

Reading the World, CONSTRUCTING THE SELF

IN A FAMOUS LITTLE BOOK titled *Art and Anarchy* (1963), the great Renaissance art historian Edgar Wind pointed out that the trivialization of art was implicit in the modernist assumption that “the experience of art will be more intense if it pulls the spectator away from his ordinary habits and preoccupations.”¹ American color field painting in the 1960s, driven by art critic Clement Greenberg’s prescription for “purity,” proved Wind’s point. The most memorable works in the history of art illuminate central dilemmas of their time by negotiating a fresh relation between the individual (the artist) and the evolving realities of his or her world. Art gives form to new perceptions emerging in our consciousness before we have words for them. For the artist, the work of art is always (consciously or unconsciously) in dialogue with the artist’s experience of reality. As the sculptor David Smith wrote, “art is not divorced from life. It is dialectic.”² Yet for the viewer—even for the artist—these discoveries about emergent reality are often so new as to be at first indiscernible (or so disconcerting that we unconsciously *elect* not to see them).

The importance of Robert Arneson’s work is the very thing that compels many to dismiss it—its prescient articulation of one of the most unsettling cultural developments of the last forty years. In contrast to the idealistic social engagement of the 1960s (as in the antiwar and civil rights movements and in President Johnson’s Great Society programs), the 1970s were dubbed the “me decade.” Yet the expected reaction against this trend, a strong revival of altruism in the 1980s and ’90s, never occurred. Writing at the end of the 1970s,

the social historian Christopher Lasch argued that “self-absorption defines the moral climate of contemporary society. The conquest of nature and the search for new frontiers have given way to the search for self-fulfillment. Narcissism has become one of the central themes of American culture.”³

In Robert Arneson’s career-long dialogue with abstract expressionist painting, on the one hand, and with the hierarchical aesthetics that categorized ceramics as craft, not art, on the other, he created metaphors that revealed undermining cracks in the social edifice of our era. Our dawning recognition of the simultaneity and multidimensionality of cross-tracking tendencies in every aspect of contemporary reality began unsettling our monolithic views of the world. Nothing followed one straight line of reasoning any more. By the 1970s, the powerful assertion of identity embodied in the existentialism and abstract expressionism at mid-century had started to dissipate into more fluid and complicated configurations of identity.⁴ In the narrowly self-referential New York art world, successive waves of innovation from abroad (Italian, then German, then Australian neo-expressionism in the 1980s, and new art from Asia, Latin America, and Africa in the ’90s) and the burgeoning plurality of hitherto unacknowledged American voices—voices that had been there all along—opened up a more complex and multicultural universe. The concept of postmodernism began to sink in as we came to realize how much each person’s perception of reality depends on images (on television, in film, print media, advertising, and on the computer), and how readily those images can be manipulated to mean

different things. This epiphany fundamentally destabilized images and by extension, our perception of reality itself.

As the “reality” of the world began to feel more complicated and less certain, identity too became unstable, developing more mutable boundaries. In the course of the 1970s, “an ‘inner-directed’ personality type was gradually giving way to a peer-oriented ‘other-directed’ type,” Lasch wrote.⁵ Influences from social pressures, a need for acceptance, and consumerism all began to play increasing roles in the definition of self as we

narcissism, which in less exaggerated form manifest themselves in so many patterns of American culture” and “originate in the peculiar structure of the American family.” In particular, he singled out “the fascination with fame and celebrity, the fear of competition, the inability to suspend disbelief, the shallowness and transitory quality of personal relations, the horror of death.”⁸ Erik Erikson, a pioneer of ego psychology, pointed out that societies intuitively create a form of child rearing that results in the particular form of mature human identity that their unique circumstances require.⁹

*“The role of the artist is to express reality as felt. . . .
The function of the modern artist is by definition the felt
expression of modern reality.”*

—ROBERT MOTHERWELL, *THE MODERN PAINTER’S WORLD*, 1944

began to focus more and more on intersubjective negotiations between the individual and society in defining ourselves.⁶

The lack of clear boundaries and a malleable definition of self are central to the dynamic of narcissism. In the 1970s, identity came to feel more and more socially constructed as large bureaucratic institutions of education, health care, and government began taking over responsibility from families for the transmission of culture. Parents deferred to the pediatrician, the teacher, the guidance counselor, and other “experts,” and in ceding their traditional role in reproducing the norms of culture, they communicated to their children less and less direct emotional connection to the past.⁷ Losing a sense of history, we also lost our vision of a trajectory into the future; all energies became focused on the pursuit of present gratification. A feeling of inner emptiness grew in direct proportion to the urge to define oneself in terms of external markers. Lasch pointed to “the psychological patterns associated with pathological

In the 1970s we began to fit our children for survival in the narcissistic culture of postmodern mass consumerism.

During the latter two-thirds of Robert Arneson’s career, his art centered on self-portraiture, and after 1972, self-portrait masks pervaded his work. In a number of profound and masterful self-portrait busts such as *Klown* and *Balderdash-Dash* (FIGS. I.1, I.2), a lifelike, second skin layered over the only slightly revealed face below is thematically crucial. “You’re modeling in the most traditional manner,” Arneson explained. “So you use yourself, but this self is not the inner self. You end up acting, becoming someone else although you use your own features.”¹⁰ Arneson describes a kind of alienation from the self, a distance that underlies his use of the mask. In this explanation he speaks directly to the lack of a stable core in narcissism, which makes the self unfamiliar, as the boundaries between self and Other disintegrate.

To the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, the famous declaration of the poet Arthur Rimbaud:

I.1

Klown, 1978, glazed earthenware, 37¼ x 19 x 19 inches (94.6 x 48.3 x 48.3 cm). Des Moines Art Center Permanent Collections. Purchased from the Director's Discretionary Fund from the Gardner and Florence Call Cowles Foundation, 1980.4.a-b



I.2

Balderdash-Dash, 1978, glazed earthenware, 33½ x 20 x 20 inches (85 x 51 x 51 cm). Private collection, courtesy George Adams Gallery, New York.



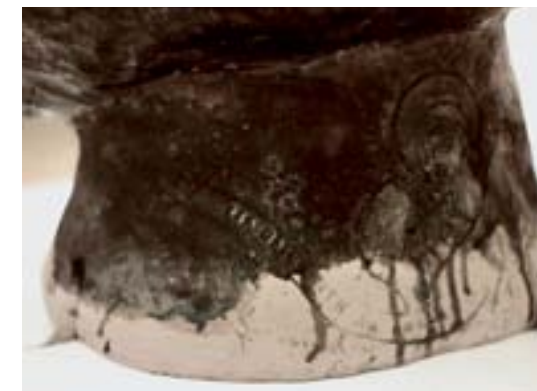
I.3

Captain Ace, 1978, glazed earthenware, 44 x 24 x 18½ inches (112 x 60 x 47 cm). Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.



I.4

Captain Ace, 1978, detail.



“Je est un autre” (“I is an other”),¹¹ was a touchstone for precisely this kind of alienation, which Lacan saw as inherent in the acquisition of language. Communication implies an “Other,” which, Lacan argued, symbolizes the child’s definitive separation from the mother, leaving an ineluctable residue of alienation and ambivalence. The stronger one’s self-definition and integrity, the more acute one’s corresponding sense of separation and alienation.¹² The self-critical distance in Arneson’s work creates exactly this form of alienation; he simultaneously delineates nuances of the self and figures them as detached, even discrete parts. At the same time, his self-portraiture critiques several new ways of thinking about the self and the world, and he superimposes these cross-tracking lines of thought over one another, leaving them to cohere in open-ended juxtaposition in a way that we have come to recognize as distinctively postmodern.

In *Captain Ace* of 1978 (FIG. I.3), Arneson depicted himself in a ceramic sculpture that transgressed a panoply of then current hierarchies about so-called advanced art. First, there was the medium—no modern artist before him had established a major historical reputation in the art world working primarily in clay. Since World War II ceramics had been stereotyped in America as the material of choice for elementary school art classes, dinnerware, bricks and bathroom fixtures, occupational therapists, and hobbyists. When serious consideration went to someone who worked in ceramics, that attention was not to the work as art but as “craft,”¹³ valorized by the narrow rules of the

ceramics establishment, in which one’s technique with the glaze and wheel were paramount and the realm of “ideas” rigorously circumscribed.

Second, there was the style—Arneson exploited the malleability of clay as a sculpture material and his remarkable technical virtuosity with both the form and the surface effects in ceramics supported his constant recourse to a popular taste for realism, kitsch, and the comics. The art world of the 1970s largely dismissed this practice as a degraded expression of low culture. But the directness afforded by clay—and in this regard the sense of spontaneous discovery in Arneson’s maquettes (FIGS. 3.50–3.52) is paradigmatic—reconnects the imagery with the tactile memory of the bodily unconscious.

Third, Arneson’s explicit subject matter is decidedly vulgar, rife with adolescent one-liners, invariably in bad taste, and utterly self-centered. His best-known work focuses on self-portraits in slapstick poses like the one in *Captain Ace*, showing himself with his finger up his nose, bird droppings oozing down his head, surmounted by a corny visual-*cum*-verbal pun of a nesting wild turkey—a joke that refers, in part, to the Wild Turkey (a brand of 101 proof bourbon) he kept in the studio. The work’s scatological humor foregrounds a frat-boy immaturity; it reverts, as the artist himself joked, to “potty training.”¹⁴

Finally, Arneson had the temerity to make his career in the provincial town where he grew up, about as far from New York as one could go figuratively and physically without crossing an international frontier. For the first decade of his career his regular exhibition venue was in the little Candy Store Gallery in Folsom, California (a small inland town known to a wider public chiefly from the Johnny Cash song “Folsom Prison”).

The overt content of *Captain Ace* functions on several independent levels, layered in coincident but multidirectional trajectories of association. In one way, this work belongs to a body of self-portraiture that also includes such key Arneson works as *Self-Portrait of The Artist Losing His Marbles*, *Assassination of a Famous Nut Artist*, *Man with Unnecessary Burden*, *California Artist*, *Ass to Ash*,

Head Eater, and *Chemo 1 and 2* (FIGS. 2.25, 3.8, 3.34, 4.4, 4.7, 5.27, 5.31, 5.32), in which the artist exhaustively examined a wide range of distortion in his own physiognomy. The almost clinical detachment with which he catalogued these disfigured self-images recalls Charles Darwin's study *The Expression of Emotions* more than the expressionist self-portraiture of artists such as Max Beckmann or Karl Schmidt-Rottluff.

Captain Ace engages in a private discourse, in which Arneson converses with himself about himself. The image is a nurturing of the self in the sense of the philosopher Michel Foucault's description of forming the self through writing.¹⁵ Diaries are essential to ascetic life, Foucault tells us, because you can't sin in front of witnesses even when the only witness is yourself, and so writing down (or in Arneson's case, visualizing) your thoughts and actions compels an unforgetting, though at turns companionable, honesty. Yet the diary also implies a distance from the subject, like Arneson's detachment. On the most obvious level, *Captain Ace* offers a self-deprecatory humor about the bomber pilot "getting bombed" on Wild Turkey. Arneson did some extensive drinking earlier in his life; in one notorious incident in the 1960s he fell off the stage, drunk, at a public panel presentation.¹⁶ The alcohol involved keeping up with some heavy drinking fellow artists and with dispelling the conflicts of a turbulent personal life. It ended long before he made *Captain Ace*, although he still occasionally loosened up by sipping Wild Turkey in the studio at night. Meanwhile the bomber hat refers to Arneson's brother Vernon, a World War II pilot who went down over Germany near the end of the war and spent more than a year in a Nazi prison¹⁷—850138 inscribed on the back of the collar of the flight jacket suggests the impersonal inventory of a military dog tag or some other detached marker of identity.

The "helmet," Arneson jokingly quipped to an audience at the San Francisco Art Institute in 1979, "is a nest for endangered species. He doesn't fly any

more."¹⁸ In this comment, the artist refers simultaneously to himself, to the pilot, and to the bird. But the remark also speaks to a more poignant meaning. In February of 1975, Arneson's doctors had diagnosed a cancer that would ultimately prove fatal. The disease never left his mind after that, although he fought it off for the next seventeen years. Here, on the back of the neck of *Captain Ace* (FIG. 1.3), Arneson inscribed "GOTTA DATE WITH AN ANGEL" next to a little cartoon of a wide-eyed figure with a halo, opening even *this* subject matter to humor.

Using humor symbolically to control an unacceptable reality reveals not just the artist's vulnerability but also the simultaneous and inextricable strength of his mind—his ego—in mastering it. The psychoanalyst Robert Waelder offers an astonishing illustration of this psychic mechanism in the account of a French aristocrat during the Reign of Terror who stumbled on the steps as he climbed to the guillotine. Turning to the crowd, he "said with a smile: 'A superstitious Roman would now have turned back.'"¹⁹

The glaze left dripping down the neck of *Captain Ace* and at the margins above the bottom of the base refer to a sophisticated and evolving critique of the New York-centered, high art discourse on painting (a conversation that Arneson engaged in his work for more than thirty years). These drips are consciously in dialogue with Pollock's syntax of dripped and poured paint. That exchange eventually became explicit in a series of works on the subject of Pollock that occupied a sizeable portion of Arneson's last decade. At the same time, the pink drips refer to Philip Guston's love affair with what Guston called "fat pink paint,"²⁰ as Arneson implicitly acknowledged with the viscously glazed pink shoes in his 1980 homages to Guston (FIG. 3.53).

In yet another way, the glaze of skin tone stopping short on the neck of *Captain Ace* undercuts the illusion of the head, its appearance of "reality." Focusing the viewer on the artifice provides a new way to think about the language of representation.

Arneson turns the likeness into a caricature, serving up some irony by alluding to the vernacular of printed comics. The same can be said of the incised drawing of the hand on the lower left side of the face. In part, Arneson let the color run down the neck simply because he found the dripping glaze so beautiful and because the protocols of proper craft pottery forbade it and, finally, because it alluded to the physical process of making the piece. On the other hand, the expression of the process repeatedly surfaces as a theme in Arneson's work and despite all of the ironic detachment, it nevertheless regrounds the work in the physical reality of working the materials.

The profound sensuality of the dripping glaze in *Captain Ace*, its painterliness, the reference to the process, the transgression of the rules of his craft, all of these traits belong to Arneson's dialogue with abstract expressionism. They refer to the clash of the abstract expressionists' construction of heroic personas with the deconstruction of heroic identity in the climate of poststructuralism that dominated the intellectual discourse of the 1970s. The multivalence of form and meaning in Arneson's manipulation of clay and glaze has, as Maurice Merleau-Ponty said of Paul Cézanne's brushstroke, "the unsurpassable plenitude which is for us the definition of the real. . . . Expressing what *exists* is an endless task."²¹

Robert Arneson articulated in his work the disorganizing plenitude of the unconscious, *his* unconscious, and simultaneously exposed both the remembered past and the world. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, we live in a "society of the spectacle,"²² inclined to see the world in terms of the constructs of culture rather than as givens of nature. It is not that people, generally speaking, no longer recognize the distinction between illusion and reality, but rather that they are indifferent to it. Believability has come to supplant truth in the same proportion as external attributes and social recognition have replaced an inner sense of identity. Arneson is among the first artists to parse, in form, the ironic detachment that characterizes this world view.

Robert Arneson's practice points us to the fundamental hybridity of art as a complex and fluid nexus of individual psychology, the body, the alienated Other, which is both self and not self, as well as local culture, personal history, and competing interpretive perspectives. He teases us in every work with cloyingly endearing humor, the gaudiness of shiny glazes, caustic self-critique, and a seeming bulletin board for the vox populi. He revels in the vulgarity of this approach. "The beautiful thing about ceramics," he said, "is that you're in bad taste just by doing it. It's in the nature of the medium . . . centuries of atrocious associations—little old ladies [doing china painting], bric-a-brac, utilitarian objects."²³ But all great American art is vulgar in its attachment to the commonplace (both in subject and style). The unabashed engagement with the mundane gives American culture its protean strength, just as it provides an underlying protocol in all of Arneson's work.

NOTES

Epigraph: Robert Motherwell, "The Modern Painter's World, 1944" in *The Collected Writings of Robert Motherwell*, Stephanie Terenzio, ed. (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 28–29.

1. Edgar Wind, *Art and Anarchy* (New York: Knopf, 1963), 18. Here Wind looks back to Hegel who "explained that when art is removed to a zone of safety, it may still remain very good art indeed, and also very popular art, but its effect upon our existence will vanish." Hegel *Vorlesungen über die Aesthetik I*, ed. H. G. Hotho (1835), pp 134ff. "Uns gilt die Kunst nicht mehr als die höchste Weise, in welcher die Wahrheit sich Existenz verschafft,"
2. David Smith, *New York Herald Tribune* forum in April 1950. Smith file, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., cited in Cleve Gray, ed., *David Smith by David Smith* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1968), 132.
3. Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in An Age of Diminishing Expectations*, 1979 (New York: W. W. Norton, 1991), 25.
4. In the late 1960s, a group of French poststructuralist philosophers, including Jacques Derrida (who