



notes on myron

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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.

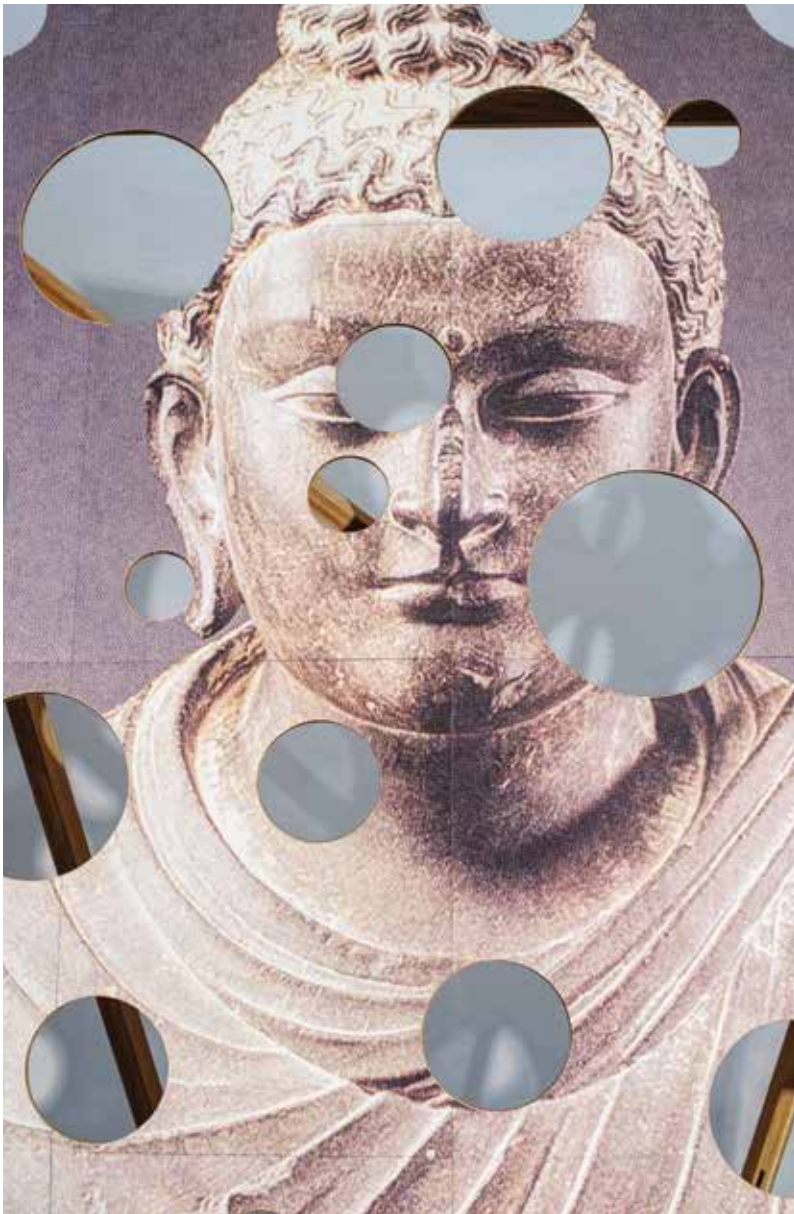


Portrait with Topiary (detail), 1994

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.

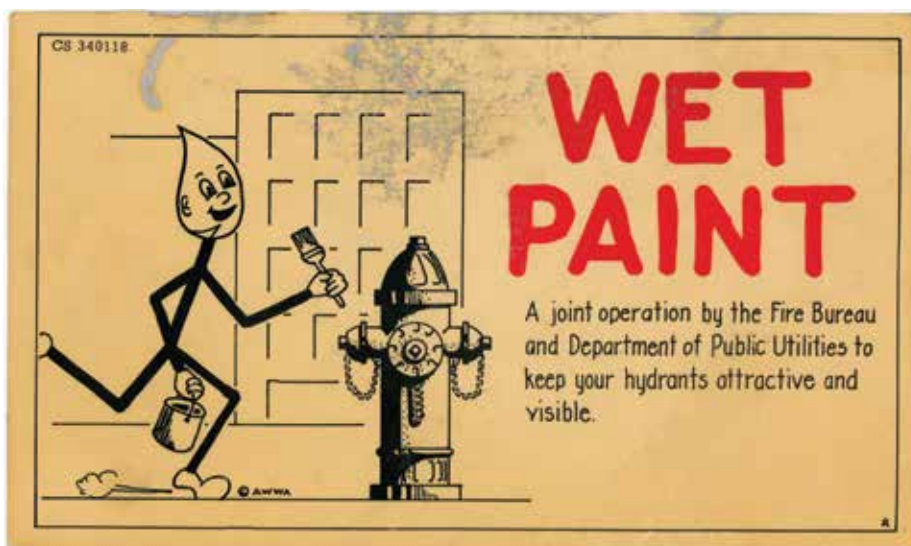
Is it any wonder that Helfgott returns to the studio each day? The value and inevitability of corrections, as his notes acknowledge, in large measure compel the ongoing modification and reinvention he daily undertakes in the studio. In short, Helfgott keeps working because in his view things are never 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.