

The prints in this exhibition have survived thanks to Charles Rue Woods, a member of the Happy Arts School of Manuscript Illumination. His generosity and willingness to discuss his time working with Varble have been essential to this project, and I am grateful for his friendship. I also thank Ree Wilson for his recollections and for the loan of Varble's early print. Support for the preparation of the video has been provided by the Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts. This exhibition would not have happened without Paul Brown's enthusiasm. It has been an honor to work with him to bring some of Varble's work to Kentucky, where it will remain. Upon completion of the exhibition, the xerographic prints will be donated to the Faulkner-Morgan Archive in recognition of its important work preserving Kentucky's LGBT histories.

–DAVID J. GETSY

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Stephen Varble: An Antidote to Nature's Ruin on this Heavenly Globe
Prints and Video from the Early 1980s

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Stephen Varble's Xerographic Dreams

David J. Getsy

In 1976, the artist and philosopher Adrian Piper wrote a manifesto titled “Cheap Art Utopia,” where she envisioned remaking the art world through mass circulation. “Suppose art were as accessible to everyone as comic books? as cheap and as available?”¹ Piper was a contemporary of Varble's who, like him, disrupted the proprieties of public spaces through performances that broke social rules, complicated gender, and erupted into shared, non-art spaces. Both reconsidered art outside of conventional commercial patterns and precious objects. Piper's text was intended to reconsider the aura attributed to the unique object and the system of value that supported it. She posited an alternative in mass-distributed, cheaply-made art. “People would have to be able to discriminate quality in art without the trappings of preciousness, such as the gilt frame, the six-figure price tag, the plexiglass case, the roped-off area around the work, etc.”

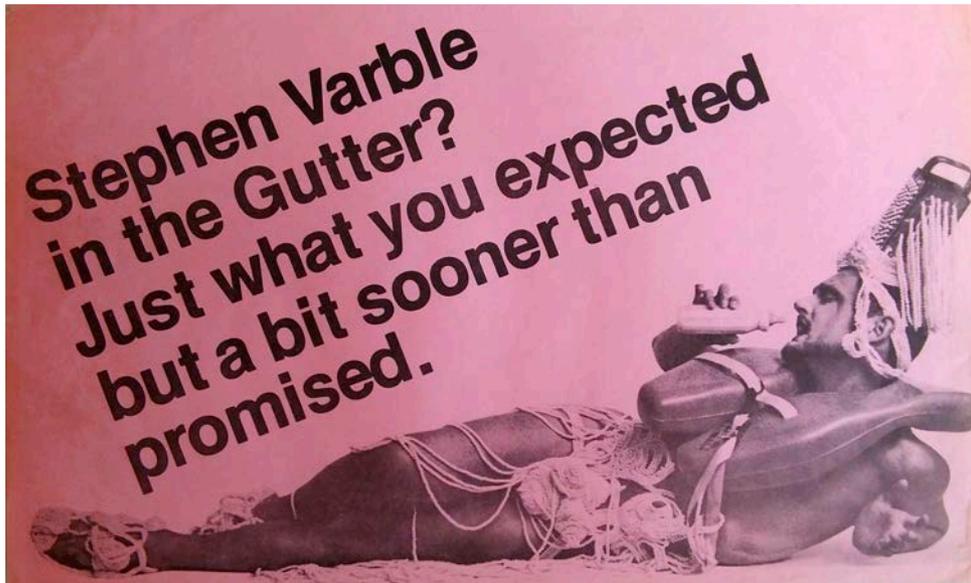


Figure 1
 Stephen Varble,
 photocopied Gutter
 Art flier [recto],
 1975, on pink paper,
 approx. 8.5 x 11in.

Varble’s work had long been invested in the alchemical transformation of trash, in the ephemeral performance-as-intervention, and in the idea of operating outside of the sanctioned spaces of art. This began with his participation in the milieu of New York Fluxus and its culture of performance of and with the everyday. From that foundation, Varble began his legendary appearances as Marie Debris in couture made of discarded and reclaimed rubbish. Like Piper, he was invested in the idea of the cheap and its resistant potential. [Figure 1]

In the later 1970s and early 1980s, he started to envision a practice similar to the one Piper foretold – a mass art of the reproducible image that gained its value by virtue of it being accessible, multiple, and easily distributable. Varble did this by making “prints” using a photocopy machine, and he thought of creating mass-produced books in which his drawings and his words would circulate outside of the

conventional commercial system of the buying and selling of art. This was a key part of his practice of the early 1980s and ran alongside the work he committed himself to most fully – the making of an epic and operatic video titled *Journey to the Sun*. Varble turned to video as another means of thinking about the mass-distribution of his works, and he thought of his tapes as “video books.” His videos and his xerographic prints were components of Varble’s utopian ambitions to make “cheap art” similar to the kind that Piper prophesied. These reproducible works were intended to move into the world, transforming it through his vision.

In what follows, I will provide a brief summary of Varble’s career up to the late 1970s, and I will then examine his creation of the xerographic prints in the early 1980s in relation to his prophetic ambitions. This exhibition focuses on Varble’s interest in reproducible media, and it shows how he was transforming his own work through the embrace of technologies that allowed for artists to self-publish and circumvent the conventional commercial art world. The search for an alternative to art’s commerce had driven his performance art, and this turn to the photocopied image was an extension of those priorities.

Rubbish and Dreams²

Varble came to be “considered by some the embarrassment of SoHo, and by others the only touch of real genius south of Houston street.”³ With these words, the art critic Gregory Battcock captured the contradictory appeal of this disruptive, driven artist. In elaborate, gender-confounding costumes made from street trash, food waste, and found objects, Varble erupted into New York’s streets. In his “Costume Tours

of New York” in 1975 and 1976, he would lead onlookers on unauthorized visits to art galleries and other sites of commercial luxury. Without warning, Varble would appear as a vision of transformed trash in a dress of milk cartons, chicken bones, and pipe cleaners. A pantomimed performance would end with a swooning bow that spilled milk out onto a gallery floor, with him sweeping out to lead viewers to the next confrontation with art’s commerce.

The “Costume Tours” were some of Varble’s most visible and outrageous performances of the 1970s, but they form only a part of his adventurous and largely unknown work. He presented outrageous displays of gender subversion that took aim at the commercialism of the art world, that reflected back the media spectacle of American culture, and that parodied institutions that turned art into a commodity out of the reach of the public.

Varble was born in 1946 in Owensboro, Kentucky, and his story starts in the environment of Lexington, where he was an undergraduate at the University of Kentucky. Experiencing first-hand the culture of queer performance that was deeply rooted in the city, Varble developed a mode of performance that refused propriety and that adapted tactics of gender performance. With groups like Lexington’s Pagan Babies as an inspiration, Varble moved to New York, where he completed an MFA in Film Directing at Columbia University in 1971. In these years, he gravitated towards Jack Smith and was a regular observer of Smith’s late-night loft performances. From Smith, Varble learned a hostility to institutions and their commodification of art and artists, and he would build upon Smith’s example in his own creation of mobile performances and, later, videos that attacked art’s commercialism.

Varble shifted from film to performance art through

involvement with the important Fluxus artist Geoffrey Hendricks, who was his partner and sometimes collaborator in the early 1970s. It was in collaboration with Hendricks that Varble did his first performances for New York’s city streets – the *Blind Walks* – that involved him moving blindfolded through Manhattan. The two toured a collaborative performance in Europe, and he began making elaborate costumes out of found or appropriated materials. Costume, he soon realized, allowed him to move through yet somehow outside of the everyday. Whether in a wedding dress made from pieces of wood and twigs or an elaborate garment made from Hendricks’s slides of his family, Varble invested in costume sculpture as a vehicle for magical transformation. He also developed his style of performance that was based on a form of pantomime and was largely silent except for whispered words and bird-like sounds. Combined with his staccato dance-inspired movements, his performances grew to have an aura of the fantastic or otherworldly.

His output was as eclectic as his outfits. He did everything from direct an educational film for CUNY (*Heavy Duty: A Film Study of the Classroom Paraprofessional*) to ghost-writing a book on art auctions (*The Elegant Auctioneers* by Wesley Towner) to writing for *Andy Warhol’s Interview* (with pieces, published and unpublished, on novelist James Purdy and artist Charlotte Moorman).⁴ His plays were performed at Lincoln Center’s Repertory Theater, at colleges, and – most importantly – at La MaMa ETC, which hosted his 1973 play *Silent Prayer* (with sets by Hendricks and costumes by Varble).⁵ His performances grew out of his writing’s blend of autobiography and fiction, and he invented characters that took to the streets in his costume sculptures made from trash.



Figure 2
Unknown photographer,
Stephen Varble during the
Chemical Bank Protest,
1976. Collection of the
Leslie-Lohman Museum of
Gay and Lesbian Art
(Gift of Geoffrey Hendricks
in memory of Stephen
Varble).

Varble made the recombination of signs for gender a central theme in his increasingly outrageous costumes and performances. While maintaining he/him as his pronoun, Varble performed gender as an open question in both his life and his work, sometimes identifying as a female persona, Marie Debris, and sometimes playing up his appearance to others as a gay man. Only later, in the late 1990s, would the term “genderqueer” emerge to describe the kind of self-made, non-binary gender options that Varble adopted throughout his life and in his disruptions of the 1970s art world.

Taking to the streets, he directed his antagonistic costume performances at sites of commercialization and commodification. For instance, in March of 1976, he staged the *Chemical Bank Protest* in which he marched into a Sheridan Square bank to demand that funds from a forged check be returned to him. [Figure 2] To the surprise of onlookers (and to the horror of the unwitting bank manager unfortunate enough to be working that day), Varble arrived in a dress made of the packaging from a Christmas tree adorned with fake dollar bills combined with a toy fighter jet as a loin cloth. Upon being told that he could not be helped, Varble proceeded to use a fountain pen to puncture the breasts he had made for his costume out of two condoms filled with cow’s blood. Using the blood as ink, he began signing bad checks for \$0,000,000 (none-million) before leaving the bank (to the applause of the bank patrons waiting in the cashier’s line). This was one of many of Varble’s protest performances at locations where the forces of money, luxury, and gentrification coalesced, and he also did similar interventions at SoHo Galleries, fashion boutiques such as Halston’s, and, of course, at Tiffany’s on Fifth Avenue.

Varble had a messianic attitude that was critical of capitalism and its exploitations. Extending some of the ideas gleaned from Jack Smith’s work, he increasingly declared himself a prophet whose aim was to expose and undercut commercialism, the conformity of gender in public spaces, and the unequal distribution of wealth. He did this by staging his genderqueer costumed performances that mocked wealth and cultural power. His most visible version of this was his performance *Gutter Art* in which he traveled through Manhattan in a borrowed limousine to stop at sites such as Fifth Avenue stores and the Metropolitan Museum in order to sit in the gutter and wash dishes he had taken out of the luxury car’s trunk. Varble exposed himself to real violence and police harassment for his unauthorized performances, and he bravely confounded expectations of gender and sexuality in public as a means of interrupting the proprieties of capital and class. Such fearlessness characterized his public interventions until, in 1977, he began to recede from the art world and from public performance in order to work on his videos, books, and drawings.

The Happy Arts of Illumination and Dissemination, 1977 to 1984

Before Varble moved from Kentucky to New York in 1969 to go to graduate school for film directing, his main interest had been writing, and he worked on plays, poems, and novels during his years in Owensboro and Lexington. He fretted over the shape and content of these writings. In long, often frantic letters, he would write to his friend Susan King about the characters, plots, and stylistic choices, and he would intersperse these letters with drawn images and symbols.

His other main creative outlet centered on the visual practice of making drawings, collages, and prints. Already in these early years, Varble's drawing style economically used sinewy lines to stylize his subjects, which often focused on images of strong women or coy mockeries of power and propriety.

Included in this exhibition is a print made while Varble was an undergraduate at the University of Kentucky, showing Greta Garbo. (See p. 30) This early example of his printmaking is evidence of his experience and interest in the medium. He understood from the beginning that his work in drawing could always be transformed into the reproducible print.

More importantly, the content of the work foretells his life-long obsession with the elusive Swedish actress. Varble identified with Garbo strongly, and he would even tell friends in his later years that he could speak telepathically to her (in the bathtub). The combination of her quiet power and her diamond-cut beauty made her Varble's ideal. Her role as the gender-crossing lead in *Queen Christina* (1933) was impactful for him as he navigated his own relationship to gender identity, and he regularly patterned himself after her throughout his career. He staged candlelight vigils that used Garbo's Manhattan home as a landmark, and his epic *Journey to the Sun* was started as an homage to her — the "Garbo Myth Ballet," as one note described it. Throughout his video work, she is regularly invoked. The prelude to *Journey to the Sun*, a discrete video book created to honor the intellectual and emotional sources of the main video, is largely a visual poem to Garbo through footage of a stand-in for her — a woman named Phyllis who also frequented the park facing Varble's apartment where much of the footage of *Journey to the Sun* was filmed. Her profile regularly reappears across the drawings and prints. A particularly telling drawing (now in

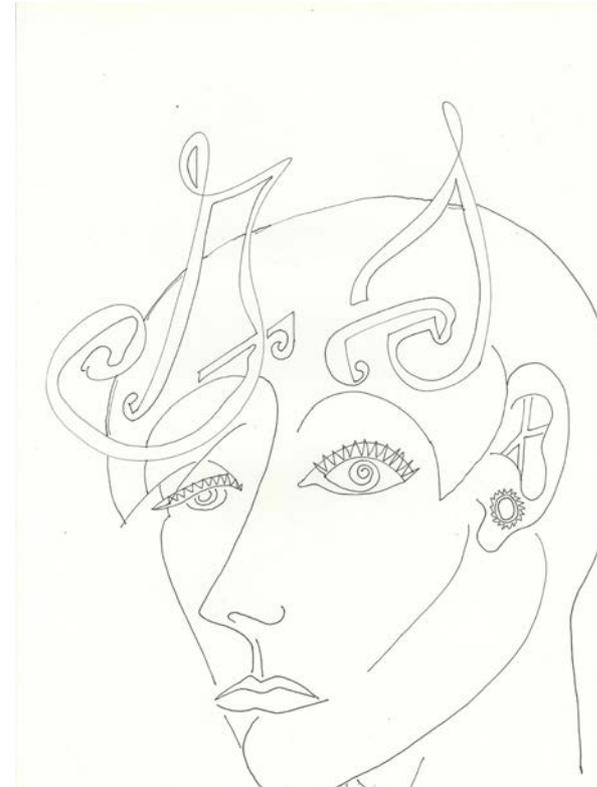


Figure 3
Stephen Varble,
untitled drawing
[G.S.], ca.1981-83.
Ink on paper, approx.
9x12in. Collection of
the Leslie-Lohman
Museum of Gay and
Lesbian Art (Gift of
Geoffrey Hendricks
in memory of
Stephen Varble).

the collection of the Leslie-Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art) shows a stylized image of Garbo based on a publicity photo for her 1931 role in the film *Mata Hari*. Above the face, the letters "G" and "S" have been written above to signify "Greta Stephen." This life-long identification with Garbo stretched back, as the print from the 1960s indicates, to his undergraduate days in Lexington. [Figure 3]

Varble returned to printmaking in the form of the photocopy. This medium worked well with his decidedly anti-commercial and anti-institutional attitudes. Even though he courted publicity, he resisted commodification and the traffic

in art objects. Instead, he offered free street theater in the form of his costume disruptions and uninvited appearances at exhibition openings. He began to use Xerox machines extensively, since they allowed him to create cheap and distributable notices advertising his events and expounding on his views. He regularly wrote press releases, and he would hand them out in costume on Manhattan street corners (sometimes accompanied by a friend such as New York drag personality Ruth Truth, also in costume). He also mailed his hyperbolic publicity to friends, artists, and art critics. Among his addressees were Battcock, Lucy Lippard, Ray Johnson, Scott Burton, Robert Rosenblum, and James Purdy. He once announced that was writing an autobiography to be called *My Press Release Life*, and he serialized stories of his life that blended fiction heavily with fact. These would be sent out to his mailing list and included wild tales of his exploits alongside Xeroxed letters of rejection from curators such as Marcia Tucker (then at the Whitney Museum of American Art). He extended this format into a mock newspaper, the *Babylonian Sunday Times*, but it only appeared for one issue in 1976.

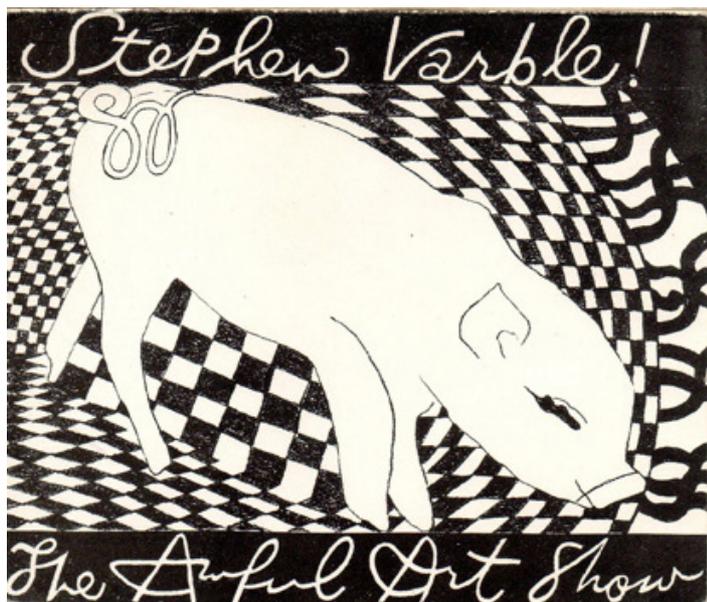
When he sent his mail art to his friends, however, he would sometimes ask for the large sum of \$25 for the next installment of these cheap fliers. (None appear to have ever taken this seriously, and they continued to receive the mailings.) This hyper-valuation of his otherwise free fliers was both a not-so-subtle request for a hand-out to support his continued artistic output and a way of ironically registering his central strategy — transforming the discarded or the cheap into the remarkable, the glamorous, and the visionary.

Such outrageous over-charging was another of Varble's many tactics for exposing and imploding commercialism.

For instance, after his *Chemical Bank Protest* on 22 March 1976, he wrote to Chemical Bank's Vice-President of Public Relations, William Carlin, offering his services as publicity agent for the bank. Given that this letter came after Varble had recently spilled blood inside the Sheridan Square branch and disrupted its operations, it was doubtful that any corporation would have taken him on. Varble knew this, and the letter itself was a performance.⁶ Declaring that the bank would "make history" by hiring him, he also warned, "My fees are inconceivably high, but I work with an international brain-pool and we are worth it." Varble photocopied this letter, and others like it, to distribute to friends and others. These open letters were created with the intent that they would be reproducible. As with his fliers and press releases, Varble saw the opportunity to reach a wider audience through the duplication and distribution made possible by Xerox machines.

Varble's aim was to vex the commercial interests that looked to his outrageous performances as possibilities for publicity. He did this by using trash, freely distributing photocopies, and making demands for astronomical fees for services. He flirted with commerce only to make it infeasible due to his hyperbolic self-valuation of the cheap. This is also evident in the two exhibitions he had in his lifetime. The first he staged for himself in April of 1976 at the loft he shared with the artist Jim McWilliams on Franklin Street in New York. The works were technically for sale, but Varble proclaimed that he had sold the entire show to his patron, the Japanese noble and art collector Miyazaki Morihiro. Miyazaki had become captivated by Varble's unorthodox performances, and he financially supported Varble (which included providing the limousines used as props). McWilliams recalled, "Stephen had the idea

Figure 4
Stephen Varble,
invitation to Awful Art
at Brooks Jackson
Iolas Gallery, 1977.



that he provided private theater for Morihiro, and it had to be paid for.”⁷ While Varble “sold” the costumes to Miyazaki (who stored them after Varble had been kicked out of his loft), he later reclaimed them all. They appear throughout *Journey to the Sun* being worn by Varble and his collaborators. He never intended to relinquish them, despite their being purchased. A year later, Varble had his only exhibition at a commercial gallery. On 29 March 1977, he opened the “Awful Art Show” at Brooks Jackson Iolas Gallery. [Figure 4]

The storied gallery had a history of showing works that drew liberally on a Surrealist legacy. A series of negotiations ensued as the gallery pressed Varble for works that could sell.⁸ Varble’s main output to this point had been the costumes and performances. The gallery insisted on something more, and Varble started making drawings again. These works, like the title of the show itself, bristled at being absorbed as

a commodity. They were filled with text, with titles such as “Pigs” and “Ugly.” One read, “Awful Art results not from a desire to create something beautiful but from a desire to make money which is rapidly succeeded by a need to overcome boredom.” Another had a section covered in pencil except for letters which stated “a blank space used to dwell here.” Varble made these text-image drawings to fulfill the gallery’s need for sellable objects but also as statements of protest against (or, at least, boredom with) that commodification. He even went further, including in the exhibition make-up and audio cassettes to be sold alongside the costumes, painted flat mannequins (depicting Varble nude), and his garish make-up. In this way, he cheapened the drawings by making everything in the “Awful Art” exhibition merely (over-priced) merchandise.

However, in the return to drawing Varble found new inspiration. After making the works for the exhibition, he embarked on his own series of drawings, which he called “illuminations” in emulation of Medieval illuminated manuscripts. Whereas his gallery show had been examples of his “Awful Art,” he now started making “Happy Art.” Like the Medieval religious works he cited as his model, he saw these new drawings as vehicles for combining poems and polemics with his images. “Happy Art is essentially a mystical experience,” he would later write.⁹ His first “Happy Art” drawings (none of which are extant) depicted peacocks and other birds in dense fields of poems and lines. There was talk of a second exhibition at Brooks Jackson Iolas Gallery, but Varble warned that he would over-price the drawings at \$35,000 each—an astronomical sum for an artist with Varble’s reputation. He did offer, however, to allow the gallery to sell photographic reproductions of the drawings (at \$2000 to \$4000 a piece!).¹⁰ They declined to take him up on this still-

exorbitant offer, but Varble's interest in the reproduction and dissemination of his drawings had been ignited.

Soon after, Varble returned to Kentucky in the summer of 1977, and he published a statement in the *Village Voice* that read:

I'm giving up art in New York, you know, and going to Kentucky. I will open up a Happy Art Shoe Shine Stand there in a room made of drawings. People can come in and I'll shine their shoes and give them spiritual counseling. The rags I use will be white velvet, and after I shine the shoe, I'll sign the rag, or something. The foot, you know, is the eternal connection.¹

Much like his "Gutter Art," Varble chose the metaphor of the shoe shine stand as a way of embracing and elevating the low. As always, this was tied up with his ironic critique of commodification and the value of art — with his offer to sign the shoe shine rags.

The Happy Art Shoe Shine Stand does not seem to have ever been realized as a physical entity, but Varble did follow through on the "room made of drawings." Upon returning to New York in the Fall of 1977, he met Daniel Cahill, a Merchant Marine captain who would be Varble's partner for the rest of his life. Cahill had long been involved with Subud, a spiritual movement that originated in Indonesia but had spread globally in the 1950s and 1960s. He had studied at Coombe Springs, an estate in England where J. G. Bennet helped promote the teachings of Subud's founder, Muhammad Pak Subuh, and of George Gurdjieff. Cahill re-ignited Varble's spirituality. Varble retreated from performance art to focus on this spiritual work of making these cycles of drawings. He founded "The Happy Arts School of Manuscript Illumination," and he filled the

Riverside Drive apartment he shared with Cahill with floor-to-ceiling drawings. He explained in a 1977 interview,

Now I want my clothes to extend to the walls, as well. In other words, I want to create situations and settings, music and lyrics which will enhance and dignify the soul. It is no easy task in a world so wasteful, so material. Soon I hope to open the Happy Art School of Manuscript Illumination. Here students will learn many secrets, not the least of which will be a glimpse of eternity or a holy pear or tomato growing in the stomach of a white impala.¹²

Varble came to see his drawing practice as a means of spreading his message and his critique of capitalism. He told another interviewer, "This is the age of pornography and contempt. The dollar is god," and "The end of capitalism is coming."¹³

Varble became more messianic in his attitudes, activating a martyr-like mentality that had always been a part of his work. He retreated from the art world and stopped doing his public interventions. Instead he began to return to writing, and he scripted elaborate performances that he would host in his apartment. Again patterning his work after Jack Smith, he used projected slides and costumes to create these works. The "Garbo Myth Ballet" started as one of these performances, and it evolved into the epic *Journey to the Sun* as Varble turned from performance to video. [Figure 5] Video afforded Varble the ability to work with both text and image, and he often included long monologues that would be interspersed with rapidly cut imagery of himself and his collaborators in his costume sculptures. He and Cahill acquired editing equipment. Drawing on his background in film, Varble edited all of the videos himself. He was also an early adopter of the

Figure 5
Stephen Varble,
video stills from
Journey to the Sun,
1978–83.



home computer, and he created concrete poetry works with a receipt-width printer. He purchased one of the first amateur music synthesizers, the alphaSyntauri, and composed music for his videos on it. He threw himself into video. Windows in the apartment were blacked out to make a recording studio, and he filled the apartment with dense and expansive drawings that combined his spiritual writings with images. Drawing re-emerged for Varble as the counterpart to his work in video, and he saw both as being modern explorations of the Medieval manuscript's invested combination of image and text. Varble called his video tapes "books," and saw them as being part of a system of distribution that would promote his salvation of the world — he understood his own mission in such grand terms.

It was in this context that Varble fully embraced the technology of the Xerox machine. He explored it as a way to make collages, and he began using it to multiply the permutations of his images. His interest in drawing increased with these outputs in view. He planned books, and as early as 1978 he had completed an illustrated manuscript, the *Book of Eyes*, that he attempted to get published. Varble was unsuccessful with the commercial publishing industry, despite having friends on the inside. His words and his images were too unorthodox, and Varble began to think of other ways of distributing and making them. Again, the photocopy became an enabling technology.

Sometime around 1980 or 1981, Varble started making line drawings intended for reproduction. These differ from other works that had previously used more color and collaged elements. Usually in black and white, these drawings were intended for xerography, and there is regular use of Whiteout, a correction fluid that made mistakes disappear when the drawing was photocopied. In the first group of these line

drawings, Varble worked hard to achieve visual density, with backgrounds filled with patterns and words. In some of the originals, he delicately cut out tiny lattices to be glued to paper to achieve the effects. These drawings tended to have an internal frame and be more packed in the scenes they presented. Sometime after, he dispensed with the densely-filled internal frame to focus on the ways in which figures and the permutations could be rendered in outline drawings. Both tendencies in Varble's late drawings are included in this exhibition in the form of the xerographic prints he made from them.

I have used the phrase "xerographic print" to capture the contradictions of Varble's practice. These works are, on the one hand, cheaply produced and intended for reproduction and dissemination. On the other, they were crafted with a fastidiousness and delicacy more akin to the engraver preparing their plate. They are cousins to, but visually unlike, much of the Xerox art and 'zine production that photocopy technology enabled. Varble's ideals for this work were related to the ambitions of such work, and there is an extensive history of 'zines and of artists (from Pati Hill to Stan Van Der Beek to José Leonilson) using the Xerox machine as an artistic tool. Already by 1970, there was a course at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (taught by Sonia Landy Sheridan) on the artistic deployment of the photocopy machine.¹⁴ Varble was an enthusiastic adopter of new technology, and he was actively using both monochrome and color photocopy machines by the early 1980s. As had been evident in his thoughts about photographic reproductions of his 1977 drawings, his interest was in producing equivalent versions of his drawings that he could send into the world. While cheaply made, he fretted over their precision and qualities. Since the drawings were clearly made to be photocopied in this careful way, they achieve the



Figure 6
Stephen Varble,
untitled self-portrait,
1983. Xerographic
print with woven
metallic foil border
and hand-colored
edges, approx.
9x12in. Leslie
Lohman Museum,
Gift of Charles Rue
Woods

achieve the status of the print rather than (as he had in the mid 1970s) the flier or leaflet.

One member of the Happy Arts School, Charles Rue Woods had initially moved from Kentucky to New York in 1975 and later became a regular participant in the weekly meetings at Varble and Cahill's apartment in 1982 and 1983. He recalled,

I know he liked to take the originals and go a friendly color Xerox place on Broadway near the Riverside Drive apartment and play around with doing them in color variations. Any and all color xeroxing would have been done at those neighborhood joints. He was probably pretty exacting with the staff at the color Xerox place (like today's Kinko's) about what he wanted. I know he was a good customer, because he made lots.¹⁵

There are multiple versions of some prints with variations, and Varble also made base drawings from which he would make multiple copies to be hand-altered. Woods worked at Simon & Schuster Publishing Company, and he would make additional copies after Varble's originals and copies at his office. The xerographic prints survive thanks to their safeguarding by Woods, including a color xerographic self-

portrait Varble made from a video still of *Journey to the Sun* and gave to Woods. [Figure 6]

While only a fragmentary record of larger narratives and cycles of drawings, the prints and video of the early 1980s give a sense of Varble's inventiveness. The content of the prints ranges from images of streetworkers to mythical scenes of judgement, and it is not entirely clear how they might have worked together as ensembles or books. Throughout these works, he restrained himself to black on white with the understanding that this would transfer to the subsequent prints, and this restriction prompted him to be even more adventurous in making his images within images. Throughout, Varble's themes of transformation, doubling, and vision are evident. Many contain images of figures (often looking like Varble or Varble-as-Garbo) looking at or inside themselves. He used line promiscuously in these works, demonstrating how it could metamorphose between bodies, scales, and scenes in a single print. Faces stare out with eyes made of faces, figures look at their doubles, and chic caricatures flow freely. Such works relate to Varble's daily practice of self-observation and self-evaluation, but they also attest to the searching and spiritual nature of his practice — however riven with his wicked sense of humor and irreverence.

These prints were part of Varble's belief that his work could help the world beyond its imminent collapse. Together with the work on the "video books" of the epic *Journey to the Sun*, they evidence Varble's enthusiasm for reproducible media that he could distribute to the world. He was rarely interested in making overly precious objects. After all, his performance practice took place in the gutter and relied on exuberant costumes crafted from transformed trash. Cheap art was part of his thinking, and his embrace of the photocopy

machine was in line with his disdain for commercialism, capitalism, and commodification. He chose to implode these systems from within, and his over-priced artworks and his delicately-prepared yet inexpensive Xeroxes both result from such inversions of the expected assignment of value.

His work on his video books and illuminations was abruptly halted when Varble died from AIDS-related complications in the first days of 1984. Across the decade of his work, however, he had created performance art and costume sculptures that challenged the expectations of "fine art" and that took genderqueer presentations to the streets. He lampooned the art world's pretensions, and he styled himself as a prophet for a world corrupted by commerce, capitalism, and the class conflict. The street was his stage, and he believed in making work that did not require the authorization of an institution. He took to art's peripheral spaces to establish a distance from which he could glamorously lampoon the idea that art was a commodity unavailable to the everyday person. He remade himself as the prophet of possibility, showing others how to take rubbish and turn it into dreams

In the early 1980s, his prints, video books, and manuscripts were the tools he planned to use to show the world a way out of capitalist materialism and empty commodification. In a 1983 text announcing *Lady Hercules*, the prelude to *Journey to the Sun*, Varble explained the aims of the Happy Arts School and its mission to assist in the world's wrenching transformation. He declared,

THE HAPPY ARTS SCHOOL OF MANUSCRIPT ILLUMINATION is an association of aspiring artists seeking to revive and express in modern media the values and traditions of the great medieval schools of manuscript illumination such as those which

produced the Book of Kells and the Lindisfarne Gospels. In addition to the use of inks, paints, parchments, and computers, the artists of the school are well versed in cinematography, videography, music composition and performance, English usage (both poetry and prose), dance, and gem fire editing. The current work of the School is JOURNEY TO THE SUN, an infinitely spacious epic, recorded on video laces, allegorically radiant in its display of all religions and processes of purification, self-perfection, and fun-filled sequestrations possible for modern man—in effect, an around-the-clock antidote to nature’s ruin on this heavenly globe.¹⁶

The xerographic prints give a glimpse of Varble’s wild ambitions and the world he envisioned. Like much of Varble’s work, only a small amount has survived, but even these few prints show the spirit, if not the full effect, of the “antidote” that Varble set himself to create and disseminate.

¹ Adrian Piper, “Cheap Art Utopia,” *Art-Rite 14* (Winter 1976–1977): 11-12; reprinted in *Adrian Piper: Out of Order, Out of Sight, Volume II: Selected Writings in Art Criticism 1967–1992* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1996), 33-34. It is worth noting that Piper published her text in *Art-Rite*, an artist-run magazine that defined itself in opposition to glossy art magazines and insisted on using newsprint. See Edit deAk and Alan Vega, “Edit deAk and Alan Vega in Conversation with Mathieu Copeland,” in *Alan Suicide Vega: Infinite Mercy*, ed. Mathieu Copeland (Lyon: Musée d’art contemporain de Lyon, 2009), 66 and David Frankel, “The Rite Stuff,” *Artforum* (1 January 2003): 65-66

² The majority of the text of this section is excerpted from David Getsy, “Rubbish and Dreams: The Genderqueer Performance Art of Stephen Varble,” *The Archive [of the Leslie-Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art]* 62 (Winter 2017): 3-7.

³ Gregory Battcock, “We Went to a Wonderful Party,” *Soho Weekly News* (18 September 1975).

⁴ Wesley Towner with Stephen Varble, *The Elegant Auctioneers* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1970); Stephen Varble, “I Am James Purdy” *Andy Warhol’s Interview* (December 1972): 28-29; and, unpublished at the time, Stephen Varble, “Interview with Charlotte Moorman on the Avant-Garde Festivals [1973],” in Geoffrey Hendricks, ed., *Critical Mass: Happenings, Fluxus, Performance, Intermedia and Rutgers University 1958–1972* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Mason Gross Art Galleries, Rutgers University, 2003), 172-80.

⁵ *Delicate Champions* was put on by the Lincoln Center Repertory Theater at the Forum Theater of the Vivian Beaumont Theater as the second in the series “Explorations in the Form.” It ran from 29 December 1971 to 1 January 1972. *Silent Prayer* was produced at La MaMa ETC and ran from 14 to 18 and 21 to 25 March 1973. Varble wrote and directed both plays.

⁶ The copy I consulted is in the collection of Varble’s friend and photographer Greg Day.

⁷ Email from Jim McWilliams to the author, 26 January 2016.

⁸This pressure from the gallery came despite the fact that Varble's exhibition was being underwritten by the Waverly Mills Company, a post-Hippie purveyor of ostentatious and brightly-colored clothing that, according to Varble's press release, were "the people who brought you the T shirt craze, the sophisticated sleaze of metallic stretch fabric (Lurex), plus the ultra clean, breezy knit look." After seeing Varble's outrageous outfits, they approached him to represent the brand as an art consultant, though Varble referred to himself on his 1977 c.v. as their "Promotional and Public Relations Director." During their short-lived sponsorship in the Fall of 1976 and Spring of 1977, Waverly Mills supported his *Third Costume Tour of New York* and the Brooks Jackson Iolas Gallery exhibition, which otherwise would not have occurred. (Letter from Brooks Jackson to Claud Seguin, 19 November 1976). The company closed not long after as the result of a tax inspection.

⁹This comes from a 1977 text titled "The Happy Art Shoe Shine Stand (notes on initiation and self-perfection)," that was given by Varble to Charles Rue Woods in the form of a photocopy.

¹⁰ This information comes from a selection of the Brooks Jackson Iolas Gallery records shared with me via Brooks Jackson.

¹¹ Undated clipping from the *Village Voice*, Varble collection, Leslie Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art (Gift of Geoffrey Hendricks in memory of Stephen Varble). Varble also re-typed this paragraph in a number of letters, including to Brooks Jackson and Susan King.

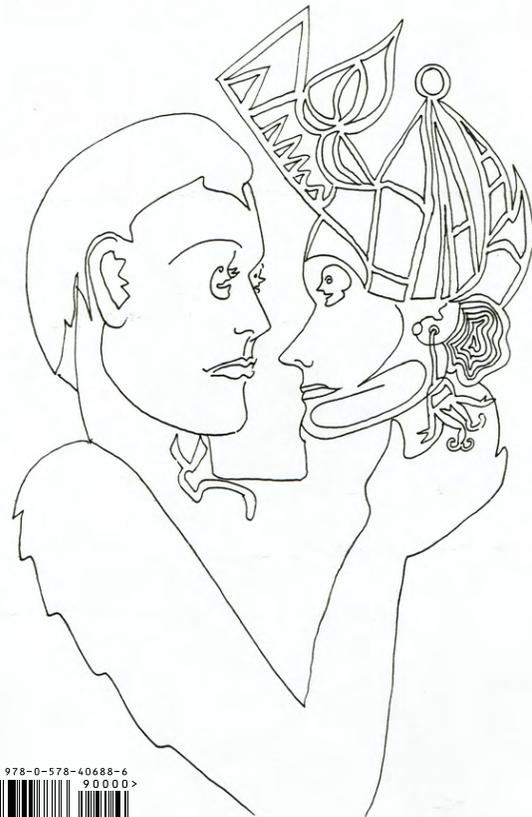
¹² Stephen Varble, "Varble," *Domus* 578 (January 1978): 54.

¹³ Quoted in Hayden Herrera, "Manhattan Seven." *Art in America* 65. 4 (July-August 1977): 50-63.

¹⁴ For this history, see Patrick Firpo, Lester Alexander, Claudia Katayanagi, and Steve Ditlea, *Copy Art: The First Complete Guide to the Copy Machine* (New York: Richard Marek Publishers), 1978.

¹⁵ Email from Charles Rue Woods to David Getsy, 26 November 2017.

¹⁶ Stephen Varble, Preface to "Luigi's Inside Dope," June 1983. Manuscript in the author's possession.



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