

MARTOS GALLERY

# ARTFORUM

1000 WORDS

## ARNOLD J. KEMP

TALKS ABOUT "FALSE HYDRAS"

March 2021



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Opposite page: Arnold J. Kemp,  
*FUNNY HOUSE (SPEECH ACTS)*,  
2019, ink-jet print, 60 x 40".

Below: Nisse Lindblom's  
interpretation of Arnold Kemp's  
false Dungeons & Dragons Hydra  
monster, 2018.



**IN ANTICIPATION** of his solo exhibition “False Hydras” at JOAN in Los Angeles, Arnold J. Kemp sat down with me in Chicago to continue our dialogue on the means and meanings of Black queer and feminist critical practice in the age of the internet. A teacher, writer, curator, and artist, Kemp occupies multiple cultural roles, which are paralleled by the range of materials and media—drawing, painting, performance, poetry, photography, installation, sculpture—that have both intellectually informed and physically shaped his practice over the past thirty years. Yet as our conversation made clear, whatever the materials in play, there are certain thematic preoccupations that consistently animate his work: a refusal of hard-and-fast demarcations between the West and its others; an interest in the visual (de)construction of African and diasporic identities within and beyond the Euro-Americas; and an engagement with masks, doppelgängers, and surrogates, a whole host of other “Arnold Kemps,” whether long known or recently unearthed.

In “False Hydras,” as throughout Kemp’s oeuvre, such visual forms become vehicles of protection, dissemblance, and encounter capable of rewiring our understandings of what constitutes connection and of how signification emerges through the wedding of discrepant objects. If, as critic Stephanie Snyder has written, Kemp’s practice can be understood as working through the universal process of psychic symbolization from the perspective of a gay man of Bahamian descent living in the United States, then the following lines provide a telling snapshot of that process as navigated by one of many Arnold Kemps, whose voice serves to refract who we are, where we’re at, and where we might go.

—Huey Copeland

**I STUMBLED** on the show’s title, “False Hydras.” I was looking for something on the internet, and I came across this term, which has a really lyrical sound. I dug into it more deeply and discovered that it’s what they call a “homebrew creature,” made for the fifth edition of the role-playing game Dungeons & Dragons. The false Hydra is a monster that creates paranoia, rumor, and anxiety. When it eats someone, any memory of that person disappears, and the monster grows a new head resembling whoever it just ate.

The false Hydra was created by a person named Arnold Kemp, who runs a popular blog, Goblin Punch. When I saw that the author was someone with the same name as me, I thought, *I have to take advantage of this*. It was a chance to give people seeing the exhibition information about how my work is related to language and narrative, especially experimental writing, which could be novels, poems, plays, or even a D&D blog. There are different ways of entering my work, some of which are a little bit out of my control.

Initially, I was speaking excitedly with JOAN’s director, Summer Guthery, about Kathy Acker, whom I knew briefly. We were talking about Acker’s performative and literary practice, really her life, and how it sought to expand feminist and queer categories. Around the same time, my work

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Right: Arnold J. Kemp, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, 2020, limestone, tailored shorts made by the artist's grandfather (Arnold J. Kemp), flip phone from a performance featuring the artist's father (Howard J. Kemp), 31 x 8 1/2 x 8 1/2".

Opposite page: Arnold J. Kemp, *Mr. Kemp: Yellowing, Drying, Scorching*, 2020, vinyl chair, vinyl seat cushions, thermometer, forty hardcover and paperback copies of Arnold Kemp's 1972 *Eat of Me: I Am the Savior*, 31 x 41 x 32".

was in a show curated by Nayland Blake at the Institute of Contemporary Art at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia called "Tag: Proposals on Queer Play and the Ways Forward." That show explored how the expanded influence of digital and online technologies, fandom subcultures, and artistic discourse was creating new possibilities for queer identification, changing how personal roles and forms of expression are defined in contemporary society. I began to think about how to extend what I was doing at the ICA with a piece called *WHEN WILL MY LOVE BE RIGHT?*, 2013. How could I continue that interaction between my work and the historical moment, presenting another model of identity that would be not only performative but *collaborative*, based on mutability and intersection?

Gossip has always been important to authors associated with the New Narrative movement, like Acker. When I think about the political dimensions of this, the thing that I really appreciate about Acker—and that some people appreciate about my work—is that it runs away from categories. I've had people say, "You're a painter, you're a writer, you're a sculptor." I take things from the real world—from real life—and mix them with fictions. In the case of *JOAN*, there are many, many Arnold Kemps, known and unknown figures, people who are related to me and people whom I've never met.

There are haunted surrogates in the show: One work, *Mr. Kemp: Yellowing, Drying, Scorching*, 2020, consists of a black lounge chair on which are placed multiple copies of *Eat of Me: I Am the Savior*, a book published in 1972 by a Black novelist with whom I also share this name. The work has this push and pull that I'm interested in. There's a lot of humor, but also this bodily weight. There's fact and fiction. I want the audience to wonder whether the books are found or made. There's a thermometer attached to the backside of the chair, which brings to mind Hans Haacke's *Condensation Cube*, 1965; it's a very crude way of dealing with how the temperature around this chair might change as different bodies come into proximity with it. I try to keep meaning open. There's the conjoining of Arnold J. Kemp, this fabulous queer Chicago-based artist in 2021, and Arnold Kemp, a Black nationalist author from 1972.

Then there's the sculpture *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, 2020, which is constructed in part from objects owned by my late father or made by my grandfather, who was also named Arnold J. Kemp. My father just died in May of last year, and I had to realize this piece, since I had made other objects and performances with him while he was alive. He grew up in the Depression, and when he got his hands on something special, such as a Christmas gift, he wouldn't use it—sometimes he wouldn't even open it. So these shorts that my grandfather made as a gift to my father are in mint condition. And my grandfather, who was born in 1894, was this really incredible tailor. The shorts are juxtaposed against this limestone sculpture that I made in 1984, when I was still in high school. Then there's a cell phone that I used in a performance in 2003 with my father that was about communication between father and son. The whole thing crosses wires between the genealogical and the associative.

One could think of *Arnold Kemp* as an imposed patronymic that does not actually reveal anything about the possibility of those beings who bear it. It underlines the multiplicity of pathways that are open to Arnold Kemps,



**At *JOAN*, there are many, many Arnold Kemps, known and unknown figures, people who are related to me and people whom I've never met.**

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even as we uncover these other commonalities. I've been searching for a long time for these other Arnold Kemps. It's no accident that they come into the work. I was around when Facebook started, and I searched for all the other Arnold Kemps. At one point, we were all in touch with one another. The Arnold Kemps that I'm genealogically related to come from small Caribbean islands. My father was born on Cat Island, which is like the old-time soul—the Mississippi—of the Bahamas.

There's this tension between uniqueness and reproducibility in this name, Arnold Kemp, that gets used over and over. I have been working on a play that borrows the conversations, the language, and the age-related short-term memory loss of my aunts and uncles. The play will be populated by all the Arnold Kemps. I like it when my work makes me laugh, just as much as I like it when it scares me. I'll just say there's meaning in that. □

