

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Adam Lehrer, "10 Artworks You Must See At The 2017 Whitney Biennial," *Forbes*, March, 2017

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Adam Lehrer, CONTRIBUTOR

Frances Stark, *Ian F Svenonius Censorship Now!!*



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Admittedly, Los Angeles-based artist Frances Stark's series of paintings 'Ian F. Svenonius's Censorship Now!!' had an immediate personal impact on me due to its subject matter. Musician and writer Ian Svenonius is a personal hero of mine. His early '90s Washington D.C. post-hardcore punk band Nation of Ulysses is one of my favorite bands of all time (ironically, I was actually listening to the band's 1992 album *Plays Pretty for Baby* on my Apple Music playlist while riding the MTA to the Biennial preview), and I have almost as much love for his bands The Make-Up and Chain and The Gang. I have also long obsessed over his essays in the likes of VICE and the late Index Magazine. Svenonius has a talent for placing rock n' roll, soul and jazz in the context of art history and history at large. He is a rock star, culture critic, and historian, all rolled in one. Stark's art work often focuses on the meaning of language, and how its process is translated into a creative act. For her contribution to the Biennial, she composed paintings that inflate pages taken from Svenonius's incendiary essay *Censorship Now!!*. *Censorship Now!!* argues that artists need to take control of censorship to combat everything from the blandness of mass-produced pop music to the espousing of fascist ideologies under the auspices that one is testing free speech. Svenonius's tone is severe, but the viewer doesn't need to completely agree with him to see where he's coming from. Freedom of speech has hit its limits in our culture. No longer is there a healthy debate between left and right-wing ideologies contributing to a common good. No, now the right is dominated by ideologues like Donald Trump, Steve Bannon and the disgraced Milo Yiannopoulos. These men utter hate speech and total falsehoods and use "freedom of speech" to protect themselves from criticisms of that speech. Freedom of speech has become dangerous, and it's east to see why Svenonius believes it needs to be scaled back. Stark's paintings of this text is an interesting and modern method of appropriation. Over art history, artists have used appropriation to critique and satirize mass media or to abstract and re-contextualize works from art history. But Stark uses appropriation to inflate and generate renewed discussion around a highly relevant idea. Too much is at stake for artists to fuss around with overly-conceptual work. Stark wants us to engage.