

There's no mistaking what's going on in this portrait of a naked man; the vintage physique photo has been censored by a slash across the model's pelvis. "The white band both arouses and frustrates our desire to see what lies beneath it, to see 'the best bit' of Ben Montgomery's portrait. As viewers of this photograph, we may try to imagine it prior to the imposition of the diagonal white band. Yet the partially blocked picture is all that survives," reads the text.

In this analysis of a censored photo – and in thousands of other examples – Richard Meyer's *Outlaw Representation* proves to be a triumphant exploration of how conflicts over censorship and homosexuality have transformed the history of modern art in America. From Mapplethorpe to Warhol, the author masterfully charts the complex confluence of sexuality and politics as we witness again and again the collision between gay sensibility and the long arm of the law.

Okay, I'm no stranger to these battles, since as one of the so-called NEA Four, I learned first hand what it's like to have your creative work in the crosshairs of people like Jesse Helms. Nonetheless, I was blown away by Meyer's grasp of his subject and the light he shines onto this sad litany of censorship in America.

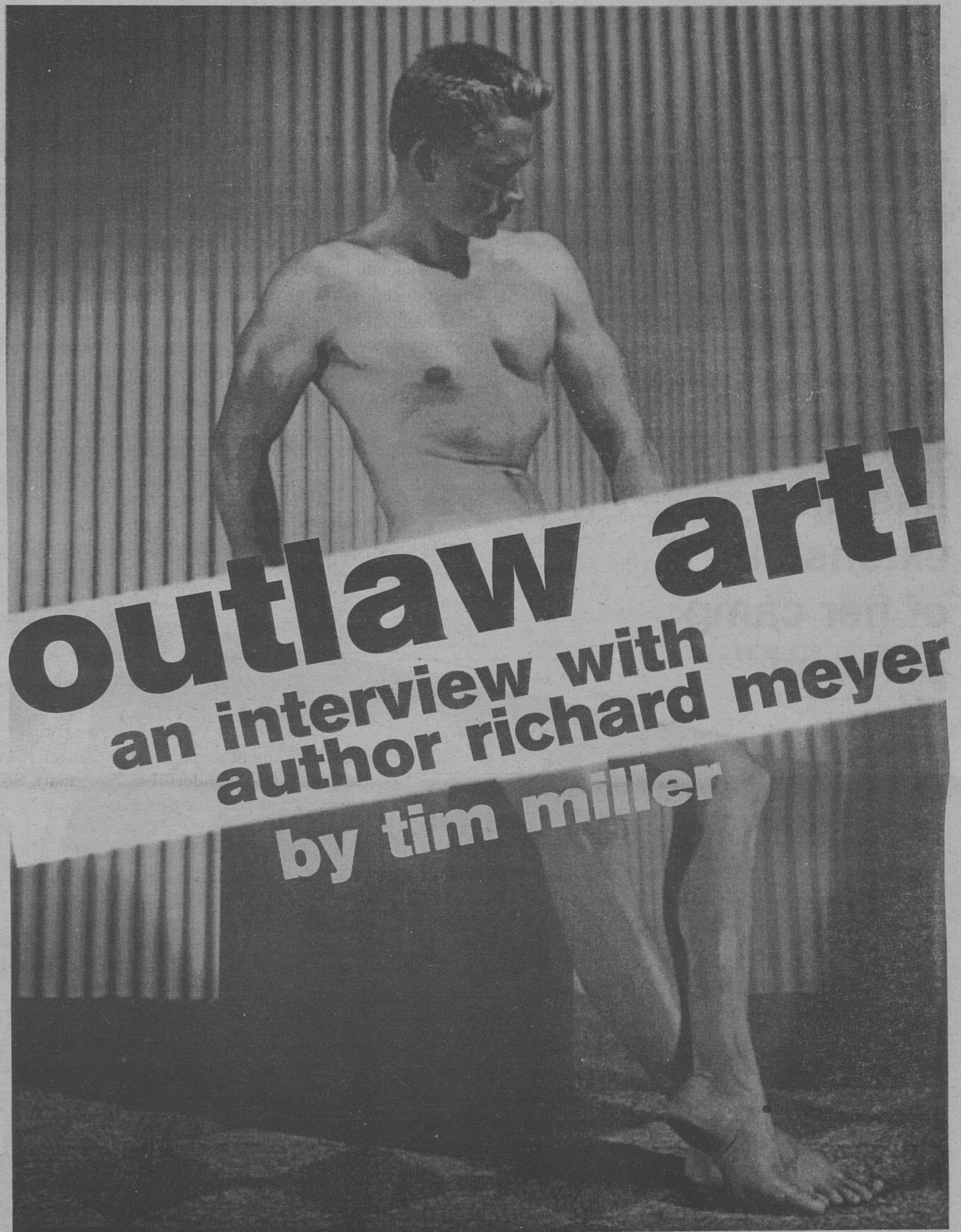
I found the book intensely reassuring about the courage of gay artists in the face of such attacks on freedom of expression. As I read *Outlaw Representation*, I was struck by how skillfully Meyer locates the ways both artists and subjects managed to get around censorship, claim power over their creativity, and sometimes even challenge the unjust authority that was messing with them. He shares with the reader an amazing analysis of the famous Weegee photo from the late 1930's of the drag queen being arrested but still finding the feistiness and agency to mug a huge smile for the camera.

"What I love about that picture, in addition to its title, 'The Gay Deceiver,'" Meyer explained in an interview, "is the way the drag queen turns the circumstances of her arrest into an extension of her camp persona. Rather than hiding her face in shame, as did most of the other people Weegee photographed in the midst of being arrested, The Gay Deceiver makes the most of her appearance before the camera – she lifts her skirt and smiles while stepping daintily out of the paddy wagon. It's as though the police station has become her stage set and Weegee her own personal glamour photographer. The Gay Deceiver embraces her role as an outlaw even as she re-imagines that role from her perspective as a drag queen."

It's this kind of deep empathy for the artists who created the images as well as the subjects and viewers that makes *Outlaw Representation* as moving as it is smart. The impressive historical reach of the book really invites the reader to realize that the censoring of queer art has always been as American as apple pie. I recently talked with Richard Meyer about art, queerness and outlaws.

Tim Miller: What led you to write a book on censorship and homosexuality in American art?

Richard Meyer: During the controversies over federal funding and homoerotic art in the late 1980s, I was working toward a Ph.D. in art history at U.C. Berkeley. I increasingly began to think about how I might use my scholarly training to situate the censorship of gay art as something that began long before



Jesse Helms denounced Mapplethorpe on the floor of the U.S. Senate.

As part of this effort, I researched and eventually interviewed Paul Cadmus, an artist whose painting of sailors on shore leave, "The Fleet's In!" was confiscated by the Navy in 1934 and denounced as a "disgraceful orgy."

The painting featured a group of sailors carousing on Riverside Drive along with several women and a single male civilian who embodied period stereotypes of the homosexual – red tie, dyed blond hair, rouged cheeks. One of the things that interested me about the censorship of "The Fleet's In!" was that its portrayal of homosexuality was never acknowledged in the 1930s, even though that portrayal was surely a part of the reason why the work was censored. Even as military officials were troubled enough by "The Fleet's In!" to seize it from a museum under cover of night, they could not fully describe or explain the problem the work presented.

As it happened, "The Fleet's In!" was confiscated from the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington D.C. More than fifty years later, that

same museum would cancel Robert Mapplethorpe's retrospective exhibition "The Perfect Moment" under pressure from conservative politicians and religious groups. From Cadmus to Mapplethorpe and beyond, my book traces the conflicts surrounding art, homosexuality, and politics in America.

TM: Why did you call the book *Outlaw Representation*? Is gay artistic production inevitably in some way "criminalized?"

RM: Throughout the last century, homoerotic art has often been attacked as obscene, immoral, or otherwise illegitimate. Yet, as I argue in my book, gay artists have found creative ways to use the outlaw status of homosexuality as a means of responding to the attacks on their work. Andy Warhol, for example, drew upon the gritty allure of police mug-shots in his mural for the 1964 World's Fair, a painting comprised entirely of silkscreened blow-ups of the police department's "most wanted men." Just before the