

From the Archives: The Calvin Tomkins Papers

Calvin Tomkins, respected writer and commentator on the arts, exposes and interprets the arts and art world of our time to a broad audience through his numerous “Profiles” and articles for *The New Yorker* as well as his books on twentieth-century artists. Over the course of his career, which began with a post as an editor at *Newsweek* magazine in 1955 and an early assignment to interview artist Marcel Duchamp, he amassed a vast amount of research material for his pieces, including over 500 files and 220 audio-tapes. Tomkins is renowned for his thorough research and for the extensive interviews that he conducts to gather firsthand information on his subjects. He considers himself more an art reporter than a critic and cites as his main interest “how artists do what they do and how they think about it.” His papers chronicle a vital period in the New York art world—the 1960s to the present—and document such key figures as John Cage, Leo Castelli, Christo, Merce Cunningham, Marcel Duchamp, Philip Johnson, Roy Lichtenstein, Georgia O’Keeffe, Robert Rauschenberg, James Rosenquist, William Rubin, Richard Serra, Cindy Sherman, Frank Stella, Jean Tinguely, Kirk Varnedoe, and Andy Warhol, among others.

The display showcases documents created, received, or collected by Tomkins in the course of his work. In general, his research tends to consist of cassettes and transcripts of interviews he has conducted with his subjects and those who know them, observations of artists’ work, notes he has taken from books or sound recordings, articles that he has copied and annotated, and correspondence. The late Kirk Varnedoe, Chief Curator of MoMA’s Department of Painting and Sculpture from 1988 to 2001, characterized these research papers by noting that “the ratio of that finely polished prose that appears on the page to the sweat and labor that goes into it is 1 to 300—the amount of material that Tad [Tomkins] leaves behind in order to get the gemlike clarity that he gets in his prose is astonishing,” and that generations of scholars will benefit from access to this material.

In 2002, Tomkins donated his papers to The Museum of Modern Art Archives. The gift augments and complements the collections of the Museum Archives in important ways and is particularly appropriate, as Tomkins has used the archives and was a founding member of the Museum’s Advisory Committee on Museum Archives, Library and Research Resources. As part of MoMA’s educational mission, the Museum Archives is open to the public for research.

From the Archives: The Calvin Tomkins Papers was organized by Michelle Elligott, Museum Archivist.