is counterintuitive to think that orienting toward likeness could be a way to appreciate singularity and specificity. But it has the advantage of sidestepping the opposition between the same and the different, as well as the reifying effects of "identity." And it's not like one's likenesses are fixed; they don't attach to you the way identities do. One can "be like" lots of different things across many kinds of differences in ways that don't erase those differences so much as help us to apprehend them more precisely. We can enter into different magic circles of similarity, but then we can also move out of them. So I don't mean to propose that orienting one's feeling and perception toward likeness is the only way to apprehend and appreciate and experience singularities. But it is one way, and it is one that Warhol seemed endlessly interested in, not least because it seemed to enable him to imagine the existence — and even participate in — groups of non-miserable, even joyous, plural queer singularities.

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Felix Bernstein is the author of Burn Book (Nightboat, 2017).

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[1] “What is Pop Art?’ A Revised Transcript of Gene Swenson’s 1963 Interview with Andy Warhol.” Transcribed and edited by Jennifer Sichel, *Oxford Art Journal*, 41.1 2018 85–100; and Jennifer Sichel “Do you think Pop Art’s queer?’ Gene Swenson and Andy Warhol,” *Oxford Art Journal*, 41.1 2018, 1-25.

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