



# myron helfgott: who am i? who are you?

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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 Helfgott<sup>1</sup>

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.<sup>2</sup>

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."<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup> 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