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Myron Helfgott : An Inventory of My Thoughts

Myron Helfgott
Virginia Commonwealth University

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**MYRON
HELFGOTT**
an inventory
of my thoughts



**MYRON
HELFGOTT**
an inventory
of my thoughts

Ashley Kistler
Curator

Anderson Gallery
School of the Arts
Virginia Commonwealth University
Richmond, Virginia

Myron Helfgott: An Inventory of My Thoughts

This catalogue was published in conjunction with the retrospective exhibition *Myron Helfgott: An Inventory of My Thoughts* (January 16–March 8, 2015), organized by the Anderson Gallery with generous support from the Office of the Dean, VCU School of the Arts.

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Paris Panorama (detail), 2000
Cover: *Portrait with Topiary*, 1984

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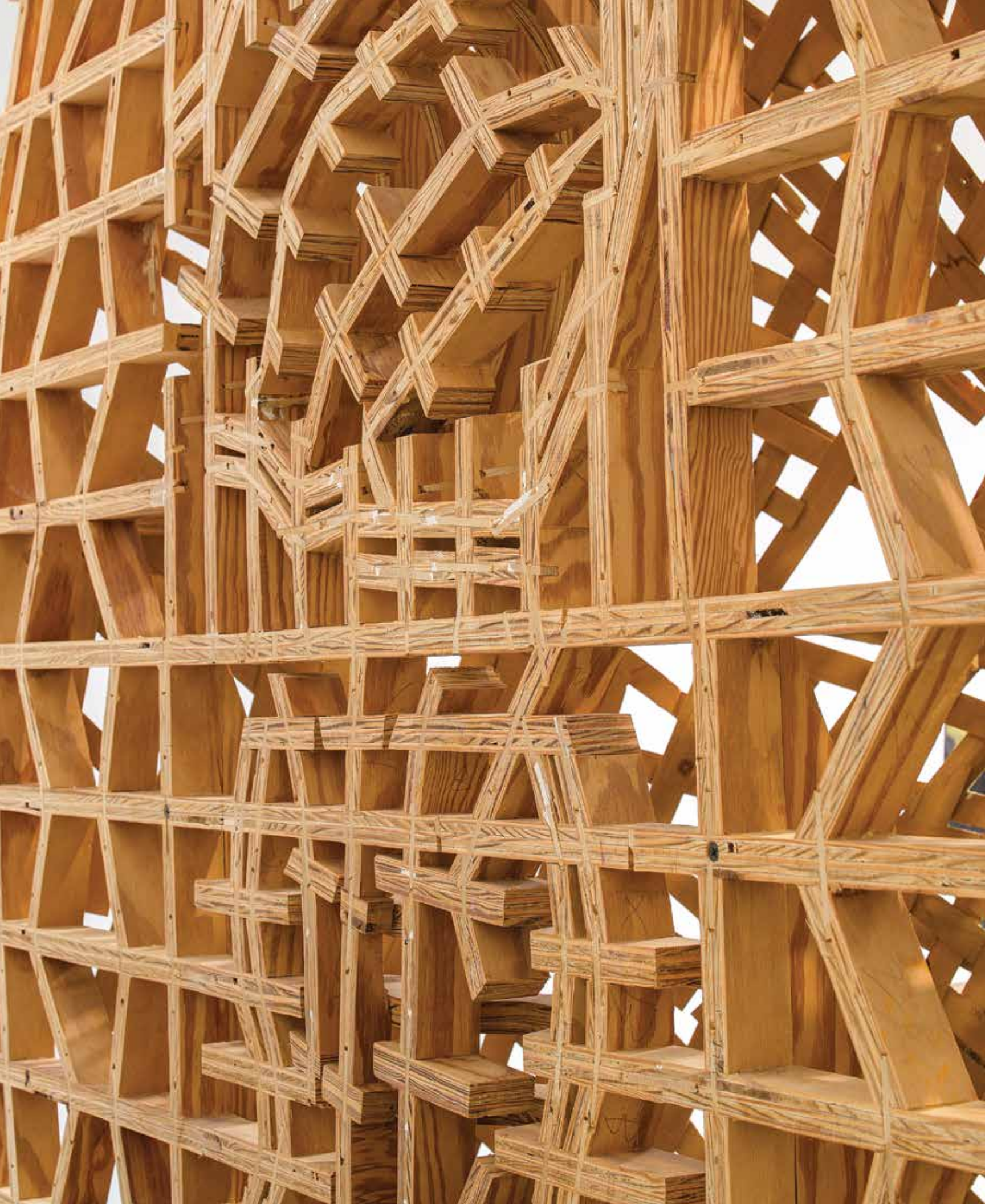
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foreword

Joseph H. Seipel

Lying even when the truth would suffice. Headlining his website with this statement, Myron Helfgott reminds us of the power of the image to confound perception and the abiding role that disjunction and misinterpretation play in human experience. Helfgott revels in the duality of image and structure, structure and content, and content and subject matter. The photographic images that now cover his carefully hand-wrought plywood structures can have the emotional charge of a tragic love story, a beautiful object, or a contemplative scene. Are these works intended to exalt the image, making it hyper-real and allowing us to bathe in its subject matter and feel deeply? As we scrutinize the work, though, the beauty fades and the stark reality of the fragile paper facade compels us to question our initial perceptions. Have we been taken in by a mirage, an empty illusion? Who would do this to us?

These are the works of a provocateur and a master of intellectual play. A true believer in the object, Helfgott also values the muscle of narrative and the subversive sway of image. He takes us on a journey that moves beyond the single storyline to complex, nearly operatic assemblages of structures and sculptural components, kinetics and audio, painted images and photographs, visual lies and truthful comments.

In terms of content, subject matter, source material, and studio fabrication, nothing is safely out of bounds. Helfgott uses literature and film as a spring board, pop culture as a convenient tool, technology like a band saw, and his everyday experience as grist for stories, both real and imagined. Well versed in the history of art, he often nods to the great artists whom he considers crucial predecessors. These acknowledgments are sometimes obvious and, at other times, hidden deeply within his thinking.

Myron was a consummate teacher during his 35 years as Professor of Sculpture at VCU's School of the Arts. He encouraged his students to be fearless, think sideways, and tell their stories with abandon. Those of us who had the good fortune to work with him witnessed his brilliance in action, including his insightful critiques, often of our own work. Ever-present, now as then, is his creative determination to provoke habitual expectations and perceived limitations.



notes on myron

Ashley Kistler

What is success? A good idea.¹

As affirmed by the title of this retrospective, the internal, introspective character of Myron Helfgott's artistic pursuits holds sway over the irreverent humor and wide-ranging material experimentation that have so memorably distinguished his work for nearly five decades. Visitors to the exhibition are initially greeted by a monumental sculpture of the artist's head and face rendered in fragmented, intersecting planes of painted plywood; the disjointed configuration of these components imparts to this portrait an appearance as agitated as a storm-swept sea. Helfgott's reductive title for the piece, *Detail*, playfully undercuts the primacy of an image that variously recurs in other works from the 1970s and 80s, sometimes coupled with a rudimentary stick-figure body. In this version, a receding flight of marbled stairs, richly glazed by a dozen or more applications of oil paint, cups the three-quarters view of Helfgott's face, as if offering a pathway into his mind and inviting us to speculate what thoughts could possibly emanate from this discombobulated head.

The 17 individually titled collages accompanying *Detail* in the gallery, chosen from a larger group of 45 works, provide some answers. Helfgott had in fact prepared 50 panels for the series but quips that he could only come up with 45 ideas worth implementing at the time. An inveterate note-taker, he leafed through countless small notebooks, selecting pages of particular interest, and then transcribed each with a pantograph, a favorite mechanical device with adjustable settings that allows great variation in presentation and scale when used to replicate line and image.

Through the visual distortions and other alterations achieved with this tool, Helfgott radically transformed his notes into loopy, much larger renditions. Even so, the resulting drawings accentuate certain intrinsic qualities of his source material, evoking organic, oddly rendered thought-balloons filled with the scrawls and stumbles of ideas taking shape. Moving from one collage to the next, we encounter observations on making, material, and craft; personal admonishments; his love of Paris; artistic aspirations and fears about achieving them; sources of inspiration; quotes from writers and painters; anxieties about his own aging body; stream-of-consciousness inventories; concepts for new pieces; studio quandaries; comments on sex and relationships, and much more.

Helfgott's decision to use his notes as a revelatory vehicle, exposing a personal, often private record of major and minor details, reveals much about his overall intentions. Throughout his career, painters, writers, poets, filmmakers, composers, and architects have all exerted considerable

Detail (detail), 1986

influence. He has absorbed lessons from each, transforming pictorial space, photographic imagery, performance, spoken text, kinetics, and architectural structure into distinctive sculptural statements, often at times when such mash-ups, now commonplace, were entirely out of favor in the larger art world. Despite Helfgott's idiosyncratic mix and recombining of such diverse "stuff," as he might typically describe it, a thematic consistency unites his work over the decades. Discovery of the self, in all of its psychological complexities and ramifications, is foremost among his concerns and perhaps most intimately explored in the existential musings that the artist wrote and recorded for several audio installations during the 1990s. He approaches this investigation not in a solipsistic sense, but in a way that embraces an essential relationship with the wider world as captured, in part, by the multifarious observations corralled in his innumerable notes.

I don't think when I go into the studio.

As an indispensable prelude to the labors of the studio, Helfgott also relies on a kind of mental note-taking experienced during the early morning hours when, he says, his best ideas occur. At these times, in a semiconscious state between sleeping and waking, he often imagines visiting his grandmother's attic, unpacking boxes, selecting objects he likes, and reminiscing while arranging them. Helfgott mentions this analogy to underscore the intuitive, non-intellectual aspects of his process, which have fueled his love of bringing together disparate things in installations that nonetheless always have their own internal logic. The object-laden tables assembled for *Tyranny of the Theoretical* and the plethora of images, objects, and moving parts making up *Three Chapters and an Epilogue* are prime examples. In the aforementioned collages, he seized another opportunity to undertake a similar exploration by pairing his re-inscribed notes with a similarly diverse array of photographic images.

Helfgott's manipulation of photographs into three-dimensional components predominates in works produced over the last five years. Tiling together inkjet prints and backing them with sheets of copper or lead, he imparts an object-ness to these images by crumpling them around meticulously built plywood structures, whose geometries include the complex octahedrons supporting the impressive *Doorway*, which depicts the classical façade of an elementary school in Paris. While his recent engagement with the photographic image stems from his longstanding efforts to incorporate pictorial space in sculpture, he has also employed this medium in many other ways since 1980, when he began applying small color photographs of details of a work to the work itself.

Helfgott extends this practice in drawings from the period, inserting photographs of individual pages from his notebooks, which he arranges against the painted image of stairs in one untitled piece as if pondering steps that might be undertaken in the studio. In *Portrait Noir*, the artist overlays subtitled video stills from a French film on an expressionistic rendering of his own recumbent face, whose wide-eyed gaze evokes an anxious interior replaying of the themes of sex, love, and infidelity acted

out in the movie. Elsewhere, photographs appended to the wall-mounted sculpture, *Fear Not*, serve as footnotes revealing the sources of his “stolen” ideas. Helfgott augments this bank of visual notes with a multitude of snapshots taken during his many extended stays in Paris that continues to provide a steady supply of images and ideas. One quirky subset of his inventory, for example, contains inadvertent faces discovered on manhole covers in Parisian streets. By adding several of these pictures to *The Lost Traveler* he creates an additional layer of visual complexity in a fractured self-portrait that suggests anything but a consolidated self.

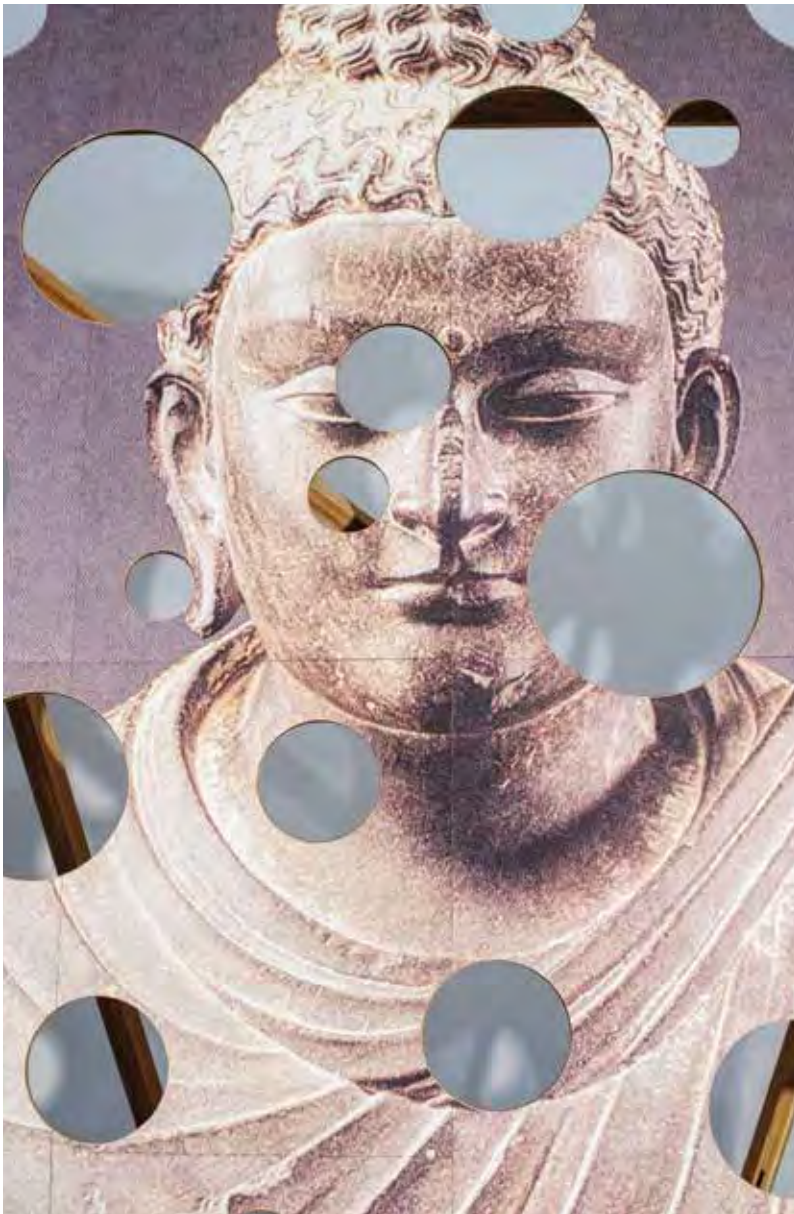


Portrait with Topiary (detail), 1994

The preparatory function of notes signifies the distinction Helfgott makes between the preliminary activities that take place outside the studio—reading, writing, looking—and the actual, frequently pragmatic work that occurs within. He compares this situation to the mindset of a professional boxer who rigorously readies himself for the fight, knowing that if he thinks for an instant once inside the ring, he’ll likely be knocked out. Helfgott primes the machine, so to speak, and then puts it on auto, not knowing where he will end up. In doing so, paradoxically, he cultivates the kind of truly creative process described in a favorite quote that paraphrases one of his most admired writers, Philip Roth: “[Books] contain possibilities—thoughts, emotions, kinds of wisdom, kinds of folly—that emerge, unplanned and unforeseen, from the writing itself.”² Or as Helfgott himself observes, “Sometimes you run out of ideas, then something happens and you make art.”

I’m interested in the disjunction, not the conjunction of things.

By conceiving *Detail* in disjointed facets and highlighting the fragmentary nature of notes, Helfgott formally manifests disjuncture in these and other works as a way of objectifying the discontinuity and disorder that prevail in our chaotic world.



Buddha Wisdom, What Women Have Told Me
(detail), 2005–06

Opposite: Source material for *Portrait with Topiary*, 1984

He disassembles to an even greater degree the large-scale self-portrait that introduces *Three Chapters and an Epilogue* repeating certain facial features in a staggered heap and setting significant portions of the image adrift on the gallery wall. In an accompanying audio, Helfgott poses to the viewer-listener a series of humorous yet pointed questions reminiscent of those encountered on personality-profile tests. He also incorporates a kinetic device that drives a pair of pencils in endlessly looping ellipses over two of five eyes, as well as several graffiti-inspired photographs balanced on small shelves, perhaps representative of the instinctual desires of the id. Through this confluence of stimuli, he multiplies the psychic dimensions of his portrait and emphasizes the viewer's perceptual role in reassembling and making sense of its component parts.

Helfgott's interest in disjunction as an artistic strategy is rooted in his early exposure to Gestalt psychology, formulated in the early 20th century by German psychologists, whose focus on comprehending the capacity of our minds to generate whole forms provided the foundation for the modern study of perception. Although discussions about Gestalt theory are virtually nonexistent in art school today, much to Helfgott's dismay, they exerted a powerfully formative influence on his own development during the 1950s and 60s. For him, this avenue of inquiry uniquely embodies the human propensity to puzzle

things together in order to find meaning, a phenomenon he activates in various ways, often by removing visual information in his work.

Consequently, while Helfgott's process of making may seem wholeheartedly additive, subtractive decisions can be just as important. In his collages, the foregrounding of each page of notes eliminates, sometimes mischievously, portions of the photograph with which it is paired, thereby marginalizing an image that nonetheless intrigues, even in a partially extant state. This strategy also informs his layering of visual elements in other works that often relinquish just enough information to spark our desire for completion and understanding. Holes perforating a monumental photograph of Buddha in the installation *Buddha Wisdom/What Women Have Told Me*, and interstices appearing around the individual photographs that comprise *Windows* and other recent pieces also convey Helfgott's fascination with our ability to mentally fill in these empty spaces. Admittedly bored with art that assigns him no task, he intends

to give viewers an integral role in resolving his work, trusting that their perception of the whole will be different than the sum of its parts.

Everything is never right.

Is it any wonder that Helfgott returns to the studio each day? The value and inevitability of corrections, as his notes acknowledge, in large measure compel the ongoing modification and reinvention he daily undertakes in the studio. In short, Helfgott keeps working because in his view things are never correct; furthermore, he comments dryly, "the moment you finish, you realize the work's inadequacy to resolve contradictory issues." The standing, larger-than-life self-portrait encountered in *Classical Figure with Corrections* humorously personifies this dilemma. Looming over the viewer at a height of ten feet, clothed in shorts and one sandal, the artist's alter ego here assumes the persona of an orator, with one arm outstretched and the other upraised. Helfgott equips each arm with two hand gestures, one gesture partially overlaying the other as if in correction. Unlike the accomplished Greek and Roman orators of yore, however, who perfected their persuasive gesticulations through the ancient art of chironomia, Helfgott's figure seems to send if not a double message than one at least requiring clarification and further refinement.

In this and other sculptures from the 1980s, Helfgott's reification of different personalities and the flat, frontal aspect of each work suggest a recasting of the little characters that populate his balsa-wood tableaux of the previous decade, which now have stepped off their stage sets into the viewer's space. Perhaps henpecked or terrified of commitment, the sprinting protagonist of *Portrait with Topiary* seems to flee the female figure perched in the background. To create his runner, Helfgott riffs on the little stick figure appearing in a public-utilities "wet paint" paper sign that he happened to notice and pick up in the street. His version, now life size, supports a giant head—a self-portrait seen in profile—on which are heaped several other portraits, each peeking out from behind its cousins. To the last image on the pile, reduced to the most minimal

head-shaped rendition, he applies a big fat X as if canceling out the entire arrangement, seemingly at a loss as to what to try next. This resolution brings to mind what must signal for him a finished piece: "I have to keep working until I get to the point when I've exhausted all the possibilities and can't think of anything else to do."

Actually, everything is a self-portrait.

Along one side of the page of notes transcribed in the collage *Sense of Humor*, Helfgott scribbles, "Easier to appear objective about



yourself when writing in the 3rd person." His frequent use of the pantograph as a mediating agent between his hand and his work serves a similarly distancing purpose, though for somewhat different ends. Besides his notes, he has employed this device to also transpose a range of images, including Japanese sumo wrestlers, the manual gestures of sign language, and portraits by the German painter Max Beckmann and the French artist Francis Picabia. Helfgott's mechanical adjustments of the pantograph greatly distort the personality and demeanor of each static image, especially the portraits, creating a jittery, cacophonous composite of overlaid sketches in one instance, and increasingly weird, unsettling iterations in the other. In several works, revealing his method of implementation, he incorporates the tool itself as a sculptural element.

For Helfgott, such experiments afford the possibility of drawing like someone else, of stepping outside himself. He extended this idea some years ago by asking several non-artist friends to draw his portrait, the results of which provided source material for certain works mentioned earlier. His re-rendering of the requested images preserves a sense of their original naiveté and crudeness, which imparts to his psychologically inflected portraits a purposeful sense of self-parody.³ Ironically, the

results of all these maneuvers exist as a singular, unmistakably personal stamp, as Helfgottian as anything else he has created. "It's unfortunate," the artist observes, continuing his comment above, "but you just can't get outside of yourself."



To the intricate picture that emerges from this confounding task of defining oneself, Helfgott supplies a host of other fundamental details, from the recurring images of friends and family that literally surround him in *The Feel of the Thing, Not the Think of It* to aspects, both close-up and panoramic, of places that he clearly cherishes as well. In three works inspired by Parisian bridges, Helfgott inserts photographs of these structures into much larger wood panels, beautifully painted and glazed to capture the translucent color of the Seine flowing under each. In *Pont Marie*, he also embeds a small sculpture of an ear inscribed with Chinese acupuncture points, which conjures for this viewer the many ameliorative effects of listening to the river's flow and how this sensation can plant a memory more firmly in the mind. Even something as overly familiar and prosaic as the downtown



Untitled, 1995–96 (detail)
 Opposite: *Pont Marie* (detail), 1998

Richmond view out his home windows takes on a contemplative, nearly uncanny quality in his affective portrayal. While Helfgott may be less impressed with much of the art he has encountered in his lifetime, he forthrightly acknowledges those artists and works that have been impactful. Punctuating his comprehensive “self-portrait” are references, among others, to Cézanne and Picasso, Yves Klein’s mid-twentieth-century blue monochromes, Matisse’s *Nymph and Satyr* (1908–09), Marcel Duchamp’s *Étant donnés* (1946–66), Alberto Giacometti’s *Bust of Annette* (1962), and James Hampton’s *The Throne of the Third Heaven of the Nation’s Millennium General Assembly* (ca. 1950–1964). Apparently, Helfgott’s “thefts” (his word) are his sincerest form of flattery.

I try to build every pissant idea that comes into my mind.

Helfgott’s earliest ideas, as represented in this exhibition, are manifest in small sculptures he constructed out of sheet lead during 1970–71. Reminiscent in some respects of Claes Oldenburg’s soft sculptures of the late 1950s, Helfgott likewise transformed such mundane, everyday objects as articles of clothing, utilitarian objects, and even small notebooks, now lost, whose pages he inscribed by hammering messages into the soft metal with a Sears lettering kit.⁴ His fabrication and display of these humorous simulacra often lent them an air of feigned utility, enhancing their absurdity, while at the same time his unlikely choice of material upended function and viewer expectation. Among the more surreal pieces in this body of work, differentiated by his inclusion of a partially drawn window shade, are several he made in memory of loved ones, including



Sarah, which commemorates his mother, and *33 Years & 6 Months*, so named for the brief life of a close friend.

In a seriously assiduous way, Helfgott has continued to recognize the dead by assembling a vast collection of obituaries clipped from the pages of *The New York Times* and *Richmond Times-Dispatch*. His selection of what might be regarded as last notes, begun in 2001, usually constitutes part of his early morning routine and reflects his tireless interest in the dimensions of lives that he considers part of his own history and/or remarkable in terms of human gumption and achievement. Just in the past few days, for instance, Helfgott has added the obits of Milo Russell, a former colleague and an esteemed Richmond painter; Mario Cuomo, the former New York governor who championed liberal ideals; and Bess Myerson, thus far the only Jewish Miss America. For this presentation, he stacked hundreds of Masonite-mounted obituaries in the gallery, among which visitors can walk, capping each pile with a small, three-dimensional house, sewn from acetate sheets and imprinted with the image of an object once again indicative of everyday life. Like these paired components, his title for the project, *Here and There*, conjoins two realms, summoning another favorite, surely heartfelt quote, this time from the poet Charles Wright: "One day more is one day less."⁵

Helfgott builds ideas in order to see and evaluate them, including those he eventually admits are "bad" and discards. The challenges and rewards of this open-ended process draw this resolute artist back into the studio each day, most of all for the meaningful self-discovery that is gleaned in the making. Inclusive by nature, his investigation probes the kind of deep-seated anxieties, foibles, fantasies, and desires that many of us would find difficult, if not impossible, to concede. In the text he composed for *Ingo and Annette*, Helfgott concisely addresses his real fears in the manner of a critique delivered to him by Annette. "But what you've done is a tired rehashing of old ideas," she accuses. And later, "Where are you in this piece? ...Are you hiding between the two of us afraid to show your face?"⁶ By example, he not only encourages us to note and attend to the multitudinous aspects, both internal and external, that comprise our own singular worlds; he also proffers this as the most essential activity human beings can undertake. Ultimately, we are the beneficiaries of Helfgott's compulsion to give his ideas concrete form.

1. All quotations attributed to Helfgott derive from conversations with the author that took place August 2013–September 2014.

2. Claudia Roth Pierpont, *Roth Unbound* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013), p. 225.

3. As noted by Mark St. John Erickson in "Multiple Images of Myron," *The Virginia Gazette*, 26 September 1984.

4. F. D. Cossitt discusses these notebooks and Helfgott's larger body of lead works in "Fantasies in Lead and Balsa," *Arts in Virginia*, Vol. 14, Fall 1973, n.p.

5. "Portrait of the Artist with Hart Crane," in *The World of Ten Thousand Things, Poems 1980–1990* (New York: The Noonday Press, 1990), p. 33.

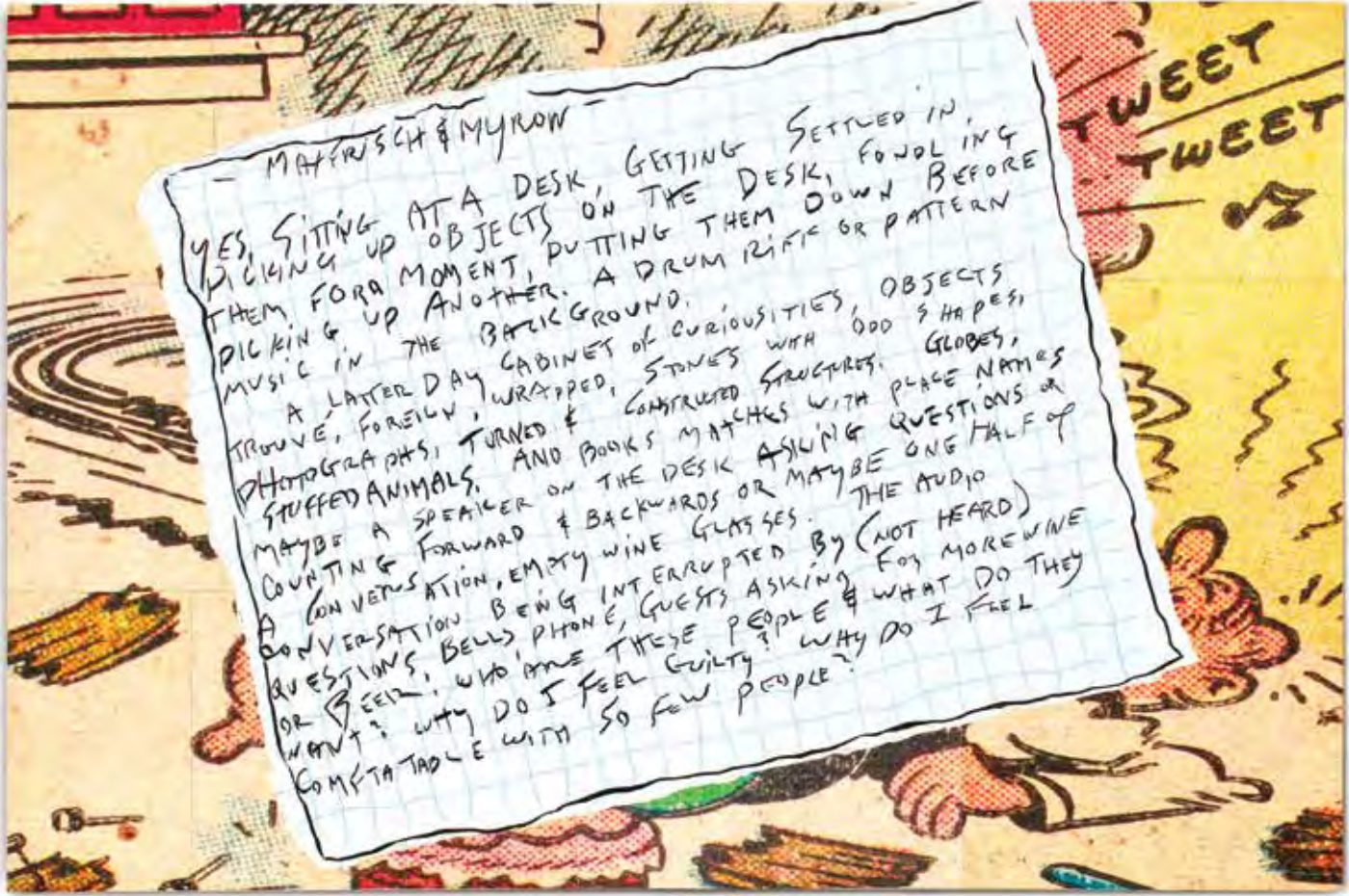
6. For the full text, see page 151.



Detail, 1986
Collection of the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts,
John Barton Payne Fund



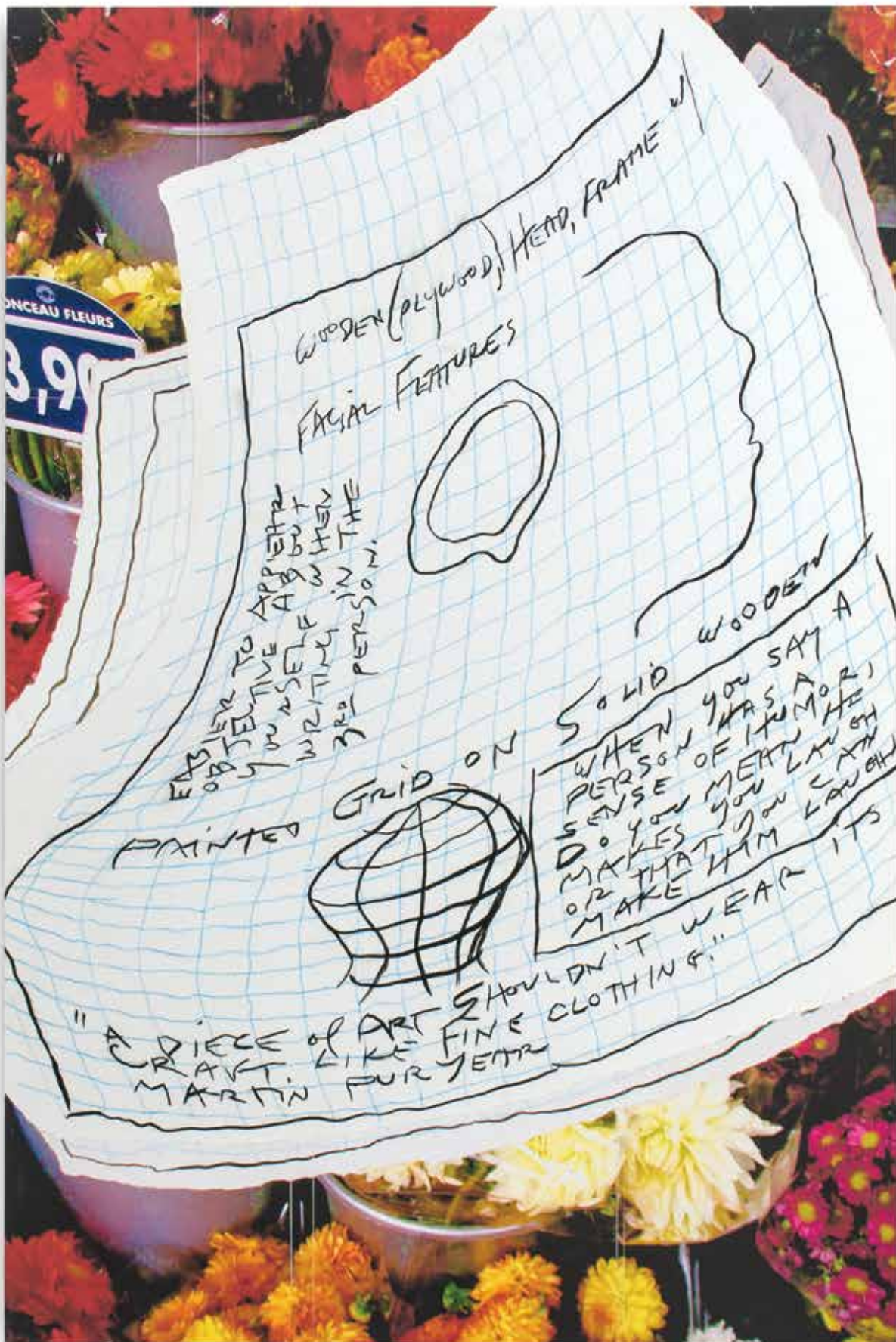
From a series of 45 collages, 2007–08
Interrupted



MATTHEWSCH & MYROW

YES, SITTING AT A DESK, GETTING SETTLED IN,
PICKING UP OBJECTS ON THE DESK, FONDLING
THEM FOR A MOMENT, PUTTING THEM DOWN BEFORE
PICKING UP ANOTHER. A DRUM RIFF OR PATTERN
MUSIC IN THE BACKGROUND.

A LATER DAY CABINET OF CURIOSITIES, OBJECTS
TROUVE, FOREIGN, WRAPPED, STONES WITH ODD SHAPES,
PHOTOGRAPHS, TURNED & CONSTRUCTED STRUCTURES, GLOBES,
STUFFED ANIMALS, AND BOOKS MATCHES WITH PLACE NAMES
MAYBE A SPEAKER ON THE DESK ASKING QUESTIONS OR
COUNTING FORWARD & BACKWARDS OR MAYBE ONE HALF OF
A CONVERSATION, EMPTY WINE GLASSES. THE AUDIO
CONVERSATION BEING INTERRUPTED BY (NOT HEARD)
QUESTIONS, BELLS PHONE, GUESTS ASKING FOR MORE WINE
OR FEEL: WHO ARE THESE PEOPLE & WHAT DO THEY
WANT? WHY DO I FEEL GUILTY? WHY DO I FEEL
COMFORTABLE WITH SO FEW PEOPLE?



WOODEN (PLYWOOD) HEAD, FRAME

FACIAL FEATURES



EASIER TO APPREHEND BUT YOU WRITE YOURSELF WHEN YOU WRITE IN THE 3RD PERSON.

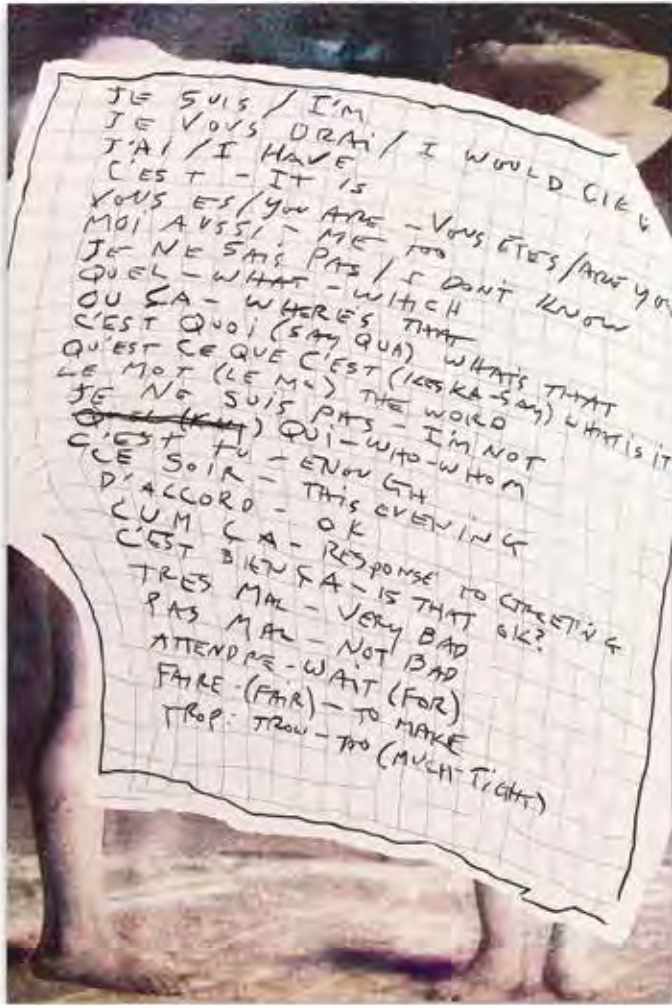
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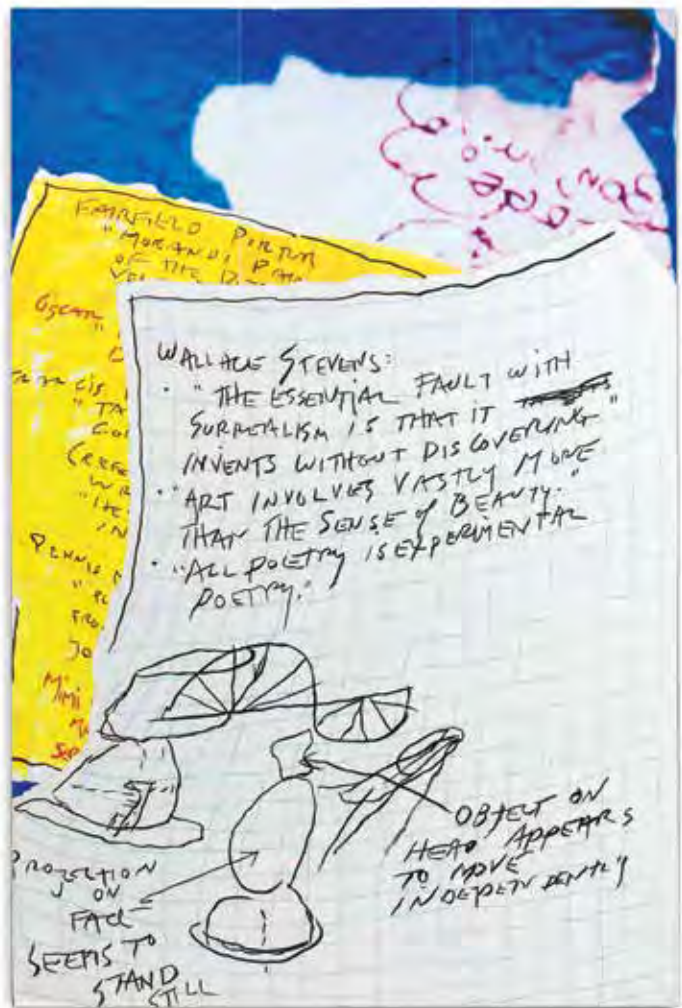
SOLID WOODEN
WHEN YOU SAY A PERSON OF HUMOR, DO YOU MEAN LAUGH OR THAT YOU CAN MAKE HIM LAUGH?



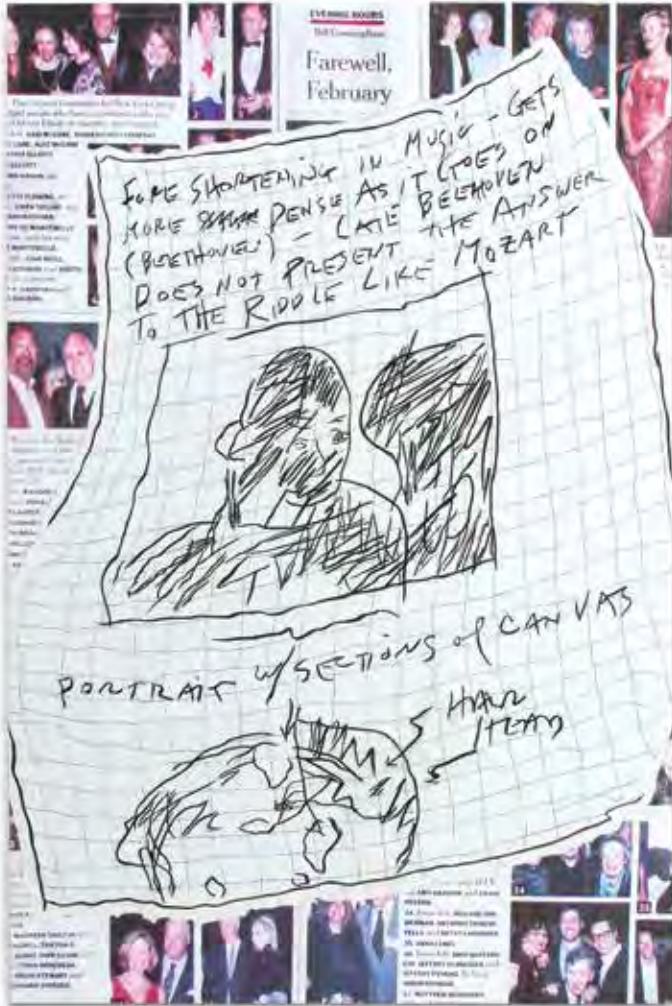
"A PIECE OF ART SHOULDN'T WEAR ITS CLOTHING."
ART LIKE FINE MARTIN PUR YEAR

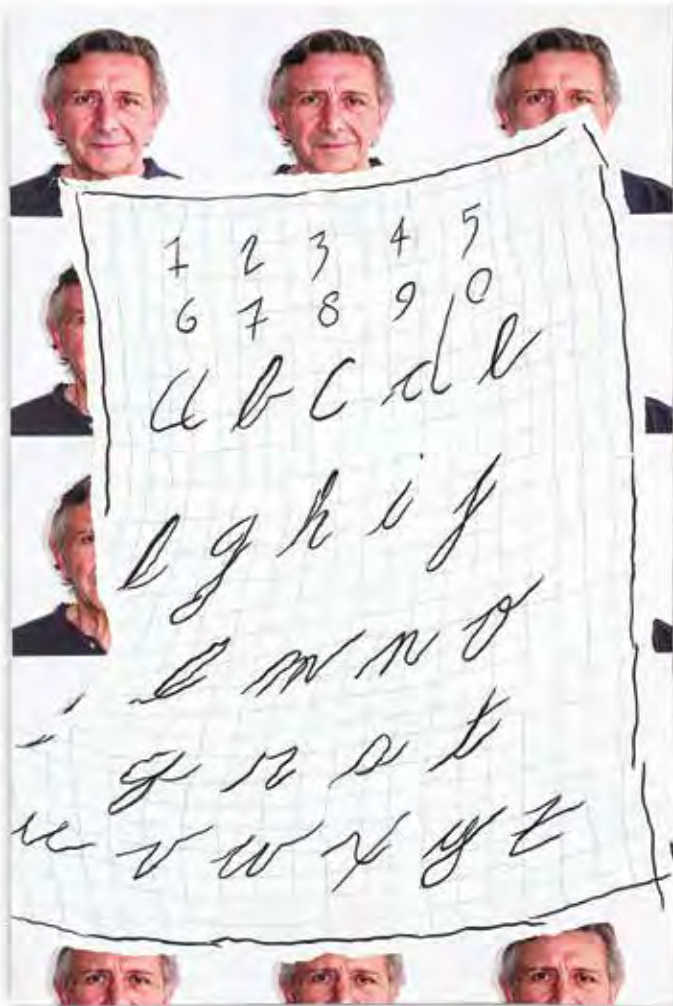


From a series of 45 collages, 2007-08
 Left to Right: *Je Ne Sais Pas*; *Yellow and Blue Autumn*
 Opposite: *Sense of Humor*



From a series of 45 collages, 2007-08
 Left to Right: Social Intent; Essential Fault
 Opposite Left to Right: Farewell February; Indian Wash





From a series of 45 collages, 2007-08
 Left to Right: 1, 2, 3, 4; *The Comic and the Tragic*
 Opposite: *Present Tense*

IMMEDIATE. MY BODY HAS A LIFE OF ITS OWN... IT DOES THINGS WITHOUT MY CONSENT. THE WORKS I CHOOSE TO LOOK AT ARE NOT AT ALL LIKE THOSE I MAKE.

"A WORK" IMPLIES PROCESS
LIKE GUIDO SAID IN FELLINI'S 6 1/2...
"I AM SEARCHING BUT HAVE NOT YET FOUND."
CAN BE WHAT NOT

ESSE ARE THE THOUGHTS & VALUES THAT
PASS THROUGH MY ~~WHOLE~~ INTELLECT & PASS
THROUGH MY CONSCIOUSNESS CANAL
ITS WAY TO THE JUST BIN OF
~~FORGOTTEN~~ FORGOTTEN SOCIAL CONSTRUCTS
PERSONAL OR

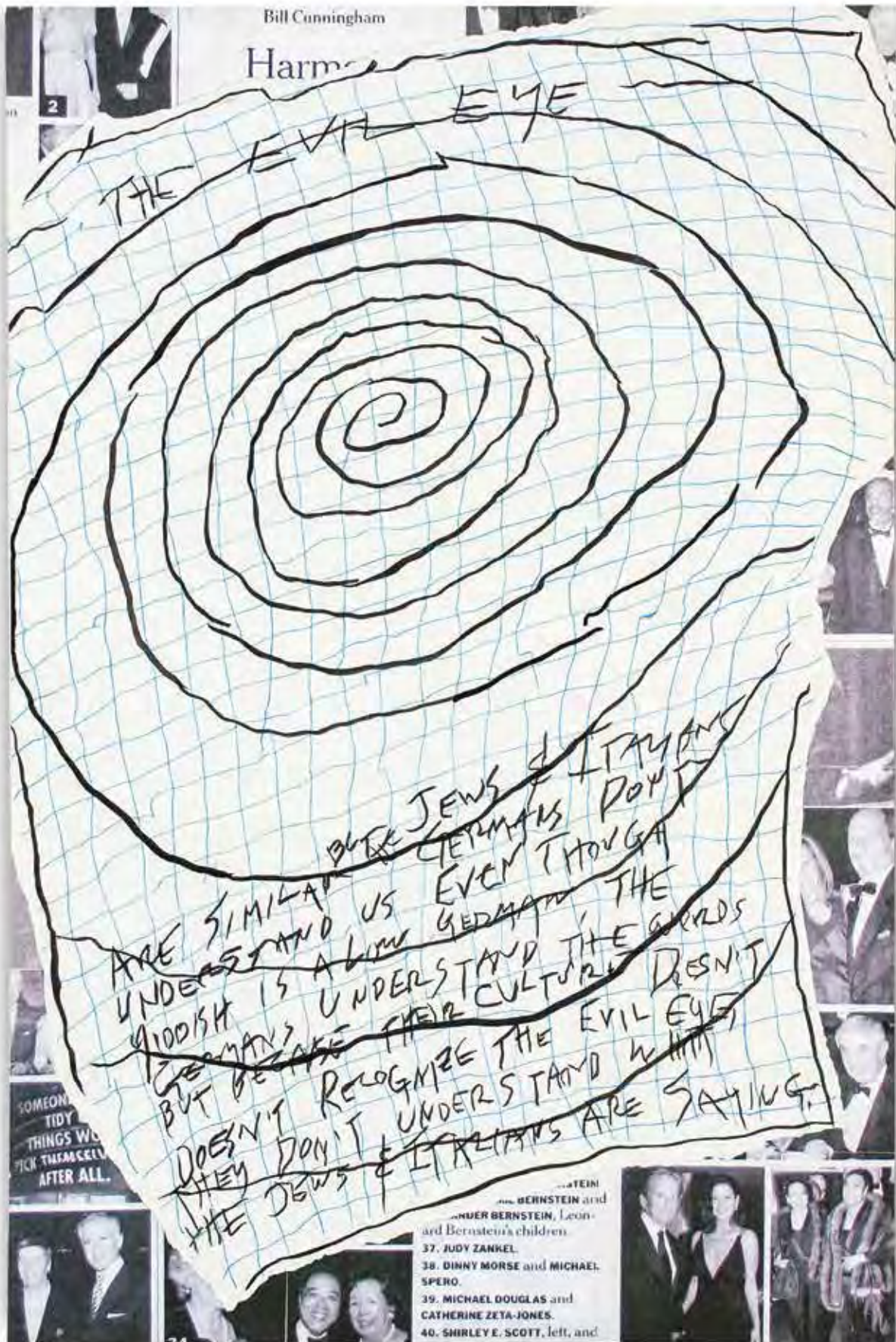
IF I LOVE IT I WANT TO COPY
IT OR EAT IT.
- ATTEMPT
- ~~TRY~~ TO STAY IN THE PRESENT TENSE



From a series of 45 collages, 2007–08
The Finger
Opposite: *Evil Eye*

Harm

THE EVIL EYE



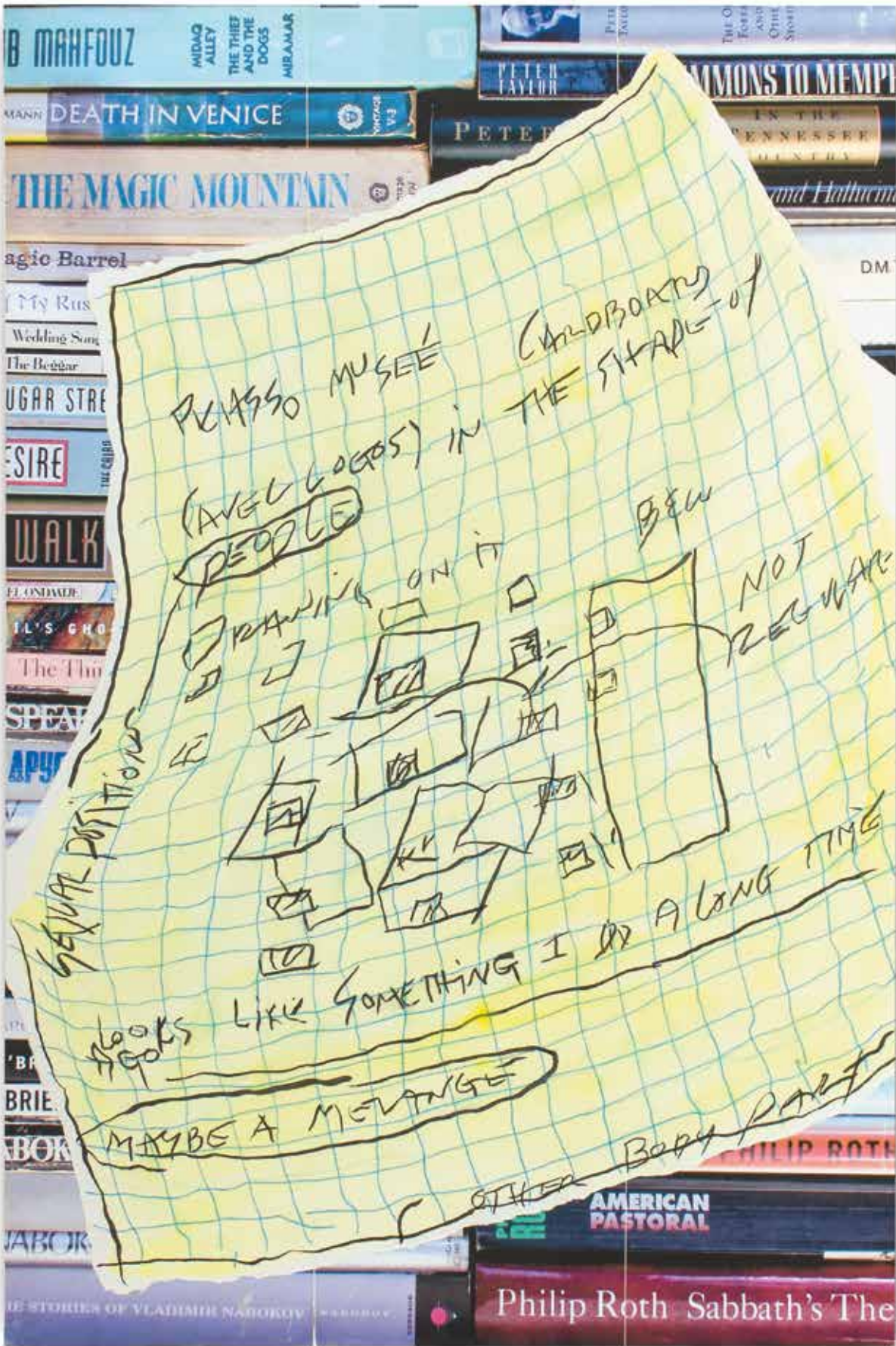
ARE SIMILAR BUT JEW & ITALIAN
UNDERSTAND US EVEN THOUGH
GIDDISH IS A LOW GERMAN THE
BUT BECAUSE THEIR CULTURE DOESN'T
THEY DON'T UNDERSTAND WITH
THE JEWS & ITALIANS ARE SAYING

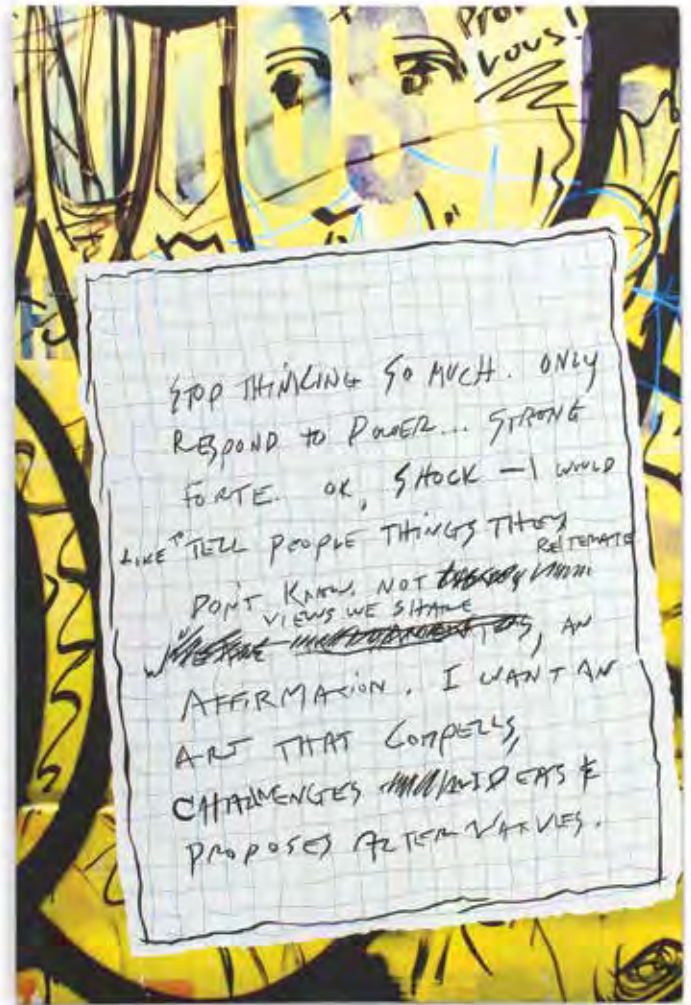
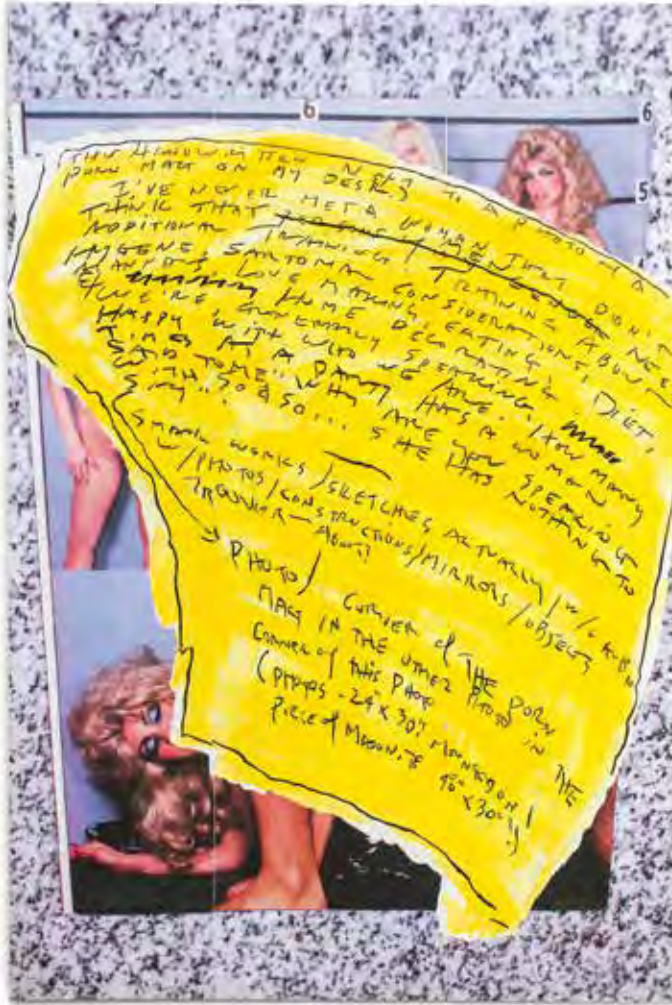
SOMEONE
TIDY
THINGS WO
PICK THEMSELVES
AFTER ALL.



...STEIN
...BERNSTEIN and
...ANDER BERNSTEIN, Leon-
ard Bernstein's children.
37. JUDY ZANKEL.
38. DINNY MORSE and MICHAEL
SPERO.
39. MICHAEL DOUGLAS and
CATHERINE ZETA-JONES.
40. SHIRLEY E. SCOTT, left, and







From a series of 45 collages, 2007-08
 Left to Right: Piece of Masonite; Stop Thinking
 Opposite: Not Regular

From a series of 45 collages, 2007-08
Voice of Conscience

Arthur Miller, a Voice of Conscience in the American Theater, Dies at 89

Continued from Page A1

all over the world. These dramas of social conscience were driven from life and informed by the Great Depression, the event that he believed had a more profound impact on the nation than any other in American history, except, possibly, the Civil War. "In play after play," the drama critic Mel Gussow wrote in *The New York Times*, "he holds man responsible for his and for his neighbor's actions."

Ella Kazan, who directed "All My Sons," "Death of a Salesman" and "After the Fall," once recalled in an interview, "In the 30's and 40's, we came out of the Group Theater tradition that every play should teach a lesson and make a thematic point."

The Broadway producer Robert Whitehead, who worked frequently with Mr. Miller, said in reminiscing about their work together that he found a "robust (usual) righteousness" in the plays' rights. "In his work, there is almost a cosmic urge to be a light unto the world," he said, adding, "He spent his life seeking answers to what he saw around him as a world of injustice."

Broadway theaters dimmed their marquee lights late night at certain times in his memory.

Mr. Miller, a lanky, wiry man whose dark hair turned to gray in his later years, retained the appearance of a 1920's intellectual whether he was wearing work boots and overalls while fixing his porch or scolded at his word processor — or typewriter, when the power failed at his 130-acre farm in Lincoln County.

Writing plays was for him, he once said, like breathing. He wrote in "Timebonds" that when he was young, he "imagined that with the possible exception of a doctor saving a life, writing a worthy play was the most important thing a human being could do." He also saw plays as a way to change America and, as he put it, "that meant grabbing people and shaking them by the back of the neck."

He had known hard work first-hand in an automobile-parts wash during the Depression, in a "called a mouse house," where he earned \$15 a month for work in medical equipment.

But Mr. Miller's hands were not cupped in a typewriter.

ter the Fall," "The American Clock" and "A Memory of Two Mondays." The crash meant the collapse of the coal business and a move from the apartment overlooking the park to considerably reduced circumstances in the Flatbush section of Brooklyn, where the teenage Arthur worked as a bakery delivery boy and developed a knack for carpentry, which left him fascinated, he said, with "the idea of creating a new shadow on the earth."

He attended James Madison High School, graduated from Abraham Lincoln High School in 1932, and then went to work in the newspaper warehouse, earning \$15 a week and saving \$11 a week for college. Mr. Miller said he was not much of a student, but he knew by the time he was 18 that he wanted to be a writer. He recalled a terrific urge to tell stories, a talent that he said made him a center of attention.

Prizes Pay Tuition

When he had put away enough money for his education, Miller went to the University of Michigan with the intent to write a play good as every Hepwood manuscript he carried a prize second year at the university.

He did not have a chance to go to Harvard because of the \$1,200 tuition from the 11 more competitive than years at a college if he was not a member of the Phi Kappa Phi Honor Society.

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NEELSON ALGREN'S THREE RULES FOR A HAPPY LIFE:

1. NEVER SIT DOWN TO PLAY POKER WITH ANYBODY AT A PLACE CALLED "MOM'S"
2. NEVER SLEEP WITH A WOMAN WHO HAS MORE PROBLEMS THAN YOU DO
3. NEVER SLEEP WITH A WOMAN WHO HAS MORE PROBLEMS THAN YOU DO

"THE WORLD IS AN ILLUSION CREATED BY A CONSPIRACY OF OUR SENSES"

"I AM SEARCHING BUT HAVE NOT YET FOUND." FELLINI'S GUIDO IN "8 1/2"

"I REALIZED I DIDN'T WANT TO COMPOSE PICTURES, I WANTED TO FIND THEM." FELLSWORTH KELLY

Arthur Miller was born on West 116th Street in Manhattan on Oct. 17, 1915, to Augusta and Isidore Miller. His father was a coat manufacturer and so prosperous that he rode in a chauffeur-driven car from the factory apartment overlooking the northern edge of Central Park to the Seventh Avenue garment district. For a child, Mr. Miller remembered in "Timebonds," "he added an 'a' kind of acrid whose message was surprise and mostly good news."

The Depression changed everything for the family, and it became a theme that etched its way through Arthur Miller plays, from "Death of a Salesman" and "The Price" to "All



Charles Lohr and Jesse McKinley, photographed for the play.



Miller's performance, although he said he refused to be an actor and to turn his private administration, accordingly been I Congress. That a man who has a word plays." The where the case is litigious. I in January 6, the courts of Chicago.

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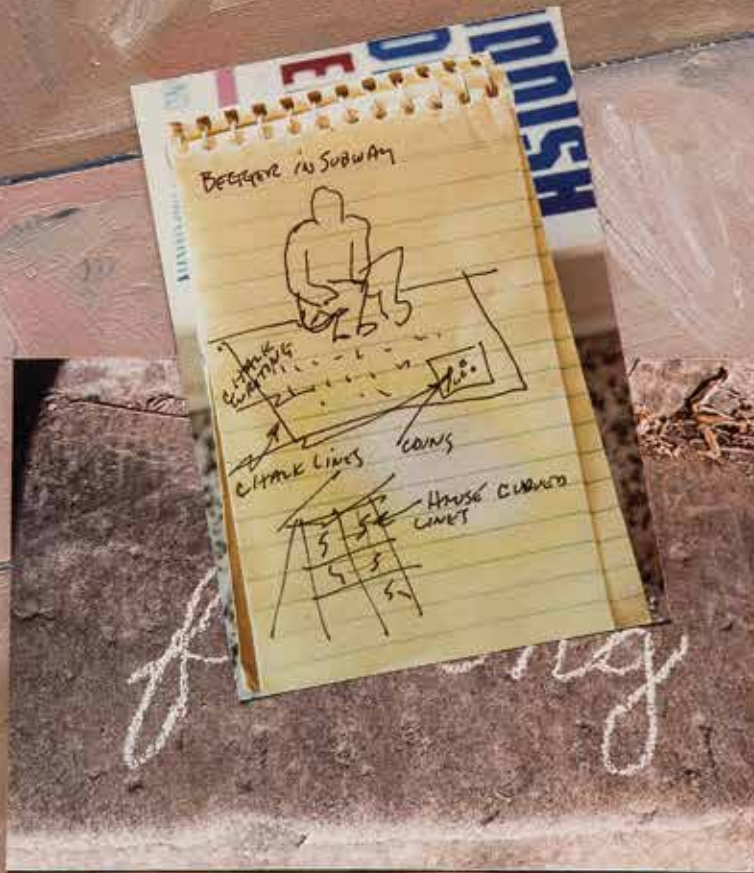
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Landmarks in Broadway history from the pen of Arthur Miller from far left, Beth Merrill and Thomas Chalmers in "All My Sons"; the original cast of "The Crucible"; Lee J. Cobb and Mildred Dunnock in the 1961 production of "Death of a Salesman."





Untitled, 1990
Opposite: detail

Untitled, 1976





Myron, 1987
Opposite: *Portrait Noir*, 1991





With Frank Owen, Artist/April 15, 1981



With Dr. Paul Knapfenberger,
Director, Science Museum of Virginia/
January 20, 1981

With Marshall Coleman, Attorney General
of Virginia and Mrs. Coleman/Easter
Virginia



With Dr. Wm. Rosenblum, Vice-Chairman-Neuropathology,
Department of Pathology, Medical College of Virginia/
March 23, 1981



Monticello, Virginia/ Easter 1981
Richmond, Virginia



With Dr. Wm. Rosenblum, Vice-Chairman-Neuropathology,
Department of Pathology, Medical College of Virginia/
March 23, 1981



With newspaper headline/March 31, 1981,
Washington, D.C.



With "Senior Team"





We Share the Same Interests, 1981–82
Opposite: detail



Buddha Wisdom / What Women Have Told Me,
2005-06







*Buddha Wisdom / What Women Have Told Me (details),
2005–06*

AUDIO

buddha wisdom/ what women have told me

Text by Myron Helfgott

The audio is comprised of suggestions made to me by women, instructions of how to respond to them, or things they would like me to say to them.

1. Living in the present is overrated.
 2. Get close; I want to tell you a secret.
 3. We all know about post coital disappointment.
 4. I've been unhappy lately...
 5. I have such unbearable urges...
 6. My husband is filled with desire but lacking in passion.
 7. Do you think your gender is preoccupied with sex?
- A. **But I already know what I think. I want to know what you think.**
8. How boring.
 9. No...don't do that.
 10. Not here, not now.
 11. You do exactly the opposite of what I expect of you.
 12. I'm not enjoying this.
 13. I have a desire to leave home naked.
- B. **What a great idea. Why didn't I think of that?**
14. You don't seem to be able to talk about love standing up.
 15. You son of a bitch.
 16. What the hell do you think you're doing?
 17. Why do you like putting things in the wrong place?
 18. This is amusing, you have nothing to say.
 19. Each time you touch me do it as if it's the first time.
 20. Don't be so predictable; try to be more spontaneous, more romantic.
 21. Listen to me.
 22. Be gentle when you disagree with me, please don't let your ego get in the way.
- C. **I'll never forget the excellent advice you gave me.**
23. Be more open, share with me your thoughts and dreams.
 24. I don't want you to say, "I'm doing this because I owe it to you," even though you do. I want you to say, "I'm doing this because I want to...I want to make you happy."
 25. I don't want you to need me; I want you to want me.
- D. **You have beautiful breasts and such lovely nipples.**
26. Not everything is about your penis.
 27. Did you read that someplace or was that just something you thought up.
 28. Just because you don't agree with it or like it doesn't mean it's wrong. It just tells me more about you than about me.
 29. When I spoke with you on the phone I would have preferred your not telling me that you had chosen that weekend to visit me because you had nothing more important to do.
 30. I've noticed that sex seems to be a reoccurring theme.
- E. **How can we have such divergent views and seemingly get along so well?**
31. Every reality is a deceit.
 32. Don't mistake these arbitrary juxtapositions as insight.
 33. One would think that if you sat down to write you'd have something to say.

F. I can't believe that you thought of that before I did.

- 34. Normality is like a tightrope walker above the abyss of abnormality... or is it visa versa?
- 35. You seem a bit insecure.
- 36. I would never have expected that from you.
- 37. Can I be perfectly honest with you?
- 38. How can you have an opinion about everything?
- 39. Can you be honest for a change?
- 40. Why do you think you have to use psychological blackmail?

G. I wonder if I can ask you for your advice on this problem?

- 41. Sincerity makes no sense in this world.
- 42. Why must you always torment me?
- 43. I dream about money.
- 44. Who the hell do you think you are, Jesus Christ or somebody?

H. Ah, but enough about me. I really want to hear about you.

- 45. This work of yours began with such interesting possibilities.

I. Of course I'm interested in your opinion.

- 46. Each instant obliterates the one previous.
- 47. Last night I had a dream...oh so lovely.
- 48. I'm very angry with you, you don't appreciate how much I've done for you.
- 49. We're like actors in some Beckett drama.

J. That's brilliant; I wish I would have thought of that.

- 50. Entertain me.
- 51. You speak of the past, present, and future; but for us there may not be any future.
- 52. I wish you would make something happen.
- 53. I think I hear music.

K. I like it when you close your eyes and wag your tail like a puppy.

- 54. I think you're telling me more than you think you are.
- 55. The intellectual arts are always more beautiful than nature.
- 56. I think there is something here, but I'm not sure what it is.
- 57. I don't have to do that anymore.
- 58. You don't want to have to do what I had to do to get it.
- 59. Well then...what do you do for pleasure?
- 60. Don't tell me what you know...speak to me about how you feel.
- 61. I don't think you understand, a serious breakdown has occurred.
- 62. I don't mind using whatever talents I have to get it done.



Please Except Jesus, 2009



EXCEPT JESUS



woman drowning in her house

Elizabeth Seydel Morgan

Why is there no protest,
no twisted features
mashed against the glass
like a woman
in a car gone off
a bridge, sinking fast?

Her smiling face
in this sealed Mylar house
is like the happy frog
warm before the boil.
Or the woman who left
on the spigots for years
and got used to the noise.

from Spans: New and Selected Poems
Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2014

Untitled, 2007
Printed acetate and photograph,
7 x 7¼ x 5¼ inches
Courtesy Elizabeth Seydel Morgan
(not in exhibition)



A Disquieting Void, 1995



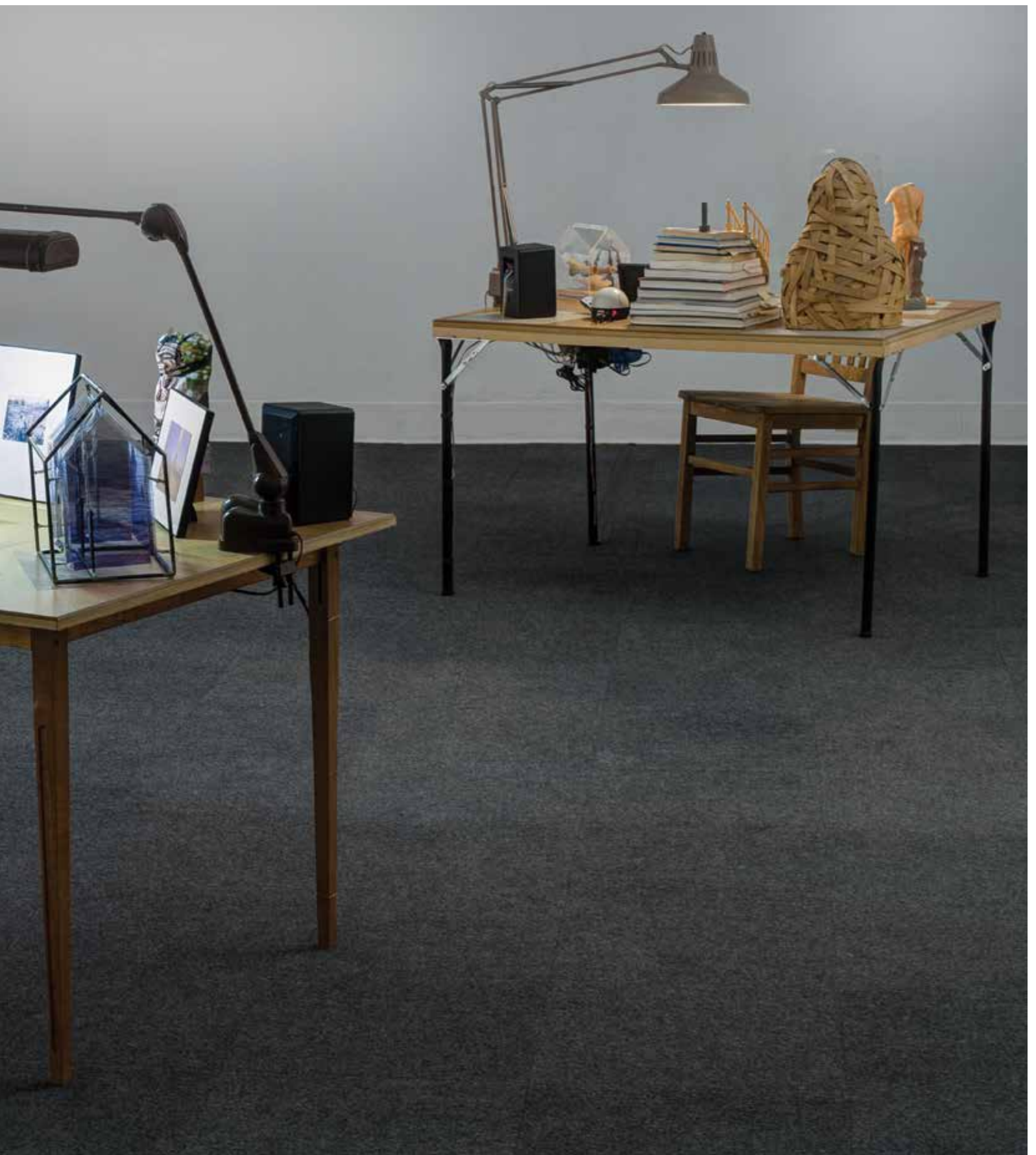
Pont Marie, 1998







Tyranny of the Theoretical, 2008



AUDIO

alone tyranny of the theoretical

Text by Myron Helfgott



Alone, (Pause) not exactly alone, I have my work, many friends, numerous acquaintances, along with my fears and fantasies, and of course – I have you. My friends are close without intruding, we each have our private lives and friendship – is a social, rather than intimate relationship. Because my friends are so very important to me, I rarely burden them with my most personal thoughts; I speak with them about philosophical issues and mundane problems, but not my fears and fantasies and desires. My fears and desires cling to me like some yet undiscovered appendage, fears about my intellectual life, fears about my aging body, fears that you will think this work shallow or derivative or possibly clever. That wonderful comment of Thomas Mann's in *The Magic Mountain* is never far from my thoughts, "Stupid—well, there are so many kinds of stupidity, and cleverness is one of the worst." You might disagree and find cleverness in others entertaining and feel a certain joy when you think yourself clever. (Pause) I've grown accustomed to being alone; when my work is going well I hate the intrusion of the other. When the work is not going well my thoughts wander and my world shrinks. For me wisdom has so far been elusive. I'm afraid that my desire to do more or be more will end with that same patronizing refrain, "very nice...very nice." Is not desire a form of striving and is not striving essential, that condition of always becoming and never being? Becoming implies potential, a work in progress and everything is still possible, if not everything, than many things are still possible. If one is not striving are we merely marking time on our way to eternal bliss, that slow decent toward oblivion? Do you think there is a purpose to this life or are we merely the captain of our myopic, unrewarded egos? (Pause) Curiosity may be another form of striving, an implied dissatisfaction with the present...a will to change, to do other or be other, "what would happen if I...," and once again in the back of my mind that same refrain, "very nice...very nice." Maybe God did us a favor when he expelled us from the garden. An assessment of one's fears and desires is essential for the examined life...but not essential in the garden. Do you think that when one gets older everything becomes moderated, fears more bearable, joys less joyful, and passions more nuanced? Pleasures are rare and carnal delights even rarer. Odd, now when there is less time we seem to have more patience. Maybe we just find pleasure in simpler settings, a cool breeze, a good book, or worthwhile work. (Pause) You're not buying that either are you...it may be that we desire more passion but have less opportunity. It may be that because our virility is abandoning us we want to squeeze as much life out of our waning powers as possible. May I have it now... please? As we retreat into the world of the mind some of us assume the role of the voyeur, we walk and we think and we look and we dream. I've become a flaneur; I view, unnoticed, your delights, now becoming our delights. Is this habit some personal flaw or an attempt to understand better those around me, or is being a voyeur much like watching a film or reading a book...this vignette a potential work of art that has not yet been fully formed and where there is yet no conclusion and no resolution? Do you have any such habits? Do you envy them and want to be, like them, young again...I doubt it. The pleasures of the mind I find more satisfying than the transient carnal delights of my youth. Guido was asked in Fellini's *8½* a question I've asked myself many times "Can you remain true to any one thing?" Guido found his answer; I'm still looking for mine...although I am confident that I can be true to my friends, I am much less confident that I can be true to a lover. Maybe it's easier with my friends, I'm much less demanding of them than I am a lover. I need more from a lover, more than they can possibly offer. Have you had similar apprehensions? You and I talk about many things, but talk is just so many words. God used words to create the universe and everything in it. All creation and rules governing

humankind were formulated with words, "Let there be light," "Honor thy father and thy mother," etc. Did God have thoughts such that words were an inadequate means of creation? That we'll never know. We do know that man is flawed and therefore our use of language is flawed. Language has its own structure and gives rise to meanings that may only be true within the stricture of language. Logic in linguistics is different than other forms of logic because its rules are different. These too are just words that I am now using; they too are subject to the limitations aforementioned, they've grown old and weary and have lost much of their meaning...Flaubert once said that writing is little more than artful whoredom. It's as if the terms we use are melodies fit for making bears dance while we're trying to move the stars to pity. Later Pound echoes this sentiment and says that Paradise lay beyond words...the language of the wind is Paradise...or I might add the language of the Tango is Paradise. The Tango may be the most sexual, the most combative, and the most intimate of all human invention. The language is in the movement and relationship of the bodies. The Tango is about physical interaction unencumbered by thought; words can only destroy the moment. But that's just me talking again, what is it you think? Can one properly communicate their thoughts with words? Often we use words to test our thoughts; we need the words to exit our mouths before we understand their meaning, or to possibly see the flaw in the concept. If we chose different words to describe something or someone, would we see qualities not noticed before? If one has a more extensive vocabulary, would they in turn have a more complex grasp of the issue? Will a Frenchman or an Italian using a romance language have a different perspective on a subject than those of us that use English...an Anglo Saxon, Latinate, Norse, and Germanic language? For that matter, do males and females use language differently? Given that the genders have cultural and physiological differences, do the genders respond differently to the issue of social intercourse and in particular striving? It seems that Alberto Giacometti thought so; in his sculptures it is only the males that are striding, the females stand erect, are mute and motionless, they seem to be waiting for something to happen...waiting for something or someone to activate them, to give them a direction, a purpose. These works were done at a different time in our social history...women then had a different role in society. There are those that believe that when God created Eve from Adam's rib he separated into two that that was originally one, and in as much as God created man in his own image, God is actually the unification of the genders. I've spoken of the intellectual component of intimacy but have ignored an even more important, complex factor...that of affection and more importantly touch, the physicality of the intimate. Is not the freedom to touch another person, to fondle, to caress, to use a language that only your hands know, to leave your intellect behind, to touch and be touched not an integral part of any intimate relationship? To be able to get so close to someone that you only know them by their scent, the texture of their skin, and the taste of their body? With age, is this need to touch lessened and at the very end of our lives, that time when our useful days are past and death has not yet come to call us home, this sweet, melancholy period, do we still not need the touch of a loved one? Do we want to leave this world holding the hand of our beloved, or be polite, leave making as few demands as possible on those we love so much? As Saul Bellow said "Love is a force of nature and death nullifies even that." Once we accept the fact that we like our parents before us and their parents before them will one day die and sink into oblivion, we think about and possibly plan our departure. I don't believe that anyone wants to die alone but that comedy of ourselves and how we want others to remember us, we that are slowly decaying in our graves, that are

now part of the eternal, assume we will somehow feel better knowing that others think fondly of us. Have you made your plans yet? Why am I speaking of death when I still don't know what I'm going to do when I grow up. This is not my last will and testament...it's an examination of who I am and the belief that I am free, but free to do what? Free to do as I would want when I want? Free to vote for one of two unacceptable political candidates? Free to waste my time any way I damn well please? I want but am not sure what it is I want. Do you know what you want? The limitation of my imagination is my biggest obstacle; I want to be or do something different than that I am now doing. I am now sitting in an atelier in the center of Paris with a panoramic view of the city writing this text...and still not satisfied. What will it take to satisfy us? Wisdom has been elusive; I've had many experiences but seem to lack insight. I've sold shoes, poured concrete, dug ditches, worked in a packaging plant, a furniture manufacturing plant, a cardboard box factory, a wholesale grocery warehouse, a grocery store, worked as an installment collector, a draftsman, a designer, I've distributed leaflets, and have been fired from more jobs than I can count. Presently, I'm not wanting for encouragement but am eager for change...the need to change indicates to me that I'm still striving and in no hurry to get to the point of not striving. I'm still more interested in becoming than in being. There doesn't seem to be a place I want to be except in a state of flux. But that is just how I feel, have you had similar thoughts? Is happiness a fiction reserved only for the other, or do I find looking more satisfying than finding? I feel that the work I want to do is nearly in my grasp; I reach for it but am quite unable to capture it. I'm so close and at the same time an eternity away...I want it and I want it now...please. But what would happen if I ever realized my wish and made that work that I know I'm capable of making, would I be satisfied or would I want again to change course and look for something else, something even more elusive? Like my idealized lover, if I'm ever lucky enough to have such a thing, if I found her would I then want someone else? What is the problem; can one not be satisfied with what one has, or are we corrupted by the notion that there is something better just over the horizon...something I can nearly see, something I can nearly touch? Is the concept of an existential nature just a fiction? Must we always want more... maybe not more, maybe just something else? Is this my ego talking or am I prisoner of some inherited nature. My horoscope said, "If September 1st is your birthday you are perceptive, creative, can be domineering and you are also an original thinker, sensual and an innovator. You are willing to take a chance on your own abilities and are capable of pioneering a project. Members of the opposite sex find you attractive, puzzling at times and almost always a challenge. You'll travel during September, you'll be more popular and your vitality will make a comeback." None of us take horoscopes seriously but maybe there is some validity to them and our course is charted from the moment of our birth. It might be that I'm just another link in the long continuum that forces me to do that that is counterproductive. I want to be better but I just can't help myself. Is there a problem of responsibility here? There is obviously a problem and I'm not responsible...can I blame it on my genes, my circumstances, or the community of art apparatchiks that, as H. L. Mencken put it when referring to an *egoist* as someone *more interested in themselves than in me*. This dilemma, this continual dissatisfaction with where I am, is this the reason I am alone? Or am I alone because I want to be alone or am I alone because I'm spoiled, selfish... not wanting to share...always wanting to have it my way, to see things my way. (Pause) Get with the program sweetheart; it's my way or the highway, (Pause) and once again...alone. "Darling, I want to be alone."

AUDIO

chide/cajole/rant tyranny of the theoretical

Text by Myron Helfgott



The difficulty of not being self-conscious, of letting ourselves go...of letting our bodies make decisions instead of our minds, of walking and eating when we want to walk and eat, laying down when we're tired, touching another being when we need to feel that closeness. Why do we find that so difficult, why do we let our egos get in the way, feel the need to organize, to plan, to develop programs, programs that if not followed will mean disappointment, develop a recipe that lets us know when to eat and when to lay down, why do we need an intellectual construction, a map of time and place, that controls our waking hours and in fact our lives. We want to plan, to design, to figure out what time to eat, to sleep, to walk, to know that twilight is a good time to look at the sky and dawn a time to reclaim our lives, reclaim our lives after the fears we suffer at night. Who am I? and Who are you? Why are you here, why are you here looking at me, imposing the matrix of your values on this work, viewing this object, you pretending to be objective, pretending to view this work with fresh eyes, all the while keeping your prejudices well hidden, it seems to me. Listen to me and speak to me, talk to me, let me know what is in your mind...no, not in your mind, what's in your flesh, in your very being; maybe art is a corporal phenomenon, something that effects your body not your mind, alters your heart rate, cools you down or heats you up, makes you calm or nervous, weak or energetic; please, get as close to me as you can, touch me, caress me, look at my life and my work, my successes and my failures, become a part of this thing you are now only looking at, don't just look at it, examine it, become intimate with it, get down on your hands and knees and rub up against it, smell it, get to know it as well as you know your own children. There are so many things I would like to do but don't know how, so many people who I respect...no, not respect, love and envy, and things, things I so greatly admire, things that are well beyond my ability to achieve. Even if I could achieve them, what would be the sense...having seen these ideas made whole in such powerful and economical ways by people I love and envy, made whole in such a way that I am struck dumb, transfixed by the event, only tells me that that vocabulary, that language foreign to some, is already exhausted and I can only participate as a viewer, not a maker, a maker of these wonderful objects. I salute the maker, I'm envious of the maker; sometimes I attempt to compare my work to these others and am embarrassed by my lack of skill and insight, I'm envious of how the maker has brought together disparate notions, brought together issues and forms rarely seen together, and by the power and intellect of the maker, and by strength of will, force, no not force, finesse these disparate entities together as though they had never been separate. And yet, at other times I look at my work and think that it too may have the same power, that maybe I'm just too close to my work to see it clearly, maybe I have a myopic view of my work, unable to realize how powerful it really is, to realize that it may have as much or maybe even more power than the work of the others I so greatly admire. Maybe I've unknowingly absorbed so much of my culture, the social and political, the visual and auditory, the tactile and the olfactory, the foods and fashions, that maybe without knowing it I've presented a synthesis, an archetype of my culture, a work that speaks for and to everyone around me, a work that contains the basic building blocks, the vocabulary, the very DNA of this culture. But then again, maybe that's not it at all, maybe it's the existential being that resides in my soul that has forced me to develop ideas and schemas that are so unique, so shocking in their newness that they sit there and both threaten and challenge whoever happens upon them, a work that seems to have been born whole, without precedence. Of course this is my vanity speaking, how can I compare this work, the work you are looking at at this very moment, with other works I so admire, and expect you to embrace this work as I do, to love this work as I do, to be as intimate with this work as I am, and to want to make this work yours, to devour it, to digest it, to become so much a part of it that you and it become one. Unfortunately, there are so many things that can come between you and this work you are now looking at. I sometimes look around and get so very upset, so indignant to find so many things that

stand in the way, things that engage the mind but not the body, so much thinking and so little doing, of taking our feelings and emotions and translating them into words, to find so much energy spent putting words together, together in such a way that they are more poetic than meaningful, and as we examine these words we come to discover that they make sense only in as much as they are syntactically correct but whose meaning can only exist in the mind, words that when spoken offer such interesting possibilities, but any attempt to convert these word constructions into practice, to convert them into practical realities, is met with failure, the absurdity of their construction and implication become immediately evident. We see that, "...this era that keeps grinding out nothing but intellectual muck and all this stinking constipating clogging intellectual vomit is constantly being hawked in the most repulsive way as our intellectual products, though it is in fact nothing but intellectual waste products..." We use these same misleading, corrupt words and intellectual waste products to define for us the problems we are attempting to solve, these same words to ask ourselves serious questions, questions that, we think, somehow define our lives. How difficult it is to solve a problem, any problem, especially difficult when one can't quite define the problem, can't quite put the problem into proper words, and even if one could put these problems into proper words how worthless that would be, worthless knowing full well the limitation of the words we're attempting to use to define the problem, knowing the impossibility of solving a problem when possibly there is no problem, and without a problem there cannot be a solution only speculation. Maybe what we now see before us is a series of random thoughts made real, thoughts that in other circumstances would embarrass us, thoughts whose only purpose is to entertain, to lighten the moment, to allow the moment to pass quietly making way for even lighter more asinine thoughts, making way for the next event that will occupy our mind for the briefest bit of time, occupy it such that we don't need to concern ourselves with other, more serious matters. Have these thoughts in any way enriched our lives or have they solely enriched the reputations of the makers? What have we gained by marching through galleries and museums and other cultural edifices? What we've gained, it seems to me, is to appear, yes appear to be productive with our time, the time we invest in cultural activities, yes, we can say that we're cultured and that we've been there, that we've seen that, have read that, we want so much to impress our friends, not impress our friends, just let our friends know that we too are part of their cultural circle, that we are not beneath them, let them know that we too have become conversant with the current body of work, with the names we've read in the art journals and heard on the lips of influential critics, but what we've really done, done in addition to making ourselves acceptable to that subculture with which we associate ourselves, what we've really done, it seems to me, is find an acceptable way of occupying that time between lunch and dinner. Of course we need to read criticism and philosophy, read it but not take it into our studios, not let the criticism and philosophy contaminate our hands and in turn contaminate our work...let the work influence the philosophy, influence the philosophers, let them look and attempt to make sense of what they're seeing, make them attempt to include this new phenomenon in their well organized, well thought out pattern of ideas. Maybe the relationship between influencing and being influenced is somewhat like a finite, enclosed system with no beginning and no end, a social Möbius strip, a snake eating its own tail. The reading influences the maker and the work influences the writer. How wonderful it would be to read these philosophical texts, to absorb these ideas, to make these ideas concrete, to present these new works to you, these works born of philosophical parentage, you who have also read these philosophical texts and find these philosophical speculations fascinating, you who are insightful enough to see the connection between the words and the work, to present these works to you such that now we can share the delight of philosophy made real, of the conversion of words and sentences into events that occupy our space, events that interrupt the normal flow of our lives,

events that delight us, the delight in seeing the conversion of these philosophical speculations into practical realities. Of course I would like to do this for you, to please you, to make you happy, make you want to return time and again, make this image stick in your mind like a tune that you cannot stop humming, make you want to tell your friends, make you want to eat it, make you want to take it home with you, you knowing that people will envy you because you've taken it home, will think you have unique insights, have a knowledge of the most current aesthetic forms, aesthetic forms they know nothing about, you knowing that while you age and are here for such a brief period of time the work will live after you, and after you're gone your name will be on peoples lips as well as noted in respected journals, noted because of the thoughtful, meaningful legacy you so generously left behind. If I could make you happy I would, there is that part of me that wants to grovel, to act the sycophant, to meet your expectations, to see you smile. No, that's not really true, that's not what I'm trying to say, that kind of happiness is such a fleeting phenomena, that's not the kind of happiness I'm interested in, I don't want you to be happy in the way that's here one moment and gone the next. I'm interested in the kind of happiness that grows out of wonder, the kind of happiness one feels when one sees themselves an integral, productive part of the natural system, the system of natural things, a system that we know and don't know, a system that fascinates us because of what we don't know, a system that we are a part of and at the same time are removed from, a system we examine and measure, but how is that possible, how can we pretend to examine from the outside while being on the inside, controlled by that system we are trying to measure. No, not that either, what am I trying to say, what is in my head and impossible to put on my tongue, actually, not in my head, what is in my heart, what is the question that is at the core of this rambling, what do I want to know, what is it I'm looking for, ...maybe what I want to know is what is nature anyway, what is the nature in human nature, is it just an illusion, a convenience, a way of allowing ourselves to live one person on top of another, a synthetic structure that allows people to live in close proximity, to live in "harmony". We speak of man and nature, the implication being that we somehow see ourselves separate from nature...but somehow still a part of nature, how can that be, we speculate that we're different because we think we understand our own mortality, but in reality we don't understand anything, we don't understand how to live peacefully with our families and neighbors, we don't understand the simplest, most basic issue of all, how to properly treat and adequately respect those that are closest to us, we understand nothing, we are so taken with our own egos that we find it impossible to conceive of the idea that will rot just like the parings of the fruit we had for lunch. We're dreamers and planners and controllers, we attempt to plan and control our lives and our environments, control our futures and very often control those around us as well. We're aware of our being, and we're aware of our being next to another being, we're aware of our being aware, aware of whom and what we are. We find it nearly impossible to lose our awareness. If only we could lose ourselves, let our minds go blank, be emptied out, "be" and not be aware of "being," be happy without being aware we're happy. Is that so very difficult, is it not in our nature to lose ourselves in time, not in time, outside of time, become independent of time, and is this not the condition we strive for? Maybe we need to begin with the body and not the mind, relax the body in order to empty the mind, come now, loosen up, start with your neck and let the relaxation flow down your spine, let your arms hang limp, your legs and feet float above the ground, your hands and fingers defy gravity, your head become disconnected from your body, the body disconnected from the mind. Did I say strive? Is not the whole problem one of striving; striving is about ego, the ego wants and strives, strives to get places, get things, are we on the wrong track, moving in a direction opposite of that we seek? The Zen acolyte strives for enlightenment and when enlightened ceases to strive and ceases being self-conscious.



Fiction, 1994





myron helfgott: who am i? who are you?

Howard Risatti

Who am I? and Who are you? Why are you here, why are you here looking at me, imposing the matrix of your values on this work, viewing this object, you pretending to be objective, pretending to view this work with fresh eyes, all the while keeping your prejudices well hidden, it seems to me.

Myron Helfgott¹

Myron Helfgott's *Tyranny of the Theoretical* (2008), a sculptural installation from which the above audio text is taken, reveals something of the concerns and insecurities that underlie, perhaps even drive, much of his work. The title itself is revealing. It implies a juxtaposition between the solid, tangible reality of the world and abstract, intellectual thought. According to Helfgott's view of this relationship, the applied (what in philosophy is often called praxis) is unjustly characterized as somehow inferior to the theoretical, so much so that he uses the word "tyranny" to describe this relationship. And as if to dispel any doubts about where he stands on the issue, he titles another work from this same year *The Feel of the Thing, Not the Think of It*. Here the word "feel" suggests both physical touch and inner feeling—the idea of being touched emotionally.

The two audio texts of *Tyranny of the Theoretical*, which are spoken by the artist, reveal another aspect of his thinking, this time vis-à-vis his audience. By directly addressing his audience, regardless of how confrontational he may seem, it becomes clear that Helfgott is attempting to expand the work into the actual world around him. He believes that the work should not, indeed cannot, be hermetically sealed for purely abstract, aesthetic contemplation and still be vital and meaningful. The point he seems to stress is that the real world does exist, that it is a landscape full of tangible stuff that we continually bump into, including other people. What we are to make of this "bumping into" is another question, one that lies at the heart of his work. For it is as if the artist himself is trying to find an answer, and his art is the tangible result of his investigations. This also may explain why the many art styles that were so prominent when he came to maturity in the late 1960s never really dominated his work. Yes, one can find hints of all of them—bits of Formalism in his structures, traces of Pop Art and Photo Realism in his use of borrowed imagery, even Post Modernism in his critical stance—but they never actually shaped his work. This go-it-alone attitude, or at least his indifference to art-world trends, stems directly from his attempt to understand the self in relation to a wider world.

Kozminski School, June 1950 (detail), 1950

While Helfgott's approach to issues such as those outlined above is more apparent in later works like *Tyranny of the Theoretical*, in one way or another the germ of these ideas is already present in his earliest works. The acknowledgment that we exist in a wider world comprised of others—something especially symbolized by family—is already evident in *Being Looked After by Ida, Jeri, and Megan* (1981–82). This mixed-media sculpture, modeled after a work by Alberto Giacometti, is comprised of three busts of important women in his life: Ida, his grandmother; Jeri, his former wife; and Megan, his daughter. The piece may contain Helfgott's most overt reference to family, but it is not unique in this respect. References to family occur in many later works as well, attesting to their continuing importance to the artist.²

Such references are Helfgott's way of expressing his deep sentiments for family; and though these sentiments spring from heartfelt personal feelings, surely he is aware that they also have the effect of expanding the work outward into the larger world of the viewer. Otherwise, why make such a work and exhibit it if no one else cares? But others do care. Everyone has family of one sort or other—parents and grandparents, brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles, caretakers—that, for better or worse, forms the initial core of an individual's life world, the world making up everyday reality. Simply put, this subject is something everyone can relate to; it compels the subtle but genuinely interactive aspect of Helfgott's work, which operates on both personal and psychological levels.

In a profound way, the use of such a strategy to reach a wider audience has clear existential overtones. According to existential philosophy, which gained much prominence in the post-war period in which the artist grew up, "existence or being comes before essence." As French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre further states, "Man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world—and defines himself afterwards."³ However, moving from a state of simple existence to defining oneself is a complicated process that hinges on the development of human consciousness. As Helfgott would argue, this development does not occur in a vacuum or on its own. It is shaped within and by family and a family's historical circumstances—religious affiliations, level of affluence and education, ethnic backgrounds, political views, etc. Thus in a very real sense, even from an existential point of view, it can be argued that family determines the initial shape and form of being *and* the essence that then develops from it.⁴ Family encapsulates history, both actually and symbolically, at the personal level. That Helfgott would be interested in such existential ideas and the kind of soul-searching they inspire is not surprising. His generation experienced the tail-end of the Great Depression, all of World War II, the Korean conflict, and the A-bomb scare. These experiences, in some form or other, help explain why family and even its extended network of friends and colleagues (i.e., community) play such an important role in his work.

The artist's concern with friends and colleagues shapes many of his early pieces. One such work is *33 Years & 6 Months* (1970), a sculptural relief in lead that Helfgott dedicated to Marvin Mills, a friend he met in college who died in his early thirties of a brain tumor. It features a window shade



partially drawn over a pair of men's jockey shorts as if to metaphorically close the curtain on a life dear to the artist that ended too soon. He intentionally does this with a touch of humor and without being overly dramatic—no heroic figure, no angels, just jockey shorts. While this work specifically commemorates a dear friend whose passing at an early age diminished the artist's world, other of Helfgott's works also seem to express similar concerns and sentiments, as if the artist believes picturing his world is a way to capture and hold it, to prevent it from changing and slipping away. After all, holding is a way of remembering, and remembering is a way to keep things alive, at least inside us where our actual being and essence reside.

This same impulse may lie, at least in part, behind the series of small balsa-wood tableaux the artist made in the early 1970s. One of these tableaux, *Kozminski School* (ca.1972), was inspired by his eight-grade graduation-class photograph taken in 1950 at the school he attended in Hyde Park in Chicago. In this three-dimensional version of the image, Helfgott is the smiling figure in the upper row of boys, seventh from the left. Another tableaux from the same year is more psychologically complex with surrealist overtones. This untitled work features a classroom scene with cutouts of nuns (symbols of chastity?), over-sized



A Disquieting Void (detail), 1995

bananas (phallic symbols?), a teacher at a blackboard drawing a shouting face (distress?), and a version of one of Picasso's 1938 paintings of Dora Maar, the so-called "woman in tears" (anxiety or homage?).⁵

About ten years later, Helfgott revisited the theme of school and classmates in *Senior Team* (1981). This work juxtaposes one photograph showing his 1953–54 senior-year high-school basketball team with another depicting an improvised team lineup comprised of VCU colleagues and various friends from Richmond.⁶ Obviously, the actual people in the two photos are different, but Helfgott has tried to imagine what his former teammates would look like a quarter century later by posing his friends as them. Surely this is an attempt to bring memory up to date. Judging from the rather goofy expressions on many of the participants' faces, including the artist seated in the first row, second from the left, the endeavor was intended to be lighthearted and humorous. Despite the humor in Helfgott's attempt to link past and present worlds together, however, an unsettling undercurrent creeps into the work as youth gives way to middle age. For even as the photograph holds things in place, time inevitably erodes them away.⁷

We Share the Same Interests (1981–82) is another work from the same period, one that also incorporates a performative aspect. To create it, the artist carried around town a coarsely made, life-size sculpture of a female figure and had himself and various other people photographed with it. The sculpture and group photographs then became the finished piece, which documents the artist's world and the connections to people that define and give it meaning.⁸

Even as his work develops in other ways over the years, Helfgott's endeavor to explore relationships through images of friends and loved ones continues, as evident, for example, in *A Disquieting Void* (1995)

and *The Feel of the Thing, Not the Think of It* (2008). The latter work features two-foot-high photographic images of the faces of friends, fastened to one side of large, head-shaped wooden armatures. These armatures, which are quite complex and beautiful in their own right, are placed on chairs and casually arranged to fit the gallery space. Quotes from various artists, writers, and philosophers, collected by Helfgott and read by his friends and colleagues, make up an accompanying audio.

A Disquieting Void, on the other hand, incorporates a tripod and a motor-driven projector. Placed near the corner of a room, this apparatus projects the image of a woman's face (a friend of the artist) onto a small, blank head-shaped object, hung on a wall at eye level. This placement insures viewers will directly encounter the image, face to face, relating to it as a life-like presence rather than as a disembodied figure.⁹ As the projector rotates, the image slowly sweeps across the wall, crosses the corner, and moves onto the second wall, where it pauses on a larger ovoid form constructed as a metal grid. Because the projector is not the same distance from each wall, as this process repeats, the image not only goes from small to large and large to small; it also distorts and then is reconfigured as it travels back and forth across the corner of the room. In this, unlike earlier works, Helfgott's use of kinetics generates an actual time-based transformation of face and head, the seat of consciousness, with a visual impact evoking psychological as well as physical change.

The introduction of technology and even a fourth dimension (sound-text in *The Feel of the Thing, Not the Think of It* and movement-time in *A Disquieting Void*) reflects the increased complexity of the artist's work from the mid-1990s onwards. While technology can be seductive in and of itself, Helfgott never uses technology in the service of spectacle or entertainment; always he uses it for something serious, something that compels extended contemplation. And because these works require time to unfold in their entirety, they can make extra demands on the viewer-listener that stand in stark contrast to the quick reads typical of so many contemporary encounters. Nonetheless, despite the technical complexity of these works, their conceptual focus has much in common with the artist's earliest pieces, which likewise focus on friends and family. In the interim, that is to say in the early 1980s when he made *Senior Team*, Helfgott seems to alter his approach in other respects; not only is there a dramatic change in style and scale in the work, he also begins to use his own image as a focal point.

His use of self-portraiture continues through much of the 1980s. But rather than an egotistical shift from a concern for others to a declaration of the primary importance of the self, this development instead seems to serve as another vehicle for addressing larger issues. For instance, certain images of the artist are not actually self-portraits but portraits drawn by friends at his request—in particular, friends who had no art training. Collaborating with others on these images was Helfgott's way to get outside himself, to see himself from a different perspective. Whether self-executed or not, the portraits are sometimes rendered in profile or, more often, in a three-quarters view. Consequently, the subject seldom confronts the viewer directly as if he's not secure enough to make eye



Drawing of Myron Helfgott by Joe Marolla, n.d.

Below: *Fear Not* (detail), 1981–82



contact. Considering this, Helfgott's emphasis on portraits of himself seems less a shift in attention than a change of method, less an insistent statement about the importance of the self than an inward examination to achieve a greater understanding of the self.

A case in point is the self as portrayed in *Fear Not* (1981–82). Rather than heroic and confident, this depiction seems timid and insecure. Rendered as a flat, simplified profile of the artist's head cut out of tin, it has been placed in the middle of a rectangular armature made of wood, now one of the artist's preferred structural materials. Isolated and alone, with mouth agape, this image betrays a sense of existential angst and longing that even the work's title, hung in large letters above the head, cannot dispel. Two small photographs, attached to supports extending beyond the frame of the armature (the artist calls them footnotes), reinforce this impression of longing, especially the image of outsider artist James Hampton's *The Throne of the Third Heaven of the Nation's Millennium General Assembly* (1950–ca.1964).¹⁰

Following *Fear Not*, a greater degree of both structural sophistication and painterliness in Helfgott's handling of media characterizes his large-scale sculptures from the mid-1980s through the early 90s. A neo-Cubist fracturing of space and form also emerges around this time, most clearly evident in the structurally complex works *Detail* (1986), *Under the Rose* (1987), and *Waterfall after Duchamp* (1990). Along with these changes are frequent references to classicism and to past art and artists that reflect the importance of history to Helfgott—how it weighs upon and shapes one's view of the world.¹¹ The presence of such references in his work is in keeping with the significant role that the historical dimension of family, especially ancestral family, continues to play in his thinking.

Some of these changes may relate to Helfgott's familiarity with the Chicago art scene, which he experienced as a young man growing up around Hyde Park. This scene included the so-called Monster Roster artists, a late 1950s group made up primarily of WW II veterans. Much of their work is deeply psychological: "the figure under stress" is how one critic described it at the time. Not insignificantly, their art also contains references to classical mythology and ancient art. Leon Golub, whose work is still much admired by Helfgott, was an especially important member of this group; his early works are thickly painted canvases of classical torsos that recall the mutilated bodies of war victims. Also of importance were the Hairy Who artists



Classical Figure with Corrections (detail), 1986

of the mid-1960s; Helfgott remembers seeing their first exhibition, which took place in 1966 at the Hyde Park Art Center.¹² All these artists, later collectively dubbed the Chicago Imagists, represented an anti-cool, decidedly un-New York sensibility reinforced, in part, by a continuing interest in Dada and Surrealism, and by the ideas of French artist Jean Dubuffet, who believed in innate creativity and the work of unschooled artists.¹³ In general, there is an irreverence in their work that aligns with the contemporaneous anti-formalism and Funk sensibility of artists in the Midwest and on the West Coast.

One of Helfgott's most overt references to classicism is *Classical Figure with Corrections* (1986), a free-standing, sculptural self-portrait that evokes the ancient orator pose from classical antiquity. Nearly ten-feet high and composed mostly of fractured planes somewhat in the manner of Cubism, it is best viewed frontally, like a painting. Helfgott believed at the time that the pictorial space of painting was more challenging than the actual space of sculpture. His desire to engage what he regarded as the more seriously intellectual format offered by painting, however, did not prevent him from including a degree of irreverent humor in the work, apparent in the way he included the original and "corrected" versions of various details (e.g., the elbow, hand, and arm positions) and the same three-quarters view of his head for that of the figure, this time oversized. Shorts on the figure humorously evoke the traditional fig leaf.

Reflective once again of his interest in classicism and family, Helfgott has also drawn inspiration from the story of Laocoön, the Trojan priest from Greek mythology who, along with his two sons, was killed at the behest of the goddess Athena.¹⁴ Not only does the theme of family connect Helfgott's *Laocoön* (1990) to his work generally, but the story surrounding the ancient sculpture of Laocoön also connects it to *Classical Figure with Corrections*. When this statue was discovered in Rome in 1506, various parts were missing, including the central figure's right arm. Numerous artists made replacements representing what they thought these parts should look like, especially the missing right arm, which they envisioned as extended. According to some historians, even Michelangelo made a replacement. Four centuries later when the original arm was discovered, it was actually bent, revealing that most of the "corrections," including the one attributed to Michelangelo, were incorrect.¹⁵

In Helfgott's version, a sculpture in high relief, a straight, lightly colored arm rests across the face of a partially armless figure that is rendered



Laocoön, 1990
Mixed media, 106 x 58 x 26 inches
(not in exhibition)

in a contrasting dark color, suggesting the living and the dead—a possible reference not only to the ancient legend but also to personal loss. As already noted, references in Helfgott’s work to past art and artists reflect his belief that history plays a significant role in shaping one’s worldview. For him, history continues to have validity in the present, in real as well as in symbolic and metaphorical ways, because earlier meanings establish the ground upon which contemporary meanings (i.e., interpretations) develop.¹⁶ Thus, it should not be surprising that his *Laocoön*, with its prominently positioned arm, brings to mind what artist David Freed has called the extra arm in Michelangelo’s *Rondanini Pietà* (1550s–1564). In this unfinished work, a late re-carving by Michelangelo of one of his earlier sculptures, a realistic, highly finished arm from the original pieta remains, offering a stark contrast to the coarsely carved figures of the new version. It is as if Michelangelo were reimagining (correcting?) his earlier vision of Christ’s death and lamentation. Whether or not the relationship between the *Rondanini Pietà* and Helfgott’s *Laocoön* was consciously intended isn’t the issue; as Helfgott would argue, art works are latent with meanings that often overflow their makers’ original intentions. These meanings are carried forward into the present, and artists expect viewers to excavate them. In this case, clearly the theme of death—not only of Christ, but also of Michelangelo who worked on this, his last sculpture up until six days before he died—links

the *Rondanini Pietà* to Helfgott’s *Laocoön* and to many of his earlier pieces about the passing of loved ones.

Another important feature of Helfgott’s sculpture is his use of a complex, beautifully crafted plywood matrix that not only functions as a frame to support the figural elements, but also plays an aesthetic role in the way it echoes the contours of the figures. Helfgott often speaks about the need for an artist to be skilled in craft and yet able to hide his craft so that it doesn’t dominate the work. Here, he “hides” his craft by carefully integrating the matrix formally into the piece in a manner that recalls the work of R. Buckminster Fuller, with whom Helfgott studied as a graduate student during the late 1950s and early 60s at Southern Illinois University (SIU).¹⁷ It is especially reminiscent of Fuller’s geodesic dome projects in which the open-matrix structure actually forms an integral part of the architecture. Helfgott learned a great deal about structures from Fuller, in part because structure was the essence of Fuller’s work. That’s why, as Helfgott has pointed out, Fuller’s method stands in contrast to Frank Lloyd Wright’s approach: Wright designed from the inside out, while Fuller designed from the outside in.

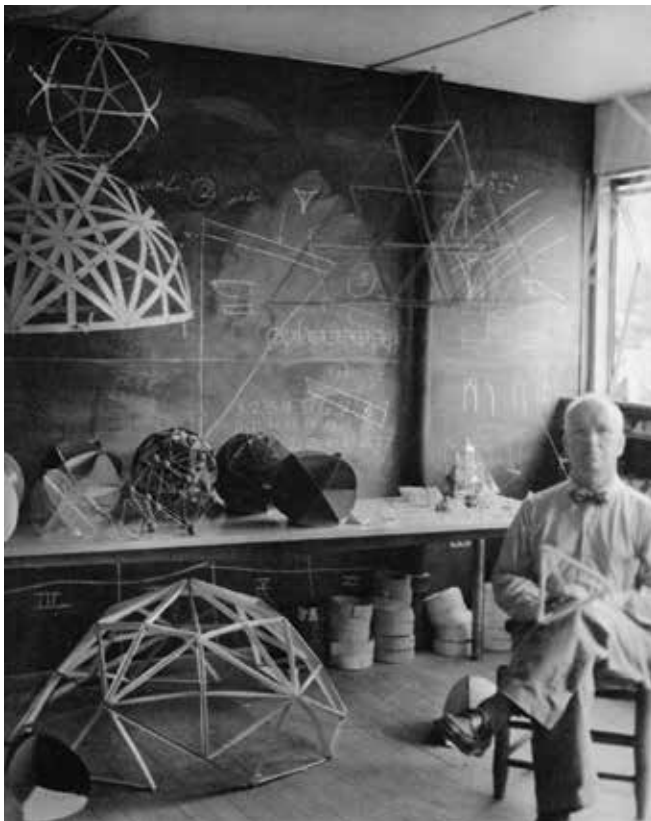
Of even greater importance in shaping Helfgott’s attitude about art making, however, was the philosophical vision of the SIU Design Department where Fuller was in residence. Developed from ideas inherited

from the Bauhaus, design at SIU was not necessarily about instruction in making the kind of beautiful objects that today characterize so much fashionable high-end design. Rather, it was about trying to adapt design to something useful, like solving social problems. In short, the program revolved around the idea of socially responsible design.¹⁸ In a real sense, these two ideas—problem solving and social responsibility—characterize Helfgott’s approach to art making, and they undergird the seriousness of his work. Though he often speaks of problem solving from a technical point of view, when one examines his work, it is clear that technical considerations are always used in support of content, of something more all-encompassing than pure formal invention.

This becomes clear in the series of mixed-media sculptural works incorporating audio and kinetics that Helfgott began making in 2000. According to the artist, he wanted to add the element of time to his work, something he had already done five years earlier in *A Disquieting Void*. The first of these newer time-based works, *A Film in Three Chapters and an Epilogue* (2000), includes various moving components and audio text, its four wall-mounted sections unfolding in time as viewers move around the gallery from “chapter” to “chapter” listening to the audio. Among the major elements is a monumental version of the same three-quarters view of the artist’s face seen in earlier pieces. Here, however, it has been rendered in black with blue outlines, cut into several large pieces, and disassembled on the wall, suggesting a psychologically fragmented self. The audio, comprised of questions reminiscent of those on psychological

personality-profile tests but actually composed by the artist, reinforces this impression. Moreover, by addressing these questions directly to the viewer, the audio transforms the viewer into an active participant in the work. This first chapter sets the tone for the remaining sections and is followed by a section featuring several travel posters (longing?); then by a section with pajamas tacked to the wall as if to suggest a ghostly figure (perhaps a dream state?); and finally by an “epilogue” in which an actual hammer repeatedly strikes a photograph of a Parisian manhole cover that resembles a face. The audio in this last section raises questions about the confusing nature of visual perception, likening it to a Zen koan.

The psychological undertone of this piece is also reflected in several other mixed-media pieces with audio. In *Buddha Wisdom/What Women Have Told Me* (2005–06), for example, Helfgott combines several of his own sculptural interpretations of Buddha with a small ceramic version acquired from his father’s house after his death, bringing together images that suggest spiritual wisdom and a stoic view of the world. The audio, in stark contrast, turns the viewer-listener into an inadvertent voyeur, eavesdropping on the personal and sexually suggestive comments of several women, to which a male voice periodically responds.



R. Buckminster Fuller in his classroom at Black Mountain College, summer 1948

A related work introduced at the outset of this essay is *Tyranny of the Theoretical* (2008), an installation comprised of two desks and two psychologically probing audio tracks. Both desks hold a variety of disparate objects that, according to the artist, remind him of his grandmother's attic. This reference to his grandmother's attic, however, is not meant to be taken literally but to be understood as an imaginary place laden with memories of family, friends, and events, real and otherwise, that make up the artist's life world. Probing this psychological space, a repository of everything he has encountered over a lifetime, the artist imagines himself unearthing disparate objects that he then combines in an intuitive manner, in direct opposition to abstract theoretical calculation.

With this as a working method, it is not surprising that the general theme of one desk seems to concern the recurrent subject of the artist's family. Family is here represented by photographs of his parents and grandparents, and even a very old photograph of his great grandparents taken in Ukraine in the late 19th century. Tellingly, given Helfgott's interest in psychology, there is also a picture of Sigmund Freud's desk in Vienna, as well as an ashtray filled with cigar butts and various sexual images; these images and items recall both Freud's psychoanalytical method, which was based on analysis of a patient's sexual impulses, and a quip attributed to him that "sometimes a cigar is just a cigar."

The objects on the other desk seem devoted to the artist's professional and social world. Among them, strangely enough, are lamb bones salvaged from a dinner party at a friend's house after a reading by the poet Philip Levine. There also are various art books, a small model staircase, an obituary of the aforementioned artist Leon Golub from *The New York Times*, and a statuette of Michelangelo's *David* with its head and an arm broken off and carefully arranged in front of the small figure. One wonders, is the inclusion of these broken pieces an oblique reference to the story of Laocoön and his sons and the Renaissance discovery of the ancient statue with its missing arm?

The audio texts of *Tyranny of the Theoretical*, which are essential to expanding the meaning and scope of the work's visual elements, are interchangeable and not specific to either desk. However, so the audios can be clearly heard and understood, the installation is designed so that the viewer-listener hears only one at a time. While the text for each audio was written in one sitting in a stream-of-consciousness manner—one thought flowing into the next, similar to the way in which the objects were assembled on the two desks—both were carefully composed and touch on many of the same themes, though from somewhat different perspectives. Each audio is confessional in nature, incorporating a self-exploration that exposes the viewer-listener to the artist's hopes as well as his insecurities. In the audio titled "Alone," he speaks of friends and his fears and desires—fears about his intellectual life, fears of aging, fears about the quality of his work. He also explores the philosophical implications of becoming rather than being. In the second audio, "Chide/Cajole/Rant," quoted at the outset of this essay, his insecurities surface as he aggressively challenges the viewer-listener's qualifications to

judge his art. Not insignificantly, this audio also includes a philosophical passage on being and consciousness—on being aware, on being aware of another, and on being aware of being aware.¹⁹

In one way or another, the question of being and of being aware runs through much, if not all, of Helfgott's work. However, as noted earlier, his questioning is not about an egocentric self, something the self-effacing nature of his self-portraits makes clear. Rather, it is about seeing and understanding the self in relation to a larger world of others. Helfgott develops this idea early on in his work by focusing on family and friends as a way to symbolize the self's outward gaze. This continues in later works as well, perhaps most significantly in *The Feel of the Thing, Not the Think of It* (2008), a work in which he gathers together the images and voices of friends and family. He also explores this concern in *Here and There*, which includes innumerable obituaries (mostly from *The New York Times*) that the artist began collecting in 2001. This ongoing project exemplifies his interest in humanity and the way our lives are defined by those around us, including the departed who are commemorated in the news; after all, they also make up our world.

Helfgott's engagement with others is also evident in the audios accompanying some of his installations. While certain audios feature the artist himself speaking, the voices of friends and colleagues are heard in other works, sometimes responding to questions he asked of them. Helfgott considers this a genuine, if limited, form of collaboration because he incorporates their unedited responses exactly as they were

The Feel of the Thing, Not the Think of It (detail),
2008





Stills from the video for *With the Help of Javier, Luis, Ann and Susan*, 2014
 Courtesy Bill Humm, Light Heavy Industries

given. Participants took a more prominent role in creating several other pieces, including *Two Beautiful Women in the Luxembourg Gardens* (2000) and *Please Except Jesus* (ca.2000–2001). For the former, which involves a conversation between two Parisian women, Helfgott invited his poet friend, Terry Hummer, to compose the text, giving him general guidelines but also freedom to work within them. In an even more open-ended way, to make *Please Except Jesus*, based on a photograph he took of this admonition spray-painted on a wall, Helfgott asked another friend and artist, Richard Carlyon, to write a critique. To his surprise, Carlyon's text parodied a formalist interpretation of an image dependent on content, not structure, which then became the audio for the piece in counterpoint to Helfgott's visual component.

For his latest project, he has taken to heart his own words about the importance of others in perhaps the most significant way an artist can: he invited fellow artist Javier Tapia to "correct" one of his works and thus complete it. While previously Helfgott had added his own corrections to *Classical Figure with Corrections*, now he was handing this responsibility to another, a move similar but more radical in spirit to his use of the portraits he earlier had asked others to draw of him. Instead of determining how to incorporate in his work a visual element made by someone else, he relied on his collaborator to also make this decision, a genuine act of trust in another person.

Tapia's correction involved painting a large, bright blue shape on a clear plastic sheet, overlaid across the central portion of the work. It was a bold gesture that dramatically changed Helfgott's original composition. He acknowledged Tapia's efforts and several other people in a rather poignant way by titling the finished piece, *With the Help of Javier, Luis, Ann, and Susan* (2014). This title embodies a wider frame of reference by acknowledging the support of two female friends and the inspiration Helfgott has drawn from the work of Surrealist avant-garde filmmaker Luis Buñuel. Such collaborations go beyond an abstract, philosophical awareness of others by actually creating a dialogue with real people, not only affirming their existence as living, breathing human beings, but also recognizing their role in shaping the artist's life and work.

Even though Helfgott's work makes demands of time and attention on its audience that go against the contemporary impulse for instant gratification, it consistently rewards attentive viewer-listeners with something of substance. When all is said and done, what comes across most overwhelmingly is a belief that life is centered on interpersonal, human relationships with family, friends, and colleagues that must be carefully cultivated, even cherished. For it is through them that we are defined as human beings and a sense of community develops. The imagination and conviction with which Helfgott conveys these sentiments give his work its special power and relevance. Ignoring fashionable art-world trends and instead following a fundamental human impulse to care for others and extend to them a sense of empathy, Helfgott has created a body of work that not only stands apart in its originality, but also embodies ideas and concerns of a more profound nature than simple careerist aims.

NOTES

1. "Chide/Cajole/Rant," audio text excerpted from *Tyranny of the Theoretical* (2008).
2. According to Helfgott, Giacometti's *Petit Bust d'Annette* (ca.1946), a work in polychrome plaster, inspired his piece.

Photographic references to family appear in later works, including *Tyranny of the Theoretical* (2008), *The Feel of the Thing, Not the Think of It* (2008), and *Science Fiction/My Anxieties* (2006), to cite three examples.
3. The quote is from Sartre's famous 1946 lecture "L'existentialisme est un humanisme," translated simply as "Existentialism" in Walter Kaufmann, ed., *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre* (New York: Meridian Books, 1956), pp. 289–90.
4. This holds true regardless of which side of the "nature-nurture" argument one is on, i.e., whether one believes it is a family's genes or cultural attitudes that shape human consciousness. Helfgott has frequently discussed existentialism and his disagreements with the way it seemingly places the individual outside history. Some of his ideas concerning existentialism's influence on contemporary art were presented in a paper he delivered at a Southeastern College Art Conference.

Unless otherwise noted, details about the artist's life and work come from numerous conversations over the years, as well as e-mail queries and several interviews conducted with him by the author and Ashley Kistler.
5. Dora Maar, who was often painted by Picasso as the "woman in tears," was treated by psychiatrist Jacques Lacan at the behest of Picasso and Surrealist poet Paul Éluard. See William Rubin, ed., *Pablo Picasso, A Retrospective* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1980), pp. 348–78, especially Picasso, *Seated Woman*, Paris, May 24, 1938, p. 356.
6. Helfgott grew up in the Hyde Park neighborhood of Chicago. After graduating from Kozminski School in 1950, he attended Hyde Park High School. Sometime in 1952, when his family moved, he transferred to South Shore High School in Chicago. He graduated in 1954, around the time the basketball-team photograph was taken. When *Senior Team* was made, Helfgott was teaching in the Sculpture Department at VCU.
7. For viewers who recognize members of Helfgott's reconstituted team, this humor is heightened as individual personalities show through. At the same time, as age has taken its toll, and many colleagues and friends have since passed away, there is an aura of sadness that tempers this humor
- in a way the artist probably couldn't have imagined at the time he made the work. Participants' names are listed in the exhibition checklist, p. 154.
8. This work recalls *Lars and the Real Girl* (2007), a Canadian-American film directed by Craig Gillespie in which townspeople accept an inflatable doll as a real woman out of human kindness for a troubled young man.
9. This projection recalls the work of Tony Oursler, who presented *The Watching*, which features a video of a face projected onto a spherical form, at documenta 9 in 1991. In much of Oursler's work, the spherical forms are placed on the floor, suggesting the face is that of a disembodied person. Something very different occurs in Helfgott's work. For more on Oursler, see Jean Robertson and Craig McDaniel, *Themes of Contemporary Art: Visual Art After 1980* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 178–79.
10. This work by Hampton (1909–1964), who was an unschooled artist, is in the collection of the Smithsonian Institution's American Art Museum in Washington, D.C.
11. Besides references to Picasso, Duchamp, and Giacometti, Helfgott also refers to the painters Henri Matisse, Francis Picabia, and Yves Klein, and the filmmaker Luis Buñuel.
12. Exhibitions by both groups were organized by Don Baum, head of the curatorial and education departments at the Hyde Park Art Center. The names "Monster Roster" and "Chicago Imagists" (a collective name for both groups, as well as some later artists) were coined by Chicago critic and art historian Franz Schultze. The name "Hairy Who" came about when the artists were trying to decide on an anti-cool, un-New York sounding title for their upcoming show. When someone mentioned the Chicago radio art critic Harry Bouras, someone else asked "Harry who?," hence their moniker.
13. During his exhibition in Chicago in 1951, Dubuffet, who coined the term *l'art brut* (unrefined or raw art), outlined his ideas about art in lecture titled "Anticultural Positions." Dubuffet is also one of the artists quoted in the audio of *The Feel of the Thing, Not the Think of It* (2008), as is Surrealist André Breton.
14. According to Virgil's *Aeneid*, Laocoön, a priest of Poseidon, was punished for warning the Trojans not to accept the horse offered by the Greeks sieging the city of Troy. Athena sent two giant sea serpents to kill Laocoön and his two sons.
15. When news of the statue's discovery reached the Pope, he sent the artist Giuliano da Sangallo and Michelangelo to investigate. For a recounting of the discovery, see Howard Hibbard, *Michelangelo: Painter, Sculptor, Architect* (Secaucus, NJ: Chartwell Books, Inc., 1975), pp. 54–55. The original arm was found in 1905 in a sculptor's workshop in Rome, near to where the original statue had been discovered four centuries earlier. For a fascinating account of the many "corrections," see Bernard Frischer, "Laocoön: An Annotated Chronology of the 'Laocoön' Statue Group," *Digital Sculpture Project*, www.digitalsculpture.org/laocoon/chronology. For a romanticized depiction of the statue's discovery, see the painter Hubert Robert's *The Finding of the Laocoön* (1773), Virginia Museum of Fine Arts; note that Robert depicts the statue as it looked in 1773 with its "incorrect" straight right arm.
16. This reflects the thinking of German philosopher Edmund Husserl, whose ideas Helfgott has discussed. See Husserl's "The Origin of Geometry" in his *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press: 1970), p. 363.
17. After graduating from high school, Helfgott studied architecture at the University of Illinois at Navy Pier in Chicago from 1954 to January 1957. He then transferred to the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, where he spent the spring semester before going to Southern Illinois University.

Helfgott was drawn to SIU to work with Fuller on a project in the Design Department. Eventually he transferred from Design to the Art Department and majored in sculpture. After receiving an MFA in 1964, he taught at Northern Illinois University (1964–1967) and then at Edinboro State University in Pennsylvania (1967–68), before coming to VCU in 1968. For more on the SIU Design Department, see Al Gowan, *Shared Vision: The Second American Bauhaus* (Cambridge, MA: Merrimack Media, 2012).
18. For more on this, see "Discovery in the American Classroom: Replacing Products with Problems" in Al Gowan, op. cit., pp. 200–01.
19. This self-conscious introspection clearly echoes the ideas of Edmund Husserl. See his *Crisis*, Part III, especially pages 252–53, and Morton White, *The Age of Analysis* (New York: The New American Library: 1955), p. 104.



The Lost Traveler, 1985–89

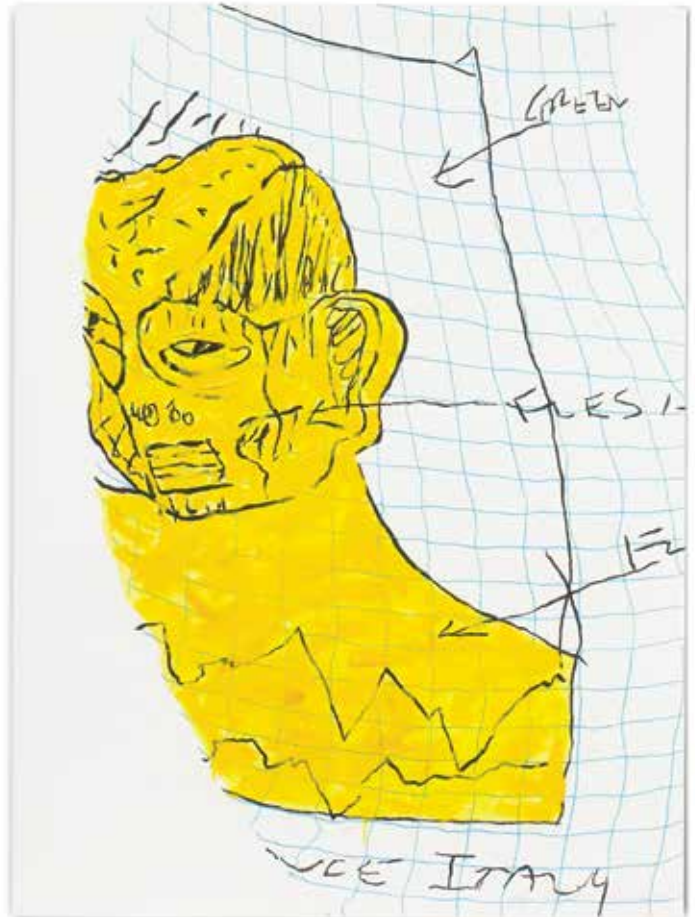
Opposite: *Classical Figure with Corrections*, 1986



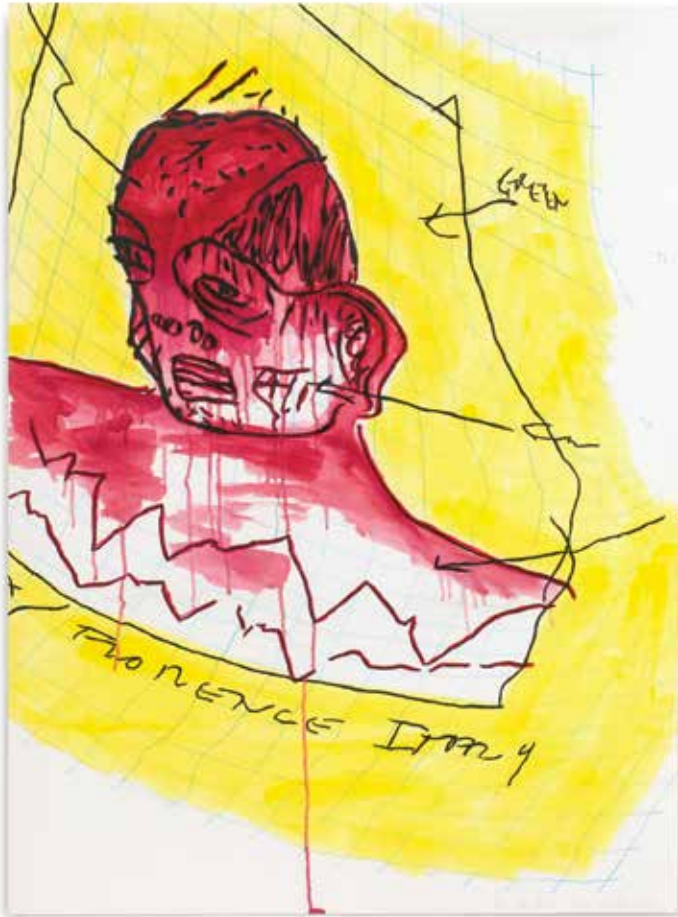


Salute, 1971
Opposite: *Hands*, 1995-96



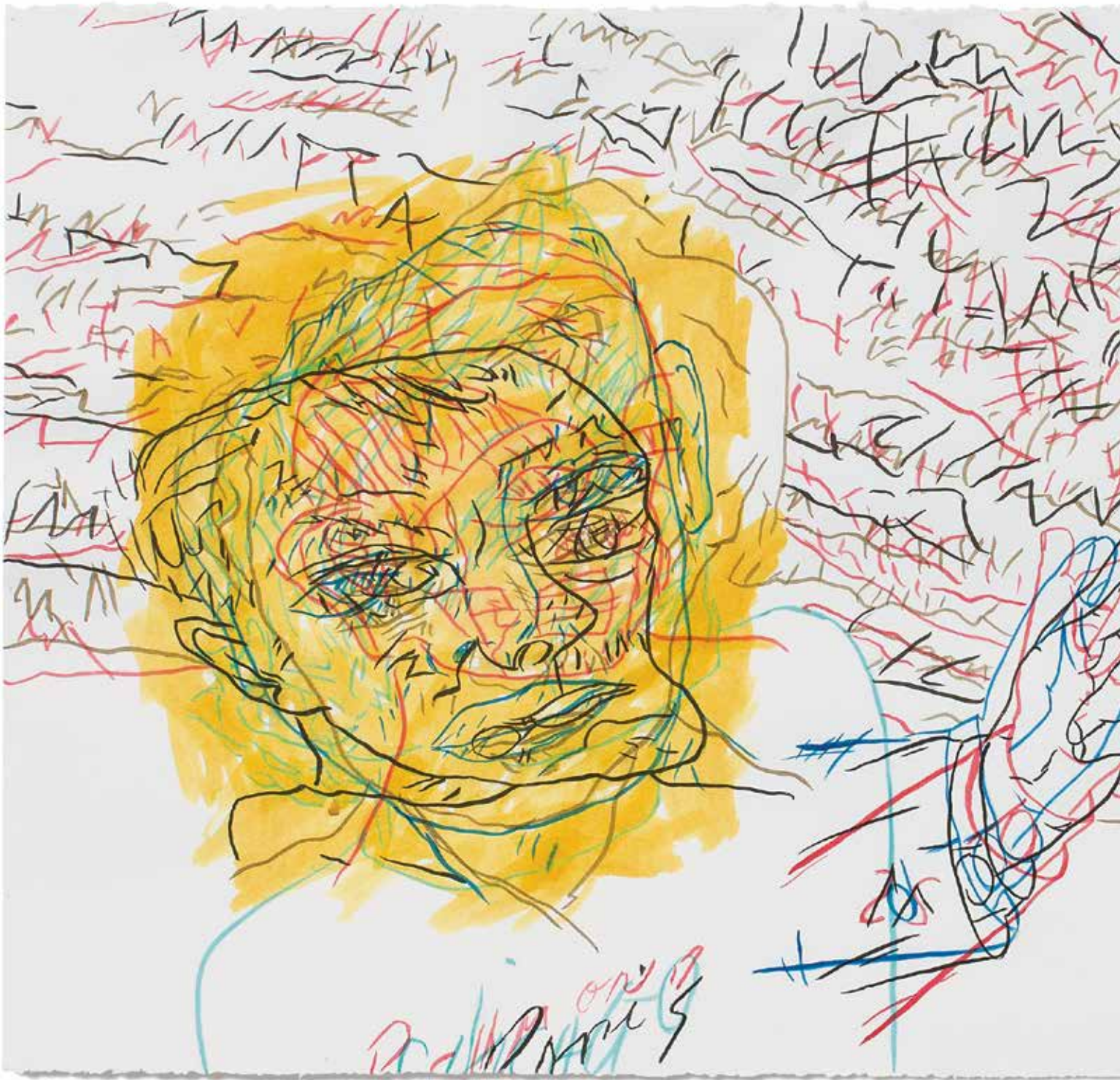


Picabia Series, 1997



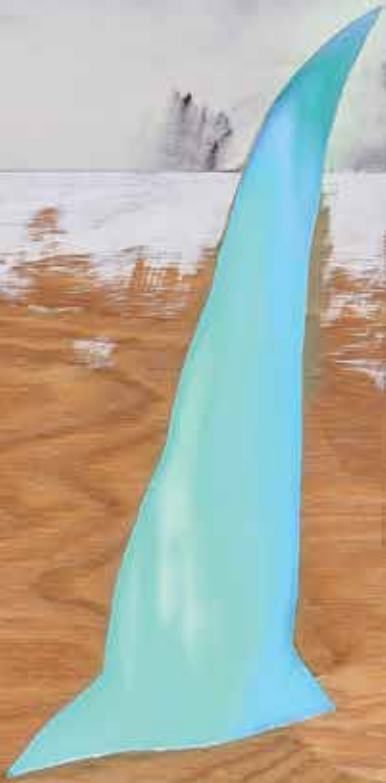
Untitled, 1995–96

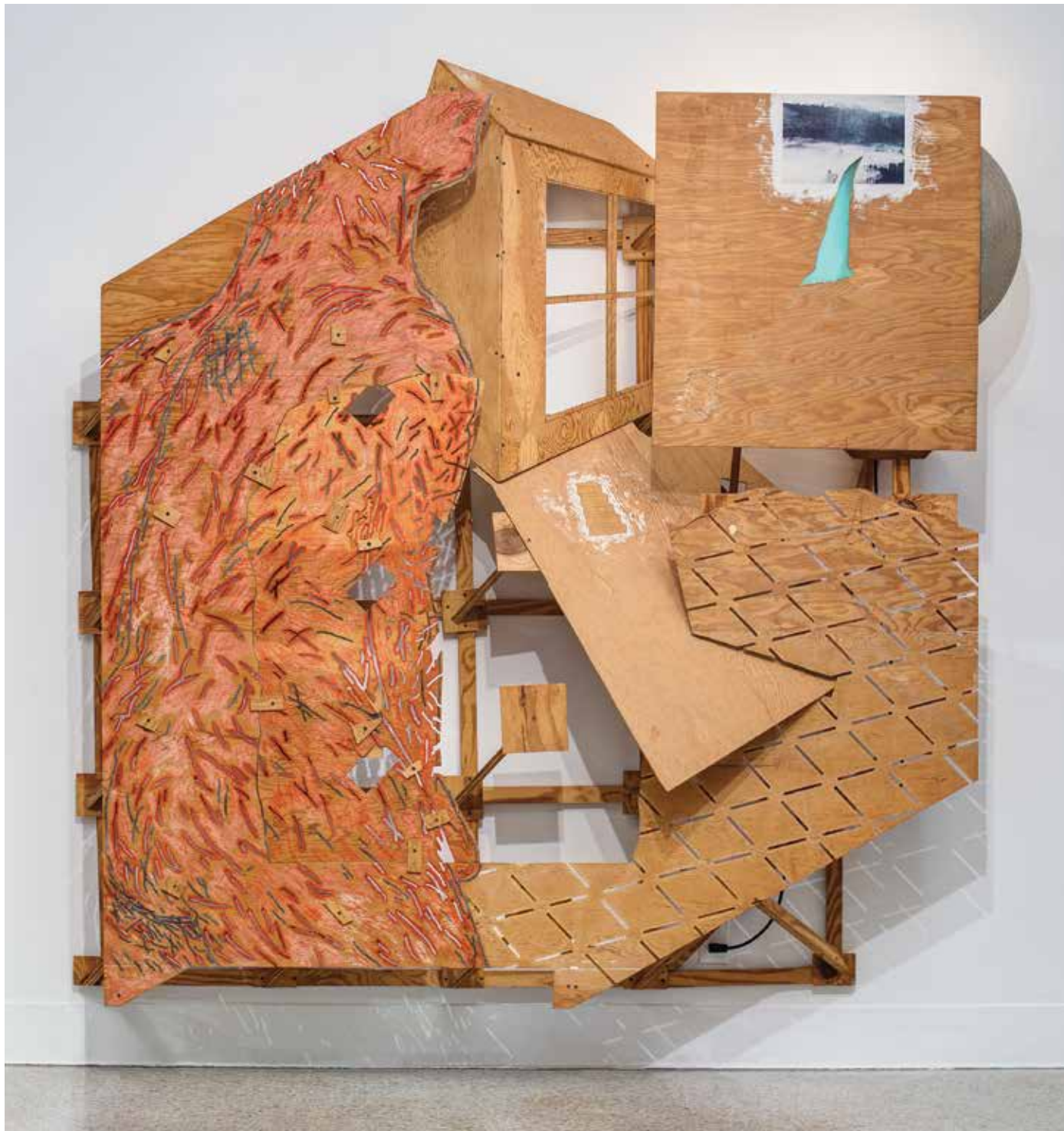






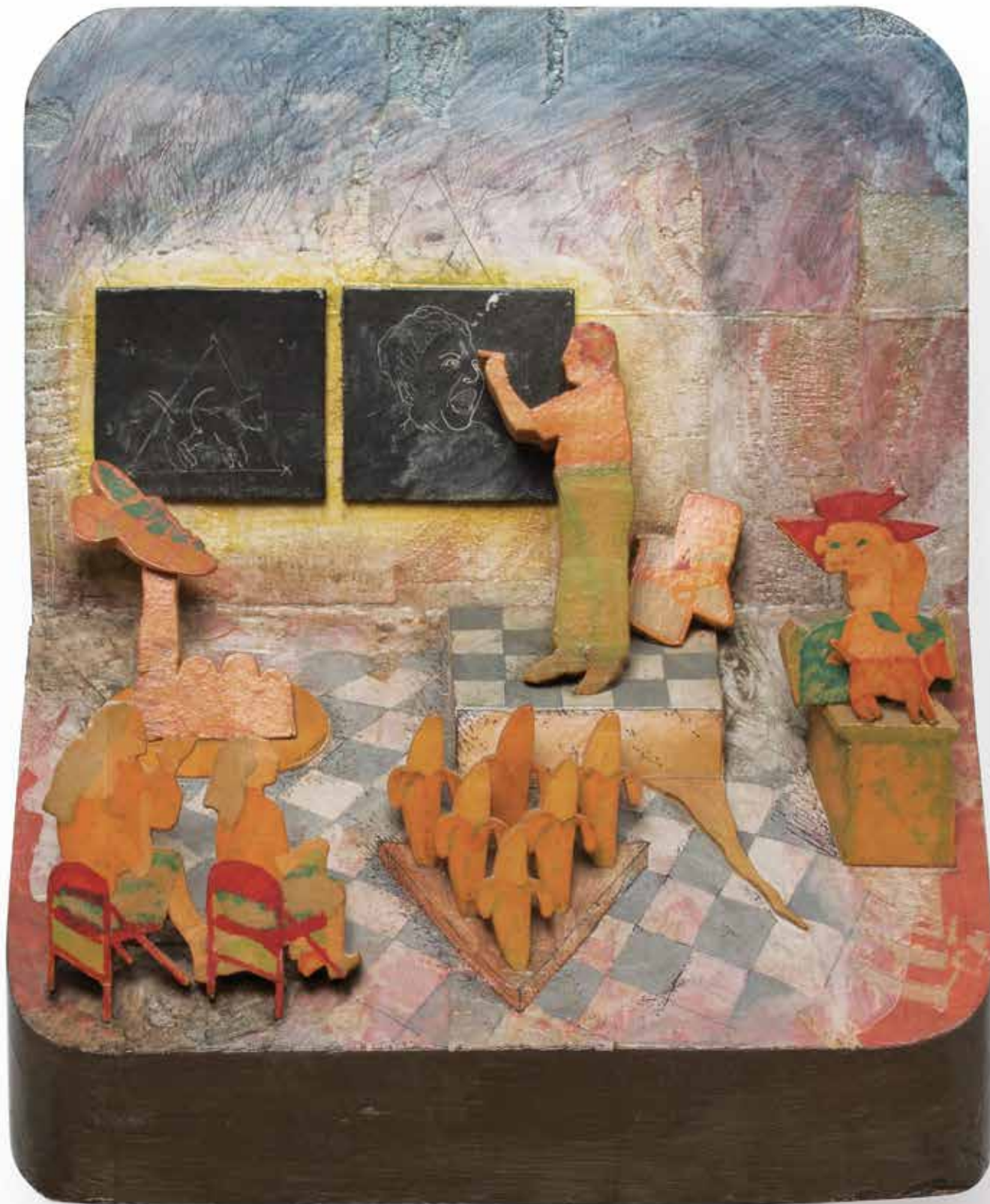
Given: The Order of Things, 1990





Waterfall after Duchamp, 1990
Opposite: detail

Untitled, ca.1972





Being Looked After by Ida, Jeri, and Megan, 1981–82





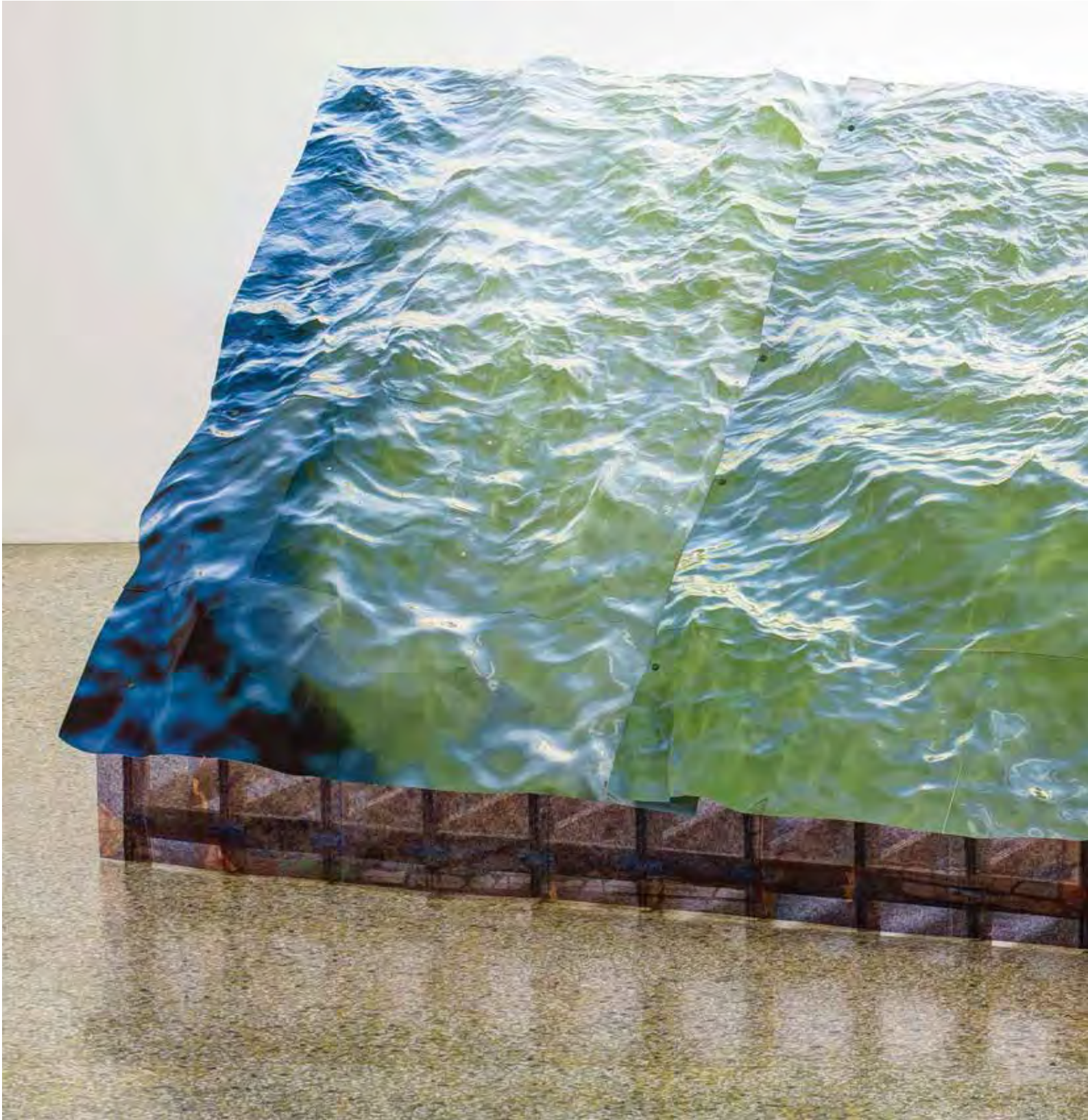
the river then and the river now

Elizabeth King

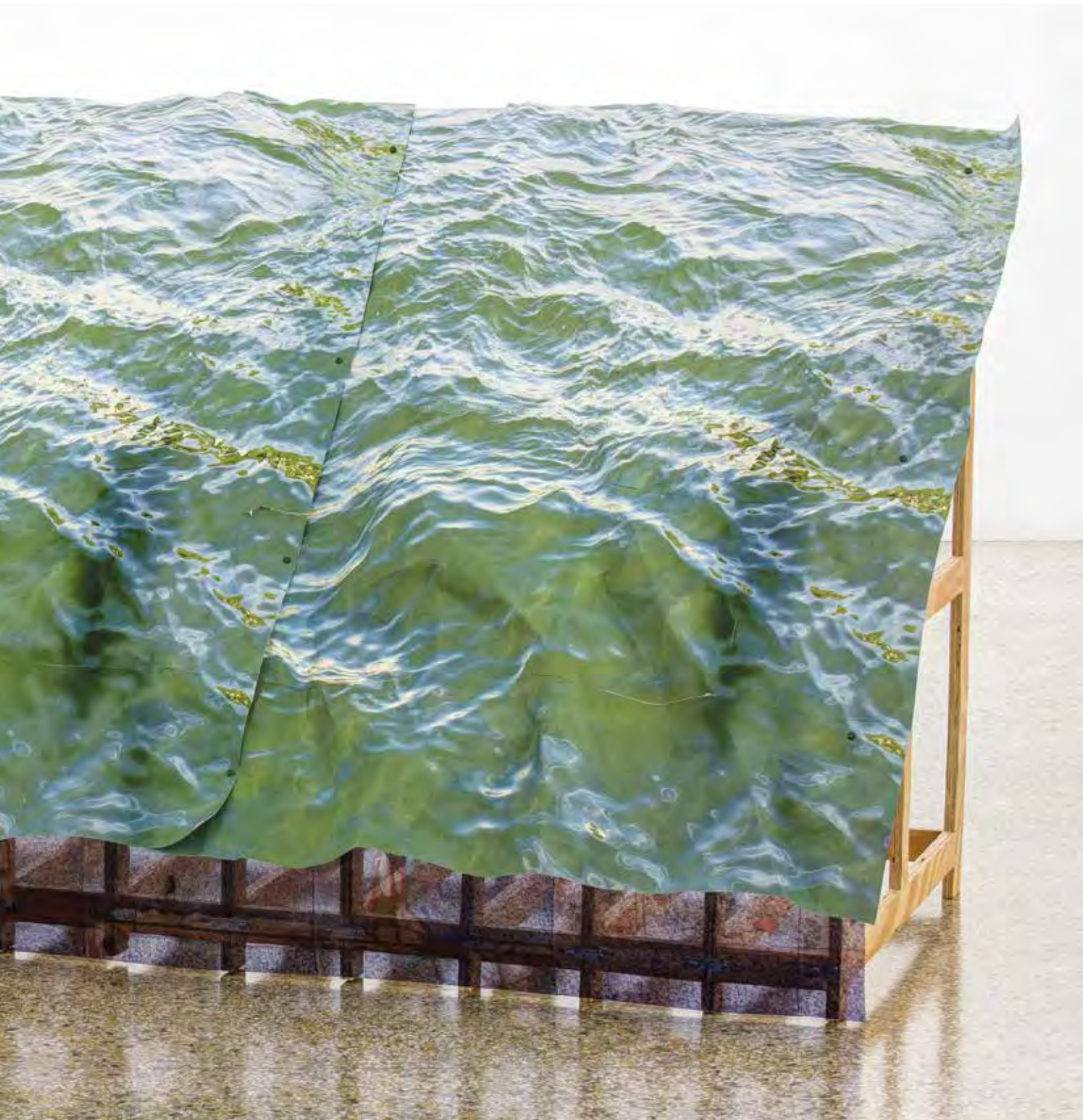
Myron's recent portrait of the River Seine, *Water*, is one of the best sculptures he's made. He took three snapshots of the river, blew them up for printing on a grid of 48 sheets of 8.5 × 11-inch paper (on his home printer), for an 8-foot-wide panorama of the surface of the water, actual scale. Supporting the image, banked at the same camera angle: his hallmark wooden scaffold, crafted with architect-tight cross-joints, its own grid in three dimensions. The water is choppy and reflects a hundred shades of Parisian blue. But he scrunched up the individual printed sheets and only partly flattened them before mounting, so the paper is choppy too, and reflects a hundred shades of gallery light. Which light is real and which is photographic? What's a wave and what's a wrinkle? An image of water at close range, no shores, no frame, the paper extends beyond the support; fluttering edges mimic the windy moment of the shot. One strolls around to see the scaffold, and goes from the straight-faced illusion of watery surface and depth to an equivalent depth of contrivance and craft. A thing made of opposites: the near-comic thrift to capture and size the picture; the elaborate stretcher strong enough to support that volume of actual water. Myron once said, "Painters always want more of the hereness of sculpture, and sculptors always want more of the thereness of painting." The sculpture tickles itself even as it walks a tightrope over the chasm between truth and bluff, object and image, fixed and fluid, lyric and burlesque. The river then and the river now.

Myron is among the most original sculptors on the American scene. He taught in the VCU Sculpture Department for 35 years. It was a hands-down privilege to see him in action as a teacher. No one could predict what he would say in a critique. He loved pointing out things that made a work good in spite of the artist's intent. Students learned to pay attention to slips and mistakes and visiting angels. He taught all of us about the demands and the gifts of history, how it pushes us like the wind at our backs. Borges, Beckett, Frisch, Calvino, Brodsky: his thinking is suffused with literary form. His love of argument, his pranks, his ethics, his animal energy, his idea of what an art school does: the department sailed to its national reputation on his intellectual momentum. "What is the difference between subject matter and content?," he would ask. "In dreams begin responsibilities," he would remind us, quoting writer Delmore Schwartz quoting Yeats. He went home from school for lunch every day and worked in his studio. "When I see something I really like, I either have to copy it, or eat it." How do we measure constitution and physical energy in human achievement? Myron, who works like a horse at 78, is in his studio every day. He's making the best work of his career, right now.

Water (detail), 2011



Water, 2011





Doorway, 2011





The Feel of the Thing, Not the Think of It, 2008



AUDIO

the feel of the thing, not the think of it

Quotes collected by Myron Helfgott

- Lo** A piece of art shouldn't wear its craft like fine clothing.
Martin Puryear
- G** ...what makes a narrative good is not the story itself but what follows what. Joseph Brodsky
- G** We become poets not because we have important things we want to say, but because we like hanging around words listening to what they have to say. W. H. Auden
- G** A reader will not be surprised by what he reads if the writer is not surprised by what he writes. Italo Calvino, *If On A Winter's Night A Traveler*
- J** The essential fault with Surrealism is that it invents without discovering. Wallace Stevens
- J** Art involves vastly more than the sense of beauty. Wallace Stevens
- L** He changes directions all the time because he is afraid he will lose the right one. Federico Fellini, *8½*
- L** I really have nothing to say but I'm going to say it all the same.
Federico Fellini, *8½*
- G** Reading literature is like going crazy with a round trip ticket.
Leslie Fiedler
- M** When asked if his films have a beginning, middle and end, Jean Luc Godard said: Yes, but not necessarily in that order.
- M** Today it goes without saying that nothing concerning art goes without saying, much less without thinking. Theodor Adorno
- M** All my friends are evil bastards except you. David Shrigley
- M** He had delusions of adequacy. Walter Kerr
- S** I feel so miserable without you; it's almost like having you here.
Stephen Bishop
- S** I've had a perfectly wonderful evening. But this wasn't it.
Groucho Marx
- Lo** The pendulum swings between sense and nonsense, not between right and wrong. Carl Gustav Jung
- L** You're only looking for what you expect to find. Jessica Fletcher
- D** Language itself is capable of transforming reality. Mario Vargas-Llosa
- Lo** What can be shown cannot be said. Ludwig Wittgenstien
- S** Happiness is the ability of telling everyone the truth without hurting anybody. Federico Fellini, *8½*
- Lo** All humans require moorings in order to make sense of things; the contemporary arts undercut our moorings." Claude Levi-Strauss
- G** A writer doesn't look for the answers in life, he looks for the mysteries.
Ken Kesey
- J** I know a lot about art but I don't know what I like. James Thurber

- Lo** Isn't the disproportion between the plain object and the fancy explanation the oldest joke there is about modern art. Adam Gopnik
- M** I know a place in the fields of... (pause) this is a bunch of shit you know. Orson Wells
- S** The idea is that poetry is produced and airplanes are beautiful. Clement Greenberg
- G** The function of art is to make a raid on predictability. Oscar Wilde
- Lo** Art doesn't reproduce the visible, it renders visible. Paul Klee
- M** I am searching but have not yet found. Federico Fellini, 8½
- D** Beauty is valued less than psychology. Joseph Brodsky
- S** I came to believe long ago not to make a meal of one's emotional life. Joseph Brodsky
- M** It's all art, but not necessarily good art. Marcel Duchamp
- L** Art is a guaranty of sanity. Louise Bourgeois
- G** Social intent in literature has been replaced by social opportunity. Vladimir Nabokov
- Lo** The only sensible way to regard the art life is that it is a privilege you are willing to pay for. Robert Henri
- D** The quiet of the past tense. Larry Levis
- M** Looking at Morandi paintings is like studying the declension of Latin verbs. Fairfield Porter
- G** The role of the art object is to render silence. Samuel Beckett
- J** The marvelous is always beautiful. Andre Breton
- J** I go to the theatre to be astounded. John Lahr
- Lo** Beauty cannot be targeted; it is always a byproduct of other, often very ordinary pursuits. Joseph Brodsky
- Lo** When asked by a student at MIT whether he took aesthetic factors into account when tackling a technical problem, Bucky Fuller said: No, when I am working on a problem, I never think about beauty. I think only of how to solve the problem. But when I have finished, if the solution is not beautiful, I know it is wrong.
- L** Love: A temporary insanity curable by marriage. Ambrose Bierce, The Devil's Dictionary
- D** Nelson Algren's three rules for a happy life:
 1. Never sit down to play poker with anybody named Doc.
 2. Never eat at a place called Mom's.
 3. Never sleep with a woman who has more problems than you do.
- S** I realized I didn't want to compose pictures, I wanted to find them. Ellsworth Kelly
- D** The world is an illusion created by the conspiracy of our senses. Roger Penrose

- G** Work is the curse of the drinking class. Oscar Wilde
- M** Taste is as tiring as good company. Francis Picabia
- J** Plagiarism is when you steal from one person; research is when you steal from many. Dennis Norton
- L** Masturbation: the hand at the service of the imagination. Mimi Benoit
- D** Inhale one vision, exhale another. To steal consciously is the way of art and of craft. To steal through breath is the way of wisdom and of art that transcends. Nick Tosches
- D** Art tells us nothing about the world that we cannot find elsewhere and more reliably. Morris Peckham
- J** Sex and death are the only two topics that can be of the least interest to a serious studious mind. William Butler Yeats
- Lo** Craft: A fool's substitute for brains. Ambrose Bierce, *The Devil's Dictionary*
- Lo** Music is the diarrhea of the intellect. Francis Picabia
- D** Stupid—well, there are so many kinds of stupidity, and cleverness is one of the worst. Thomas Mann, *The Magic Mountain*
- G** Oscar Wilde preferred stories to facts and found lying (an art of fiction) more life giving than representation.
- L** ...useless chaos is what fiction is about. Mavis Gallant
- J** After seeing and chatting with these lovely women on the street I continued home, the fleshpot of my imagination took wing (and here) I took matters into my own hand and the palm of forgiveness soothed my ache. James Joyce, *Ulysses*
- S** Perfection of means and confusion of aims seem to be characteristic of our age. Albert Einstein
- G** Do not pad ignorance with eloquence. Vladimir Nabokov
- J** Style and structure are the essence of a book; great ideas are hogwash. Vladimir Nabokov
- M** An art that claims all the prerogatives of public discourse without having a loving or attentive relationship to lived experience seems to define just what we mean by academic art. Adam Gopnik
- S** If the fusion of narrative and commentary seems strange, remember that...this story-succeeded-by-commentary is one of the profoundest, most deeply rooted and accepted experiences in modern life: The newspaper story editorial, the play-and-review-of-the-play, the travel film with voice as commentary and newsreel with commentator are all primordial examples of what is going to be an inevitable literary form... In any case, as I just said, the chorus is one of the best and most popular devices invented in any time. Delmore Schwartz, letter to James Laughlin

- M** By using humor you can be excused from engaging in very serious considerations. It is an escape I suppose. Marcel Duchamp
- Lo** The true goal of art is to disappoint expectations. Georges Bataille
- G** Knowledge is knowing as little as possible. Charles Bukowski
- G** Life eludes logic. André Gide
- Lo** How can you think and hit at the same time? Yogi Berra
- S** If one really wishes to be master of an art, technical knowledge is not enough. One has to transcend technique so that the art becomes an 'artless art' growing out of the Unconscious. D.T. Suzuki
- D** Enjoyment is not a goal, it is a feeling that accompanies important ongoing activity. Paul Goodman
- J** I like a state of continual becoming, with a goal in front and not behind. George Bernard Shaw
- M** The foolish reject what they see, not what they think; the wise reject what they think, not what they see. Huang Po
- S** Computers are useless. They can only give you answers. Pablo Picasso
- J** Words, as is well known, are great foes of reality. Joseph Conrad
- L** What we call reality is an agreement that people have arrived at to make life more livable. Louise Nevelson
- L** No snowflakes fall in an inappropriate place. Zen saying
- D** There is no way you can use the word 'reality' without quotation marks around it. Joseph Campbell
- J** Believe those who are seeking the truth; doubt those that find it. André Gide
- S** When you seek it, you cannot find it. Zen saying
- Lo** Attachment to spiritual things is...just as much an attachment as inordinate love of anything else. Thomas Merton
- J** What is truth? I don't know and I'm sorry I brought it up. Edward Abbey
- S** We know too much and feel too little. Bertrand Russell
- S** The quieter you become, the more you can hear. Baba Ram Dass
- L** We are all born charming, fresh, and spontaneous and must be civilized before we are fit to participate in society. Miss Manners (Judith Martin)
- M** Don't think: Look. Ludwig Wittgenstein
- D** The truth of a thing is the feel of it, not the think of it. Stanley Kubrick
- M** It takes a long time to understand nothing. Edward Dahlberg
- L** ...each of us normalizes the terrible strangeness of inner life with a variety of convenient fictions. Siri Hustvedt, *The Sorrows of an American*

- S** I'm not from here anymore. Heinrich von Kleist, *Bartleby and Co.*
by Enrique Vila-Matas
- J** What is a rebel? A man who says no. Albert Camus, *Bartleby and Co.*
by Enrique Vila-Matas
- Lo** Art must make you laugh a little and make you a little afraid.
Anything as long as it doesn't bore. Jean Dubuffet
- M** Screwing things up is a virtue. Being correct is never the point. I have
an almost fanatically correct assistant, and by the time she re-spells
my words and corrects my punctuation, I can't read what I wrote.
Being right can stop all the momentum of a very interesting idea.
Robert Rauschenberg
- L** Some unattributed quotes:
He's not prolific, he's incontinent.
Everything is as it appears to be and a little bit less.
- J** One day more is one day less. Charles Wright, "Portrait of the Artist
with Hart Crane," *The World of Ten Thousand Things, Poems 1980-1990*
- J** Beauty is in the looking for it. Charles Wright, *Light Journal*
- J** Truthful words are not beautiful, beautiful words are not truthful.
Charles Wright, *A Journal of One Significant Landscape*
- S** To hold a man, a woman has to appeal to the worst in him.
F. Scott Fitzgerald, *This Side of Paradise*
- S** Perfect is boring. George Balanchine
- M** Criticism is prejudice made plausible. H. L. Menkin
- M** ...we're all in this together, only some of us have better
bottle-openers. J. F. Powers, about F. Scott Fitzgerald's *This Side
of Paradise*, *Commonweal* magazine
- M** I think you must watch what is always the great danger with any
'surrealistic' style, namely of confusing authentic non-logical relations
which arouse wonder with accidental ones which arouse mere surprise
and in the end fatigue. W. H. Auden, as quoted by William Logan in
his review of *Selected Poems* by Frank O'Hara, *New York Times Book
Review*, 29 June 2008

VOICES

- D** Don Palmer
L Lee Jordan-Anders
M Myron Helfgott
J Javier Tapia
G Gregory Donovan
Lo Lothar Pausewang

The Feel of the Thing,
Not the Think of It (detail), 2008
Morris Helfgott, the artist's father







Fear Not, 1981-82

Portrait with Topiary, 1984



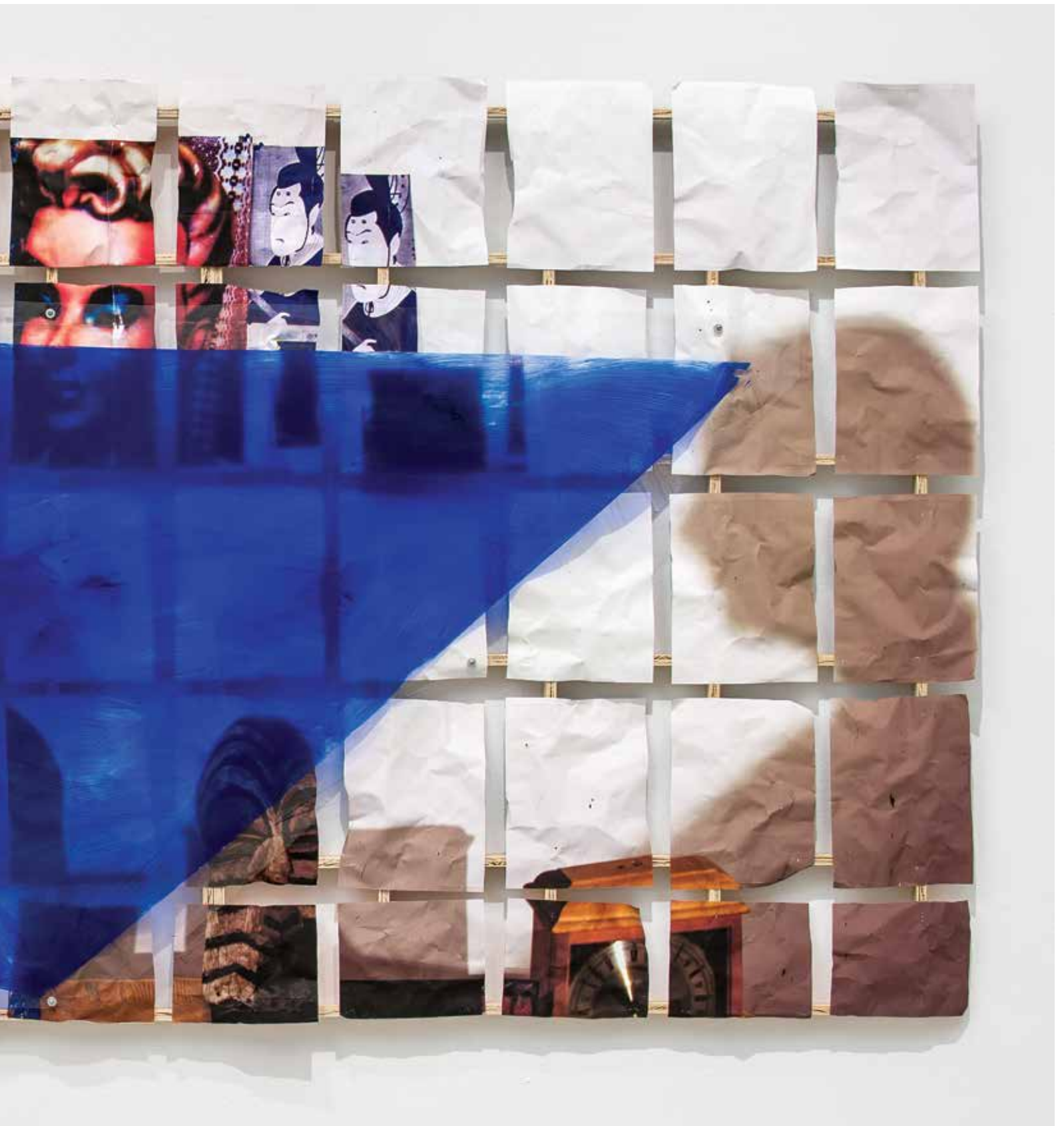




Under the Rose, 1987
Opposite: *Japanese Wrestlers, 2014*



With the Help of Javier, Luis, Ann and Susan, 2014





landscape with dekalb radio

Dinah Ryan

Loneliness is solitude with a problem.

—Maggie Nelson, *Bluets*

There are no trees in the world. They have all been cut down and milled into boards and sheets of plywood with grain that ripples like rings in brown water. The missing trees leave room for the sky covered by a membrane of pale clouds. Beneath it, the grassy field has plenty of room for the contraptions and the bed. It is one of those indeterminate midwinter mornings where everyone feels flattened by queasy dreams, as if they have been dredging dark canals in their sleep.

Buddy Ash has, in fact, been trolling with a piece of thin, greasy string, effortlessly pulling up bent screens, urinals, plastic dolls with silver hair, cinder blocks, rusted refrigerators with their doors yawning open, car batteries, brightly colored tires like enormous rubber Fruit Loops, flapping carp mouthing O-O-O and rolling their cognizant yellow eyes up at him. As light as air, these things have come to the surface attached to the line he dipped again and again into the oily stream. Things angled past him, too, bobbing on the surface: coiled copper wire, secretive metal boxes cord-strapped shut, a set of straight-backed wooden chairs, a blue toy truck, a snow shovel, an umbrella, axles, and a flotilla of broken slate like decaying lily pads. Everything was buoyant, rising to the surface or skimming along with equal ease, but some things—the more desirable things—evaded him even as his cast line slapped wetly against a branch or a hubcap that only sank a little, swiveled, and rolled out of sight.

When Buddy wakes up, his fishing expedition has vanished like the one stone that won't float in the canal's dank waters, but he feels the familiar tickle of inadequacy in his belly and a sure sense that something got away. On a wooden stool beside the bed, the DeKalb Radio buzzes and pops. Fabricated of draped sheet lead, the radio has two protruding handles like T-bars on tap wrenches, handles that Buddy twirls to change the frequency and the volume. The frequency tuner is shaped like a bisected hot dog flying from a stubby pole; the volume control is an awkward claw that appears to be clutching a cigar. Around the radio's bulbous contours a frilled collar of sheared cursive lettering says, "Let's meet regularly."

Although the DeKalb Radio picks up only the most tenuous frequencies, it is a connecting point, receiving and transmitting messages, messages that never quite come through. It's like listening to a foreign language that Buddy is just beginning to learn, a liquid and confident cascade of sound, but obscure. Buddy listens through the radio's static with an intensity divided between the effort to pick up every third word and an absurd hopefulness.

Buddy had found it on a table at a flea market, nearly buried under a jumble of rusty second-hand hammers, pliers, and screwdrivers, broken

locks and chains, metal corner braces, and hand drills. A socket wrench set with missing sockets here and there grinned at him, a smile with missing teeth.

The man sitting beside the table rested his elbow on the table, his cheek against the back of his hand, watching Buddy with knowing, laughing eyes. A flip of brown hair curled over his high forehead. His beautiful beak of a nose pointed to an amused smile and Buddy had the feeling he knew something about Buddy that Buddy didn't even know himself. The man saw Buddy spot the radio and gave it to him for nothing, with a nod and an upward flap of his free hand that said, "take it, take it," as if the radio already belonged to Buddy and had been waiting for him.

When Buddy listens to the radio, there is another transmission underneath the broadcast, a simpler, truer relay. This is what he strains to hear, but he can't tell whether the sounds that come to him are the constructions of his own thinking or the voice of something talking to him, singing to him, telling him things he wants to know but shouldn't, like a siren. The radio seems privy to private things: desire, faithfulness, betrayal.

This morning it is full of love and garbage. It unleashes a burble of you and me and what we did. I thank you and I'll say I'm sorry now, at last, but how are you fixed for love, Mustang Sally? If not for you, fast and furious, the bird gets the worm. Still, let's stay together, at least another Saturday night. You can soothe me—I'm restless stuck in the middle with you. But you're so vain, you got me hummin'. It's a wonderful world, Venus de Milo, and ain't that the straight, no chaser truth.

Buddy turns on his side in bed. He is a young man, but he feels the old man inside, the one forming like an embryo who will gradually emerge and replace Buddy's body with the old man's thin, crepuscular skin, sagging little breasts, and tender belly striated by folds and horizontal wrinkles. He draws his knees toward his chest, crosses his arms to keep the old man in, to hold him back. His heart keeps stolid time with the radio's rhythmic patter.

Is Buddy lonely? He isn't sure. He prefers being alone. Other people make him nervous. He curls in the warmth of his bed, resisting the diffuse light filtering through the cloud cover that makes the floaters, the swirling worms, in his vision rotate on a gray field, wanting someone to share the cocoon. It's too warm, too soft to be alone with the dread of the day. Being alone calls up that feeling of stupidity, the sense that he annoys people. Stay in. Stay in bed. Don't think. What is it that got away? He's not missing anything. He doesn't have to jump up and make anyone coffee or have a conversation. He doesn't have to brush his teeth, if he doesn't want to, or do anything else, for that matter.

The faces of women he might like to forget flicker on the backs of his closed eyelids, a sexually synesthetic display. Margaret's hair is a lavender spiral; Paula's legs, a cinnamon orb. Angela's hands, with the slender fingers she curled into the hair at the nape of his neck, are blue tetrahedrons of different sizes and orientations; Betty's breasts, yellow dots; Wilma's knees, a curling silver ribbon. They had mostly been unhappy with him, accusing him of using his groin to forget them before they were gone. But drifting in and out of sleep, he enjoys watching the spectacle, even as the DeKalb Radio urges longing and regret.

The only way to beat the inertia, he decides, is to run without thinking. He has a sudden desire to leave home naked. It occurs to him that by running as fast as he can, he could run across the field to the mound and collect things, unnoticed. He has things that he's seeking; he just doesn't know what they are yet. He had better get going if he was going to go. No point in dressing. Nakedness is only conspicuous to those who want to draw attention to it, who are willing to stare at it, see it, say hello. Run, don't think, he says to himself. If he runs fast enough, both his nakedness and his fear will be invisible.

He throws off the covers, stands up, and takes off running like a cartoon character, arms and legs whirling. It's a wide, unvarying landscape. He can run a long way in it without feeling like he's gone anywhere. He cuts across the field toward the mound of debris that rises out of the plane like a diminutive mountain. If there were trees, it would rise above the treetops.

As Buddy picks up speed, his arms and legs spin like propellers. He wheels past Lucinda and June, who sit beside a stump spread with a flowered cloth, drinking coffee and talking. Grinning, he waves, flips his forearm back and forth in greeting, like a hinged yardstick.

"Now, where is he off to?" Lucinda asks June, staring after him.

"Who knows?" June answers, shaking her head.

The two are dressed in simple, patterned cotton. Their heads tilt toward each other. Though from a certain angle, they appear wooden, a little artificial and not pliable, they are pleased to gaze into each other's eyes and confess everything.

While they tell each other all, they watch Buddy getting a toe-hold on the mound, scaling it like a monkey with hands and feet, the thick pads of his soles and nearly prehensile toes curling around the detritus. He seems to be looking for something as he claws through the piles of discarded tires and scrap metal, aluminum copper radiators, rolls of insulated cable, bumpers, pipes, engine blocks, brass shells and turnings, compressors and die cast. Methodically, Buddy makes a pile of the things he picks out of the mound.

There are no trees in the world. They have been replaced by the carcasses of wooden and metal armatures dotting the landscape, by stiles leading nowhere except from one grassy patch to another, by networks of levers and pulleys moving in a rhythmic tango, in a reciprocal sway of stimulus and response.

Buddy sits on the edge of the bed, listening to the radio, looking into the distance where the team—a group of men in orange coveralls—is gathered. The team gathers in a circle beside a string of empty flatbed cars at the edge of the field. The bright orange jumpsuits conceal the fact that they are of different ages, shapes, and sizes, and the way they stand, intent on solving the problem of a broken switch, they are a single-celled organism. To Buddy, from a distance, they are a cluster of glowing orbs floating on the horizon.

Buddy is listening to a game on the radio, the pock-pock of the ball hitting the court, the squeak and thud of pounding shoes, the hustle up and down the floor, looking for the open man. The static sounds like breathing.

The radio cajoles Buddy, talks back. It's pushy, like an aggressive basketball coach. "Get out there, get your hands in the air," it says to Buddy. "You think there's nobody else can do this? You think that ball is gonna wait for you? It's not gonna wait for you. Nothing's gonna wait for you. Get out there. Get your hands in the air."

He has heard all this before, the pressure to keep up with everyone else, value measured by movement and by counting off the points. Up the court and make a basket, down the court and block the shot. Repetitions, the constantly shifting arrangements and rearrangements of the team are the units that demarcate time. You can put a hole in time, Buddy thinks. He imagines palming the ball, stopping the clock. When they stop the clock, the measuring stops, time stops. Motionlessness is not an interval and emptiness has no future.

Buddy doesn't want to put a hole in time. He desires work, the increments of construction, the building line of masonry, joists that support the roof of a structure, the aerial feats of the crane's jib. This is what he wants: the team, the play, the give and take, to know that what he brings is valuable.

He gathers the pile of scrap he has brought from the mound, cradles it, arranges it on a wheeled cart, and trundles it to the team, who clap him on the back. His nakedness is no cause for remark. The team is glad to have him, pleased with his addition to the pile of paraphernalia that might contribute to the repair of the switch. With him, the team is a whole.

This is the paradox of time: you can put wholes in it. When the ball goes through the net, you put a whole in it. When you can see the pattern, you put a whole in it. Whenever Buddy builds something, what is in it and what is outside of it, that's wholeness. And, more than the brief joining with a woman, being part of the team is wholeness.

There are no trees in the world. In the intermediate distance is a throng of massive wooden heads. Buddy wanders between them, as in a maze or on a chessboard, feeling the grass between his toes. Beside these sightless, generic figures, a sea of photographs of perplexed faces attached to bulky wooden armatures are turned to him like a field of satellite dishes, receptive yet vacant. Among them, Buddy feels abandoned and apprehensive, alone with his own memories, memories that are largely unavailable, as full of static as the broadcasts on the DeKalb Radio. The field is either a series of planes and portals, through which he wanders like a ghost, or it is crowded by throngs of icons, human yet impassive and unreadable.

The news on the radio is bad. The life forms in the waters surrounding the field face mass extinction. The currency is destabilized. There's a marsupial with a third eye due to radiation. A suicide bomber has destroyed a marketplace, killing forty-eight women and children. There is too much stuff everywhere; the field is crammed full of crapola. The world is devouring itself, an ouroboros, a snake eating its tail.

The news is bad, but the radio is philosophical about it. In the middle of the report, a second voice breaks through and takes over, "That's how the monkey flows," it says, as if it's shrugging.

How the monkey flows? Buddy wonders what that means. How does the monkey flow? *How the money flows?* Yes, that could be it since

it certainly is money that drives the flow. *That's how things go?*
Sure, that, too.

The radio reverses and contradicts itself. Its voice is grief stricken one minute, caught up in the zeitgeist the next, indifferent or fatalistic a moment afterward. While he listens to the radio, Buddy goes about his job of tending to the monuments, clipping the grass from around their bases, cleaning them, setting them upright when they threaten to tip over. He lives among the dead, but it is the living mind, he thinks, that is entropic, disrupted by random errors in the transmission of signals, unavailable to do the work, longing for sanction that will not come, conjoining lies and autobiography.

The shadowy voices of the sea of faces and the crowd of heads hover just outside of consciousness. They remind Buddy that the unconsciousness of death is rich, too, a roster of loss. Death is the other ouroboros, the other snake eating its tail, containing everything it has swallowed, replete with the missing and the silenced, but ample and filled to bursting in that way.

There are no trees in the world. They have all been cut down and milled into boards and sheets of plywood with grain that ripples like rings in brown water. Buddy lies on the bed at the end of the day. The cataract of clouds that obscured the sky has drifted apart. The moon has traveled so close to the earth that it takes up half the sky. It isn't so much rising as sliding, like a molten manhole cover, between the ground and the darkening blue space beyond it. Buddy has the perspective of the lightning bugs and grasshoppers he dropped into jars as a child. He lies on his back and gazes at the pocked silver lid holding the inhabitants of the field in its reflected light that drips onto the grain elevators, the railroad tracks, the transmission towers, and mounds of debris, coating everything, as in an ice storm, in a sheer, glittering shell.

The DeKalb Radio has fallen silent, buzzing and crackling quietly. It appears to be listening intently. Buddy has lost the desire to run, to move from place to place, and to arrange things. He is tired of his autobiography, of his loneliness, of the inevitability of being naked. Buddy lies on his back and listens to the silence. Well, he thinks as he rolls on his side, we all lie, don't we?

There are no trees in the world, and the contraptions and the bed glisten in the overbearing moonlight. The radio resumes broadcasting, but this time the voice is Buddy's. It's the kind of evening where everyone feels a melancholy hopefulness. It's immaterial, the radio says, whether this is a paradise or not, whether you're lonely or not. The thing that got away will float by again. It's all a continuous flow trapped in a single temporal horizon. An ant could crawl all the way around it and never pass over an edge.

Buddy goes to sleep listening to his own voice, a little staticky, a little erratic, narrating the progress of the ant around the Möbius strip of time and place and desire. Tentative at first, its feelers out, gingerly exploring the edges before retreating from them, the ant gradually picks up speed as it progresses upward around a curve, the front legs generating forces equal

to its body weight to keep it moving. Its legs are designed for running. The locomotion of its alternating tripod gait—the front and back legs of one side and the middle leg of the other side move together during each step—helps the ant cling to the wide band as it comes over the hill and down the incline into the curve of another valley, passing from Buddy's sight as it traverses the inner rim. Buddy waits for it, knowing that it will appear sometime later, looping the loop, now visible, now hidden from sight, running around and around, its antennae perpetually moving back and forth, touching, tasting, and smelling everything within reach.

Buddy's eyes close and still the ant crawls forward and back, never stopping, and still his own voice describes its passage, while Buddy himself sleeps, voluptuously alone, under the silver ceiling of the sky.



Notes from an Art Bigot, ca.1973

Two Beautiful Women in the Luxembourg Gardens, 2000



AUDIO

two beautiful women in the luxembourg gardens

Text by Terry Hummer

VOICE 1: Shoes.

VOICE 1: My best, most intense dreams
are always about shoes.

VOICE 1: Not kinky – twisted.
Like the DNA helix. And it's not about sex –
it's about shoes.

VOICE 1: What is God if not a sandal?

VOICE 1: Your DNA is my DNA,
My environment is your environment.

VOICE 1: I mean Roman sandals, the kind
with long laces that twist their way up
the calf in a double helix. . . .

VOICE 1: I dream I am at the Bibliothèque
Nationale, looking for a book,
the original Bible, in Hebrew, or something
even older... But there are no books
on the shelves; there are only shoeboxes,
thousands of them.

VOICE 1: What have you educated yourself
for all these years if not to be able to answer
exactly this question?

VOICE 1: Therefore, your question is
my question.

VOICE 1: *How did it go? What is your name?
Or What do you love? Or What is your most
intense dream?*

VOICE 2: Of course.

VOICE 2: I had no idea you were so kinky.

VOICE 2: Everything is always about sex.

VOICE 2: Genetics. Environment.

VOICE 2: What do you mean?

VOICE 2: It's exactly as I thought, just kinky.

VOICE 2: What is knowledge if not a black
leather pump?

VOICE 2: Your DNA is my DNA.

VOICE 2: So ask it.

VOICE 2: Shoes.

VOICE 2: My best, most intense dreams
are always about shoes.

VOICE 2: Not kinky – twisted.
Like the DNA helix. And it's not about sex –
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VOICE 2: *How did it go? What is your name?
Or What do you love? Or What is your most
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VOICE 1: I had no idea you were so kinky.

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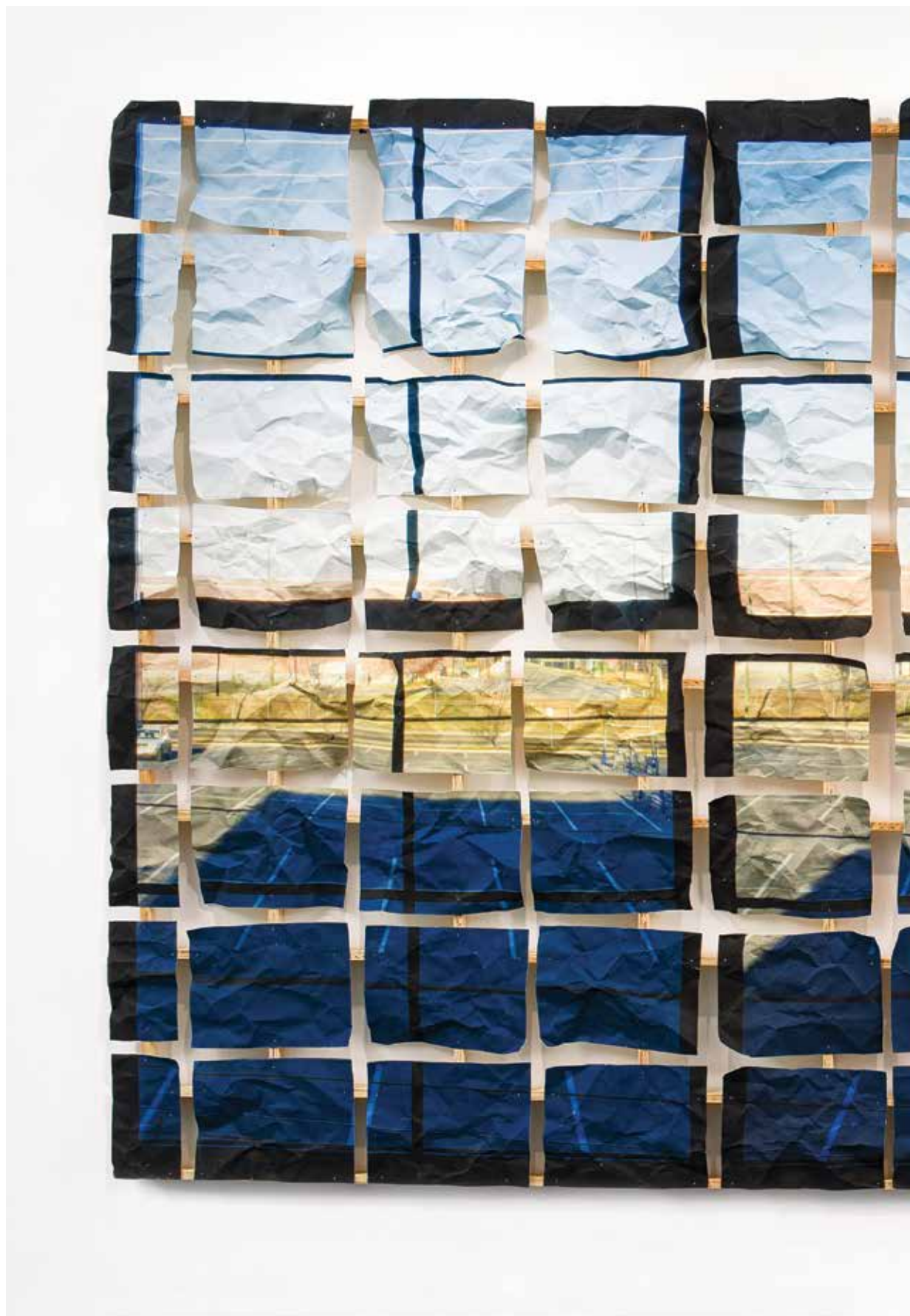
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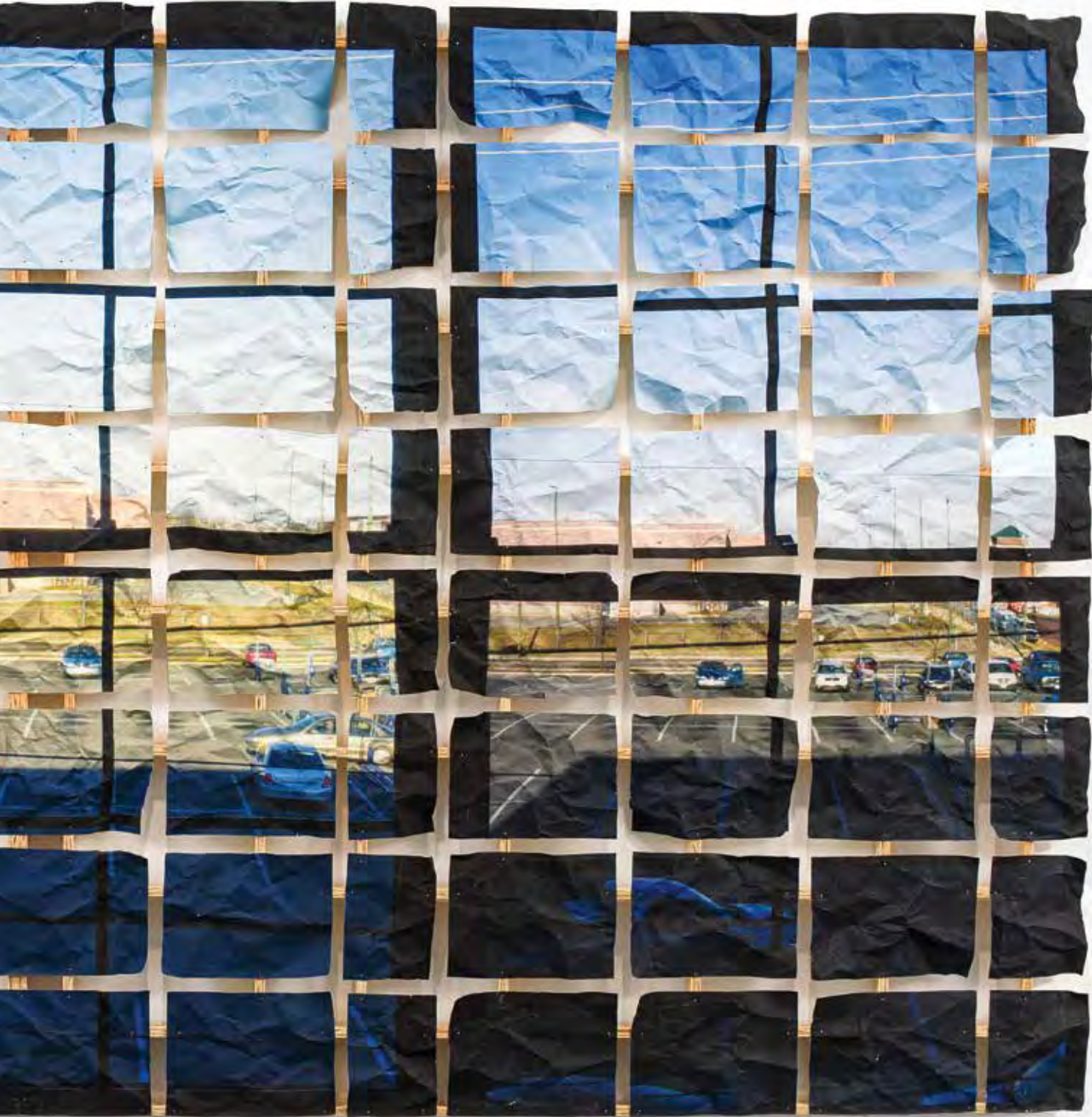
VOICE 1: What is knowledge if not a black
leather pump?

VOICE 1: Your DNA is my DNA.

VOICE 1: So ask it.



Window, 2013





Row 1 -
 Robert Rich
 Jerry Bear
 James Schneider
 Ernest Stein
 Marcus DeLitt
 Roger Johnson
 Ralph Butler
 =
 Row 2
 Condit Fisher
 Marvin Sulzer
 Walter Zuckerman
 Jordan Jittichack
 Harry Penick
 James Schmitt
 Paula Price
 Deborah Rubin
 Barbara Linnick-Sea.
 Elia Schmitt
 Sara Abba
 =
 Row 3
 Charles Lund
 Lewis Lortan
 Marvin Margolin
 Richard Lovenson
 Sara (Branche)
 Sheldon Myrdal
 Robert Myrdal
 Leslie Schain
 Mandy Kalish
 Teddy David
 Ray Swanson
 Bernard Schless
 Herbert DeLitt

Row 4
 Beverly Alvis
 Shirley Shoben-Am.
 Jacqueline Weiss
 Phyllis Koplin
 Sandra Koplin
 Fayl Hensch
 Jean Rada
 Phyllis Mueseloh
 Conale Coomer
 Lillian Popic
 Gloria Silberman
 Tony Branson
 Janice Silver
 Regula Lopez
 Leah Gornat
 Row 5
 Row 6
 Row 7
 Row 8
 Row 9
 Row 10
 Row 11
 Row 12

Row 6
 Conale Pickman
 Conale Liblar
 Barbara Weiss
 Leona Bessely
 Halvora Nixon
 Gwendolyn Stepler
 Conale Clifton
 Karen Krueger
 Ellen Glickstein
 Frieda Dannenberg
 Sylvia Day
 Phyllis Resolman
 Ruth Koberden
 Dolores Rich
 Miri Kaku

Row 11
 Edward Kelson
 Alvin Stone
 Philip Brady-Moskowitz
 Herbert Coker
 Jerry Puchner
 Myron Helfert
 Bernard Koberberg
 Frank Coover
 Phillip Simon
 David Waldropoff
 Seymour Politsky
 Jordan Berman
 Robert Frenkel

Left to Right
 Edith Rubin
 [Signature]

Kozminski School 1950, 1950, and reverse
 Opposite: Kozminski School, ca.1972



Sarah, 1970





Here and There, 2001–ongoing





Here and There (details), 2001–ongoing



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Gerry Studds in 1995.

...called "the political equivalent
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...Mr. Hara, Mr. Studds's hu
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A memorial service will be
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Frank Wilkinson, Defiant Figure of Red Scare, Dies at 91

OBITUARIES MONDAY, MARCH 21, 2005

95; Helped Rescue Many Who Fled the Nazis

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then part of the Soviet Union and fo
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childhood was spent in Budapest and
she was evacuated and sent
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her for help
with the assistance of a local so
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map, she led Mr. Benjamin and two
other refugees across the mountains
to Port-Bou, a Spanish border town.
Mr. Benjamin died there after swal
lowing one of the 50 morphine tab
lets he had brought with his

Wilson Loyalist for Decades, Dies

Lyn Nozick

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...national Republican
...Committee chastised
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AUDIO

chapter one a film in three chapters and an epilogue

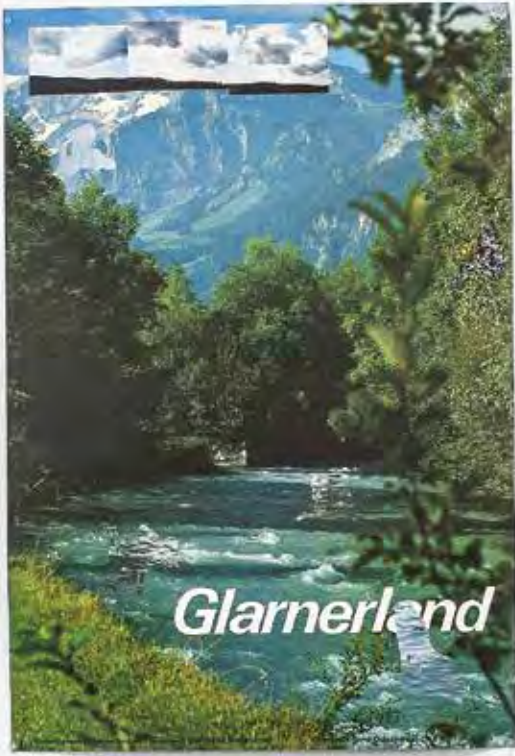
Text by Myron Helfgott

The following are questions from psychological personality profile tests. Please select your preference in each of the following sentences.

1. Would you rather test urine or play with snakes in the dark?
2. If sexually explicit scenes in movies and videos make you feel uncomfortable, while watching them would you prefer to be alone or be with friends?
3. Does the possibility of life after death fill you with longing or with anxiety?
4. Do you prize in yourself an objective view of reality or a vivid imagination?
5. Do you respond emotionally or analytically when reading a sexually explicit book?
6. Are you more satisfied with a finished product or do you prefer a work in progress?
7. Do you like writers who say what they mean or those who use metaphors and esoteric symbols?
8. Are you more interested in listening to people who know what they're talking about or telling people things you know about?
9. In your dreams is the flagpole just a phallus or is it a wish to be popular?



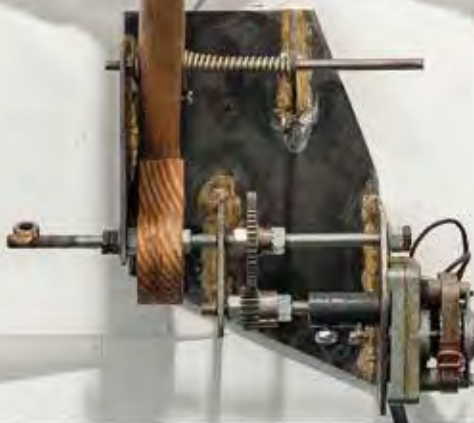
A Film in Three Chapters and an Epilogue, 2000
Chapter 2







Nothing exists. The nature of phenomena is emptiness. There is no realization, no illusion, no sage, no meditation, no effort, and nothing to be received. A man who was smoking quietly said nothing. Suddenly he whacked his pipe with his bare hand. This made the other man angry. The man who whacked said nothing.



AUDIO

epilogue a film in three chapters and an epilogue

Text by Myron Helfgott

I find this work confusing. I guess that might sound surprising, considering I made it. We can appreciate the confusion in our lives, but art is suppose to be different...I guess it's suppose to show us something or ask us an interesting question...you know...art's suppose to be uplifting, etc., etc. I was recently in a shoe store and overheard a conversation between two young women...one said to the other, "If the shoe foot wears it." They looked at each other and burst out laughing. I too enjoyed it and thought that it was not only more entertaining than "If the shoe fits wear it" but it was more profound. Maybe this work is kinda like a Zen koan, it has the illogic of "If a shoe foot wears it," it lets you go more places, think about more things...kinda like a haiku poem.

AUDIO

ingo & annette

2000-01

Text by Myron Helfgott

Voices: Ingo Porschein, Inga Sassnick
(not in exhibition)

Ingo:

Sometimes I feel like Oscar Wilde: being a part of everything and being a part of nowhere at the same time. Last Sunday my father celebrated his 70th birthday and invited all members of the family and friends to a big dinner at restaurant near by. It was snowing, the restaurant had its Christmas decoration, it was a very German party. The generation of my parents is a very German generation completed by the grandparents who are even more locals than their children. People were very organized, sitting on a long table and every once in a while the neighbors of my parents serenaded to my father who stood up at the front of the table and bowed down before his friends. The food was heavy, wild boar, deer, duck and cow and the red wine was from Baden-Wurttemberg. Later that night my father got drunken, started to change into politics and wasn't able to listen, just kept talking and talking and... Suddenly he feels that he became an old man, especially after he saw the video of his event the next day which I presented to him as a present for Christmas.





Annette:

Myron, you're such a strange fellow. You act as if you're out to break all the rules, to make an art that is fresh, that adds to the vocabulary of this new century. But what you've done is a tired rehashing of old ideas. It doesn't have the vitality of painting, the intimacy of photography, or the depth of literature. There is something too sentimental about this piece. Ingo and I are in two different worlds. He's lamenting the conservative nature of his parents...(pause) everyone's parents are conservative. I wish he would speak about me or the awkward position you've put him in. He's selling his patrimony, he's a shill for your ego. Is this some sort of psychodrama? Are you claiming no responsibility yet willing to accept all the acclaim? Where are you in this piece?...lurking behind the scenes, pulling Ingo's strings...taking his lovely story and holding it up to ridicule? Are you hiding behind the two of us afraid to show your face? If it weren't for us, you'd have nothing.



myron helfgott

Lester Van Winkle

It was the early evening of “day one” inaugurating our summer in Paris. In a sidewalk café on the left bank, a lovely meal, good wine, and small talk were suddenly interrupted by some JERK taking flash photos. I looked up to protest, and to my astonishment the photo flasher was none other than Myron Helfgott. (Hell, I thought I had left him in Richmond!)

Actually, it was Myron’s support and encouragement that got us to Paris, and an incredible generosity of spirit that got him there to surprise us. The next two weeks were a marathon of dining, drinking, picnics, conversations, museums, art, and cathedrals. Myron gave us the gift of “his Paris,” plus his restaurant list and greater insight into his passion for life, art, and good wine.

Back in Richmond, Myron’s commitment to his work is absolute. His work ethic (and play ethic) has long been exemplary and comforting to his peers. I recall being terribly upset with Myron for describing himself to a West Coast painter as a “home hobbyist.” And then again, he once delivered a lecture on his work, apologizing for each piece as a miserable failure. The sheer volume of his work and its immutable quality stand in stark contrast to his claims of hobbyism and monumental failure.

As a presence in this art community, Myron swings a big bat; his investment has been constant, selfless, and profound. He has been counselor, cheerleader, and jump starter for a number of his peers and ex-students. And he is definitely my go-to guy when studio problems seem insurmountable. His social circle resembles a spiral galaxy. His shadow is long. I think once you’ve seen the breadth and depth of his exhibition, you will agree that he has managed to become a prophet in his hometown.

But Myron, like the JERK taking flash photos, can be a JERK at times. Ask the freshman class he lined up in the hall for a trip to the infirmary to get their art inoculations. Yet, Myron is the kind of JERK who never forgets your anniversary or your birthday, or your wife’s birthday or you on *his* birthday. He’s an AMATEUR JERK.

exhibition checklist

Dimensions are given in inches,
height x width x depth.
Unless otherwise noted, works
are lent courtesy of the artist.

Sarah, 1970

Lead
21½ x 15 x 7¼
p. 137

33 Years & 6 Months, 1970

Lead
18 x 16 x 8
p. 71

Salute, 1971

Lead and Plexiglas
17 x 13 x 13
p. 84

Untitled, ca.1972

Paint and balsa wood
23 x 18 x 8
Courtesy of Susan Glasser
p. 95

Kozminski School, ca.1972

Paint and balsa wood
15½ x 15½ x 11
p. 135

Kozminski School, 1950, 1950

Gelatin silver print
10½ x 13¼
p. 134

Notes from an Art Bigot, ca.1973

Mixed media and metal screen
12 x 21½ x 17½
p. 127

Untitled, 1976

Paint and hard board
28½ x 22½ x 7½
p. 37

Senior Team, 1981

Photograph by Ed Knipe
Gelatin silver print
18½ x 13¾
Top, front row: Richard Sheridan,
Myron Helfgott, Earl Hagberg, Bob
Greitzer, Jack Forrest / second row:
Morrie Cain, Mark Lieberman, Jerry
Friedman, Sheldon Stark, Bob Rubin,
Charles Connors / back row: Coach
Roger Inman, Jim Walsh, Jim Carlson,
Maynard Thompson, Ed Bood,
Phil Conklin
Bottom, front row: Dan Brisbane,
Myron Helfgott, Frank Cole, Chris
Silliman, Jim Melillo / second row:
Morris Yarowsky, Curtis Ripley,
Bernard Martin, Lester Van Winkle,
Tom Chenoweth, Harold Carle / back
row: Coach Davi Det Hompson, Joe
Seipel, George Cruger, James Bradford,
Michael Tierney, Ed Knipe
p. 6

*Being Looked After by Ida, Jeri,
and Megan*, 1981–82

Mixed media
27 x 21 x 10 each of three parts
Jeri courtesy of Megan Helfgott
p. 96–97

Fear Not, 1981–82

Tin, paint, and photographs
on wood frame
63 x 75 x 3
p. 112–113

We Share the Same Interests, 1981–82

Photographs and mixed media
79 x 27 x 6
p. 40–41

Portrait with Topiary, 1984

Mixed media
80 x 62 x 18
front cover, p. 115

The Lost Traveler, 1985–89

Conté crayon and photographs on paper
26¼ x 26¼
Courtesy of Mary Flinn
p. 82

Classical Figure with Corrections, 1986

Oil paint on plywood
118 x 74 x 17
p. 83

Detail, 1986

Oil paint on plywood
66 x 108 x 84
Collection of the Virginia Museum
of Fine Arts, John Barton Payne Fund
p. 18–19

Under the Rose, 1987

Oil paint, putty, and wire on plywood
95 x 48 x 32
p. 116

Myron, 1987

Photograph
7½ x 9½
p. 38

Untitled, 1990

Paint and photographs on paper
30 x 26
p. 34–35

Given: The Order of Things, 1990

Paint and ink on paper
22 x 30
p. 90–91

Waterfall after Duchamp, 1990

Plywood, plastic, paint, aluminum,
motor, and lights
84 x 82 x 20½
p. 92–93

Portrait Noir, 1991

Conté crayon and photographs
on paper
26 x 30
p. 39

- Fiction*, 1994
Paint, wood, slide projector,
and electric motor
54 x 45 x 27
p. 66–67
- A Disquieting Void*, 1995
Mixed media, slide projector, and
electric motor
85 x 105 x 42
p. 52–53
- Untitled*, 1995–96
Oil, gouache, pencil, photograph,
pantographs, and gesso on plywood
panel
44 x 45 x 4
p. 89
- Hands*, 1995–96
Acrylic paint, gesso, and paper
on plywood panel
82 x 60 x 2
p. 85
- Picabia Series*, 1997
Paint and ink on paper
33 x 25 each of four drawings
p. 86–87
- Pont Marie*, 1998
Paint, photographs, and plastic
on plywood panel
42 x 51 x 3
Courtesy of Susan Glasser
p. 54–55
- A Film in Three Chapters and an Epilogue*,
2000
Chapter 1, text and voice: Myron
Helfgott; electric motor, photographs,
paint on paper, pencil, and audio
Chapter 2, electric motor, colored
pencil, travel posters, and audio
Chapter 3, mixed media, electric
motor, and audio
Epilogue, text: Myron Helfgott,
voice: Maurice Erickson; mixed
media, electric motor, and audio
Dimensions variable
p. 142–149
- Two Beautiful Women in the
Luxembourg Gardens*, 2000
Text: Terry Hummer, voices:
Marie-Astrid Nouet and Ariel
Fleiszbein
Photos on plywood substructure
and audio
50 x 31 x 8
p. 128–131
- Paris Panoramic*, 2000
Photographs
33 x 408
p. 3, 152 (details)
- Here and There*, 2001–ongoing
Mixed media and audio
Dimensions variable
p. 138–141
- Buddha Wisdom/What Women Have
Told Me*, 2005–06
Text: Myron Helfgott
Plywood, wood slats, electric motor,
mixed media, and audio
Dimensions variable
p. 42–47
- From a series of 45 collages, 2007–08
Stop Thinking, *The Finger*, *Sense of
Humor*, *Social Intent*, *Essential Fault*,
Yellow and Blue Autumn, *Piece of Masonite*,
Not Regular, *Present Tense*, *Interrupted*,
A Voice of Conscience, *Je Ne Sais Pas*,
Farewell, *February*, *The Evil Eye*,
The Comic and the Tragic, *Indian Wash*,
and 1,2,3,4
Pantograph drawings in pencil,
overdrawn with ink, and inkjet prints
on wood panels
36 x 24 or 24 x 36 each
p. 20–33
- The Feel of the Thing, Not the Think of It*,
2008
Text: quotes collected by Myron
Helfgott; voices: Don Palmer,
Lee Jordan-Anders, Sara Ferguson,
Myron Helfgott, Javier Tapia,
Gregory Donovan, and Lothar
Pausewang
Photographs on plywood substructures,
wooden chairs, and audio
Dimensions variable
p. 104–111
- Tyranny of the Theoretical*, 2008
Text and voice: Myron Helfgott
Mixed media and audio
Dimensions variable
p. 56–65
- Please Except Jesus*, 2009
Photographs on wood panel
30 x 48 x 2
p. 48–49
- Thinking of Yves-1*, 2010
Photographs on hard board on plywood
substructure
31 x 31 x 7
back cover
- Doorway*, 2011
Photographs on plywood substructure
113 x 66 x 18
p. 102–103
- Water*, 2011
Photographs on plywood substructure
86 x 86 x 21
p. 100–101
- Window*, 2013
Photographs on plywood substructure
70 x 120 x 3
p. 132–133
- Japanese Wrestlers*, 2014
Photographs on metal on plywood panel
70½ x 51 x 3
p. 117
- Untitled*, 2014
Photographs on metal on plywood
substructure
Two parts: 42 x 32 x 32 and 46 x 36 x 36
(not illustrated)
- With the Help of Javier, Luis,
Ann and Susan*, 2014
Photographs, metal, paint, and plastic
on plywood, with video
52 x 110 x 2
p. 118–119

biography

1936 Born Chicago, IL

education

1962–64 MFA, Southern Illinois University, Department of Art
1957–60 BA, Southern Illinois University, Department of Design
1954–57 University of Illinois, School of Architecture
1957–59, 1962 Special Studies with R. Buckminster Fuller

teaching

2003 Professor Emeritus, Sculpture Department, School of the Arts,
Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA
2001–03 Acting Chair, Sculpture Department, VCU School of the Arts
1968–2003 Professor, Sculpture Department, VCU School of the Arts
1967–68 Assistant Professor, Edinboro State College
1964–67 Instructor, Northern Illinois University
1963–64 Graduate Assistant, Southern Illinois University

solo exhibitions

New Work, Gallery A, Richmond, VA (2013)
Art Works, Gallery A, Richmond, VA (2012)
What Women have Told Me, Art6, Richmond, VA (2008)
Tyranny of the Theoretical, Babcock Fine Arts Center Gallery, Sweet Briar College,
Sweet Briar, VA (2008)
Literary/Criticism, Hunt Gallery, Mary Baldwin College, Staunton, VA (2001)
Mackintosh Museum, Glasgow School of Art, Glasgow, Scotland (2000)
Instituto Cultural Peruano Norte Americano, Lima, Peru (2000)
Hewlett Gallery, Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh, PA (1998)
Faculty Focus, Anderson Gallery, VCU School of the Arts, Richmond, VA (1997;
also 1995)
Dangerous Terrain: Recent Sculptures and Drawings, Paul Mesaros Gallery,
West Virginia University, Morgantown, WV (1996)
Rockville Place for the Arts, Rockville, MD (1992)
1708 Gallery, Richmond, VA (1991)
Infrastructure, Portsmouth Museum, Portsmouth, VA (1991)
Northern Illinois University Art Gallery, Chicago, IL (1987)
College of William & Mary, Williamsburg, VA (1984)
Recent Work, ICA, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, VA (1982)
Marshall University, Huntington, WV (1980)
Gallery K, Washington, DC (1977)
Baldwin Wallace College, Berea, OH (1977)
Edinboro State College, Edinboro, PA (1976)
Twentieth Century Gallery, Williamsburg, VA (1975)
Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, VA (1972)
Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, VA (1970)



Faculty Focus, September 29–
October 20, 1995;
installation view at the
Anderson Gallery.

Throughout its 40-year history, the Anderson Gallery regularly presented the work of School of the Arts faculty in solo shows, retrospectives, and group exhibitions, including faculty biennials from 1978 to 2004. During his tenure at VCU, Helfgott's work was featured in nine of these biennial exhibitions.

"We all got along and respected each other. Everyone was moving off in their own directions, and it was great to celebrate each other's successes with these shows. This sculpture has a solid wooden shape, like a head, underneath. I took a body grinder and chainsaw blade and hacked away. The wrappers on wine bottle tops used to be made of lead foil. I would save the foil and nail it to the surface."

group exhibitions

Gallery A, Richmond, VA (2012; also 2011)
A Shriek from an Invisible Box Revisited III, Rack and Hammer Gallery, New York, NY (2005)
The Lab Gallery, New York, NY (2005)
House, Boyden Gallery, St. Mary's College of Maryland, St. Mary's City, MD (2004)
Metaphor in Nature, Rack and Hammer Gallery, New York, NY (2004)
All About Drawing, Eisentrager-Howard Gallery, University of Nebraska, Lincoln, NE (2004)
25 x 25, 1708 Gallery, Richmond, VA (2003)
Main Art Gallery, Richmond, VA (2003)
Reynolds Gallery, Richmond, VA (2003)
Making a Mark, Visual Arts Center of Richmond (formerly Hand Workshop Art Center), Richmond, VA (2003)
A Shriek from an Invisible Box, Meguro Museum, Tokyo, Japan (2001)
Crossing Borders, V.A.M. Design Center Gallery, Budapest, Hungary (2001)
Erotic Art, Rowbottom Fine Art, Cumberland, RI (2000)
The Bridge, D'art Center, Norfolk, VA (2000)
Objectives, Falk Gallery, Newport News, VA (1999)
The Millennium 2000, Rack and Hammer Gallery, New York, NY (1999)
Essence of Water, Aster Plaza, Hiroshima, Japan; traveled to Fijiya Company, Kyoto, Japan (1998)
Biennial, Fijiya Company, Kyoto, Japan (1998)
The First Annual Sculpture, Object & Functional Art Show, Fulcrum Gallery, Richmond, VA (1997)
Esculturas VCU, Galeria Instituto Cultural Peruano Norte (ICPNA), Mira Flores, Lima, Peru (1996)
Gallery Miyazaki, Osaka, Japan (1996)
Artists of the Cité Internationale des Arts, Bedford Gallery, Longwood College, Farmville, VA (1996)
Mechanical Advantage, Susan Lemberg Usdan Gallery, Bennington College, Bennington, VT (1995)
Reifying the Personality, Philadelphia Art Alliance, Philadelphia, PA (1994)
Faculty Focus, Anderson Gallery, VCU School of the Arts, Richmond, VA (1993; also 1991, 1989, 1987, 1985, 1982, 1980)
1708 Gallery, Richmond, VA (1993)
Portrait/Self/Portrait, Frank E. Brown Gallery, Randolph-Macon College, Ashland, VA (1992)
Artifice in Gesture/Virginia Sculpture, Peninsula Fine Arts Center, Hampton, VA (1990)
1708 Gallery, Richmond, VA (1989; also 1985, 1984, 1980, 1978)
Tributary/3000 Years in the Course of Art, Peninsula Fine Arts Center, Newport News, VA (1989)
The Art of Richmond, Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art, Winston-Salem, NC (1989)
Sculpture Now, Danville Museum of Fine Arts, Danville, VA (1989)
Un/Common Ground: Virginia Artists 1988, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, VA (1988)
The Figure, Peninsula Fine Arts Center, Newport News, VA (1988)
Portrait: Faces of the Eighties, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, VA (1987)
Expression Now, Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art, Winston-Salem, NC (1987)
Richmond Wood Sculpture, Peninsula Fine Arts Center, Newport News, VA (1987)
Boatwright Festival Exhibition, University of Richmond, Richmond, VA (1987)



The Alumni of the Masonic Temple, June 18–July 23, 1983; installation view at the Anderson Gallery.

The Alumni of the Masonic Temple featured works by nearly 20 artists who had studios in this iconic building—then the home of much of the influential art activity in the city—located at 101 West Broad Street. Helfgott maintained a space there from 1973 until 1982, when all residents were evicted to make room for the Richmond Foundation for the Arts.

“I moved to Richmond in 1968. In 1969 or 70, I rented a studio in the Bowers Coffee Building (Bowers Brothers Warehouse) at Cary and 13th Streets. I was there for a few years until the owner wanted to rehab it, turn it into condos or something. After that, I moved to the Masonic Temple building, which was owned by Dr. Good, a mason whose sister wanted to open a gallery there. The studios were great—and big. I shared a studio with Jim Baumgardner (Professor Emeritus, VCU Painting and Printmaking). It worked out because we liked the same classical music.”

Virginia Artist: Myron Helfgott, April 29–May 24, 1970; installation view at the Robinson House, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts.



From 1965 to 1977, artists awarded Certificates of Distinction in the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts' Virginia artist biennials were given the option to present solo shows at the Robinson House, a historic building on the museum's campus that was once a Confederate soldiers' home.

Frank E. Brown Gallery, Randolph-Macon College, Ashland, VA (1987)
Process/Image/Portrait, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, VA (1986)
Watermelon Show, Hironnelle Gallery, New York, NY (1986)
Un'Idea Meccanica, Anderson Gallery, VCU School of the Arts, Richmond, VA;
traveled to Herbert F. Johnson Museum, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY (1985)
Patricia Wayne Gallery, Richmond, VA (1985)
Here and Now, Philadelphia College of Art, Philadelphia, PA; traveled to Greenville
Country Museum of Art, Greenville, SC (1984)
Anderson Gallery, VCU School of the Arts, Richmond, VA (1984; also 1980, 1978)
Alumni of the Masonic Temple, Anderson Gallery, VCU School of the Arts,
Richmond, VA (1983)
Artists Doing Store Windows, June Jubilee, Richmond, VA (1981)
Six Sculptors, Edinboro State College, Edinboro, PA (1979)
Lamp Show, Anderson Gallery, VCU School of the Arts, Richmond, VA (1979)
Twenty-one Billboards by Twenty-one Artists, City 1 Arts Festival, Richmond, VA (1979)
Gallery K, Washington, DC (1978)
Off the Wall, Chrysler Museum of Art, Norfolk, VA (1978)
Virginia Artists Biennial, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, VA
(1977; also 1971, 1969)
Gallery Marc, Washington, DC (1975; also 1971, 1970)
University of Maryland at Towson, Baltimore, MD (1975)
Nancy Lurie Gallery, Chicago, IL (1974)
Visiting Artist, Marshall University, Huntington, WV (1974)
Extraordinary Realities, organized by Whitney Museum of Art, New York, NY;
traveled to Everson Museum of Art, Syracuse, NY, and Contemporary Arts Center,
Cincinnati, OH (1973)
University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY (1972)
Collectors' Circle Show, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, VA (1972)
Arts USA II, Northern Illinois University, DeKalb, IL (1971)
Virginia Sculptors, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond and Chrysler Museum
of Art, Norfolk, VA (1970)
30th Semi-Annual Southeastern Competition and Exhibition, Southeastern Center for
Contemporary Art, Winston-Salem, NC (1969)
Drawing Invitational, Wisconsin State University, Oshkosh, WI (1969)
American Drawing Biennial XXII, Chrysler Museum of Art, Norfolk, VA (1966)
Chicago Sculpture 66, Ontario East Gallery and University of Illinois, Circle Campus,
Chicago, IL (1966)
Outdoor Garden Sculpture, Ontario East Gallery, Chicago, IL (1966)
Drawing and Sculpture, Ontario East Gallery, Chicago, IL (1965)
Happening with Allan Kaprow, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, IL (1964)

grants & awards

Theresa Pollak Prize for Excellence in the Arts, *Richmond Magazine* (2006)
Virginia Commission for the Arts, Project Grant (1992)
Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Professional Fellowship (1989)
Virginia Commission for the Arts, Artist Grant (1985)

residencies

Cité Internationale des Arts, Paris, France (2000-2011, 1997, 1995, 1989)
Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, Amherst, VA (2006)
Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, Amherst, VA, Patricia and Jerre Mangione
Fellowship (2005)

collections

Chrysler Museum of Art, Norfolk, VA
Corcoran Museum of Art, Washington, DC
Federal Reserve Bank, Richmond, VA
Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, VA
Numerous private collections

bibliography

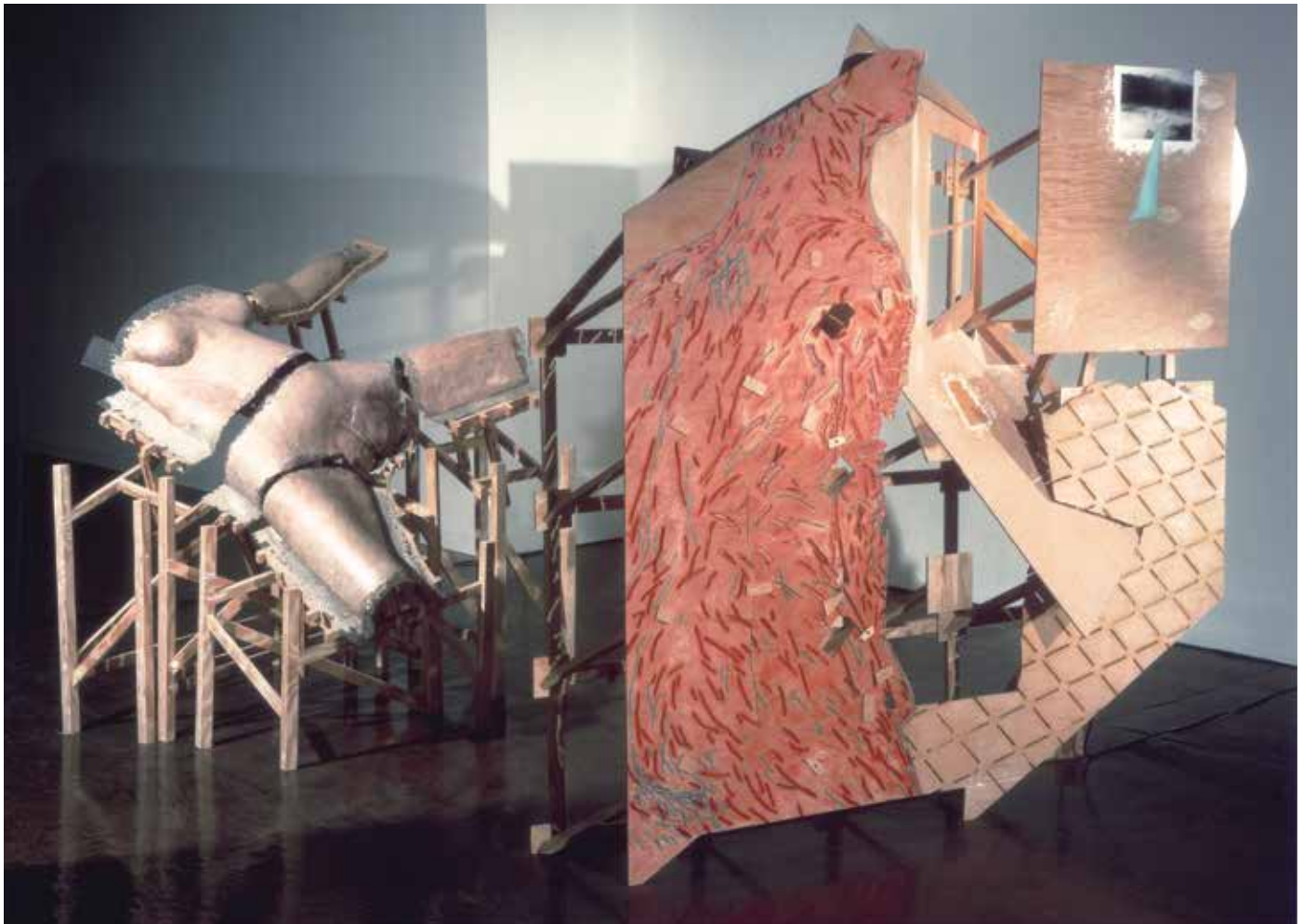
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- Boyd, Julia W. "Myron Helfgott." In *Un/Common Ground: Virginia Artists 1988*. Richmond: Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, 1988, pp. 36-43. (catalogue)
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- _____. "Fantasies in Lead and Balsa." *Arts in Virginia*, Vol. 14, Fall 1973, n.p.
- _____. "Helfgott Sculpture Stirs Imagination." *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, 12 November 1972, p. C-4.
- _____. "Busy Week Looms on Exhibit Front." *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, 3 May 1970, p. J-4.
- _____. "Richmond Scene is Highly Active." *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, 12 October 1969, p. 4-G.
- _____. "Museum Biennial Still Controversial." *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, 11 May 1969.
- Cruger, George. *Portrait: Faces of the '80s*. Richmond: Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, 1987. (catalogue)
- Delehanty, Suzanne. *Virginia Artists 1977*. Richmond: Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, 1977. (catalogue)
- "District for the Arts Dream Has Some Disturbing Elements." *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, 7 December 1980, p. L-4.
- Doty, Robert. *Extraordinary Realities*. New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1973. (catalogue; available online: <https://archive.org/details/extraord00doty>)
- Erickson, Mark St. John. "Multiple Images of Myron." *The Virginia Gazette*, 26 September 1984.



Helfgott with his daughter, Megan, at the entrance to the ICA. *Myron Helfgott: Recent Work*, May 10–June 27, 1982; installation view at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts.

“At the VMFA, Virginia artists were segregated; we showed our work in the Robinson House, not the main building. Because of potential competition from 1708 Gallery, the VMFA gave Julie [Boyd] a position and a half for the ICA. She and Ann Chenoweth invited local artists and New York artists to show together. And, you know, it looked terrific. You couldn’t tell the difference. The ICA at the VMFA was a great thing. Julie wanted to show my work early on; no one else wanted to do it. She was very generous, and I am grateful to her.”

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- "Helfgott Art Is Featured in One-Man Show at ICA." *Richmond News Leader*, 1 May 1982, p. A-6.
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- Merritt, Robert. "Art's Creative Demands Form Common Ground." *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, 17 January 1988.
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- _____. "Portraits Reflect an Intricate Process." *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, 11 June 1986, p. B-8.
- _____. "Myron Helfgott." *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, 1 May 1982.
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- _____. "Myron Helfgott." *1708 E. Main*, March 1984. (newsletter)
- Newton, Karen. "Zen Sculpting." *Style Weekly*, 9 April 2013.
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- _____. "The Wit of Myron Helfgott." *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, 15 May 1982, p. A-50.
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Helfgott's *Waterfall after Duchamp* with its original figure, installed at 1708 Gallery in 1991.

"After I saw Marcel Duchamp's *Étant donnés* for the first time, I came back to Richmond from Philadelphia and tried to make a waterfall like the one in Duchamp's piece. I asked Joe Seipel, who co-owned the Border [Café] at the time, if he had one of those Miller High Life signs with the waterfall that I could use, but he said they were collectors' items and difficult to get.

I decided I needed to first figure out how to make the waterfall before doing anything else. Later, after I had finished my sculpture, a friend gave me a copy of Duchamp's installation notebook for *Étant donnés*. Duchamp and I had solved the waterfall in the same way, using a metal disk with punched holes.

Originally, my piece included a figure, but I removed it. Duchamp made the oddest female portraits I've ever seen; his lover, the Brazilian sculptor Maria Martins, posed for *Étant donnés*. I knew I couldn't make a figure as odd as his."



acknowledgments

Ashley Kistler

This exhibition and catalogue would have been impossible to undertake without the ample help and willing participation of many individuals. Foremost among them is Dean Joe Seipel, whose multilevel support of this project and many others at the Anderson Gallery has long been essential to our planning and operation. Deep appreciation goes also to the 52 donors listed on page 3 for their generous contributions to this publication; and to Mary Flinn, Susan Glasser, and Megan Helfgott for lending key works to the exhibition. It is a special delight to feature and revisit *Detail*, a major sculpture on loan from the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts; and we are grateful to Alex Nyerges, Director; John Ravenal, formerly the Sydney and Frances Lewis Family Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art; and Mary Sullivan, Registrar for the Permanent Collection, for making this important inclusion possible.

Written contributions to this catalogue—each composed in the midst of many other commitments—represent a real labor of love. An invaluable collaborator on an earlier project, Howard Risatti once again provides insights instrumental to our understanding of a complex subject. A marvelous short story by Dinah Ryan and eloquent essays by Elizabeth King and Lester Van Winkle illuminate various other aspects of Helfgott's creativity and accomplishments, expanding what constitutes by far the most comprehensive portrait of this artist and his work. Buffy Morgan's memorable poem adds another captivating layer to this mix. Fortunately, Angeline Robertson and Charley Foley of Scout Design applied their talents and tenacity to a very complicated puzzle, giving order to the chaos, while photographer Terry Brown proceeded diligently, as she always does, to visually capture the multiple dimensions of Helfgott's work. To everyone recognized here, I extend my heartfelt thanks and gratitude.

Traci Garland, Gallery Coordinator and Collections Specialist, and Michael Lease, Head of Exhibitions and Design, are exceptional colleagues in every respect. The success of each exhibition we have presented at the Anderson Gallery has depended in large measure not only on their many talents and initiative but also, and just as importantly, on the generosity, enthusiasm, and scrappy resourcefulness they unfailingly extend to every artist we engage. Working with Michael and Traci these past nearly seven years will remain one of the greatest pleasures and privileges of my professional life. In turn, we sincerely thank our capable corps of student assistants: Remy Ciuba, Liesa Collins, Molly Flanigan, OJ Knight, Tiara Lockett-Jones, Max Runko, Joe Shaffer, Ginna Shea, Skyler Thompson, Tiffany Vander Laan, David Withers, and Keena Williams.

Among many other gatherings over the years, Myron and I used to convene periodically to drink scotch and smoke cigars, though the cigars have long since disappeared from our wide-ranging conversations. During those visits, I was always amazed, indeed overwhelmed, by the nonstop activity taking place in his studio and the tireless experimentation with ideas and materials that marked each project he undertook. As we've met with increasing frequency over the last year to prepare for his retrospective, this impression has been powerfully reinforced time and again. His remarkable creative capacity for sustained invention is truly cause for celebration.

contributors

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Inside covers: Myron Helfgott's studio, 2014
Back Cover: *Thinking of Yves-1*, 2010





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