



THAT WAY Garth Amundson

Nov 9 - Dec 21 1996

Opening Reception:
Sat Nov 9 1996 9-11 pm
Artist's Talk:
Sat Nov 9 8pm

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Garth Amundson figures among the growing number of contemporary artists who actively seek to penetrate and alter some of the dominant ideologies that currently operate within mainstream culture through the production of content-driven art. In using the term *dominant ideologies*, I am referring to the systems of ideas that serve to inform and control society through the construction of fixed meanings that determine Truth, Certainty, and Authority. Those ideas, in turn, foster notions of gender superiority, patriarchy, race superiority, and the conception that everyone under our social system is equal, free, and autonomous. In his multimedia works and installations, Amundson uses theory, autobiography, and a variety of methods and materials to explore and question the historical fabrication of truth and knowledge that surround the understanding of identity, sexuality, and gender, especially as those issues pertain to homosexuality.

In order to subvert dominant meanings and readings, Amundson uses representations of personal experience and narrative, collage, appropriation, fragmentation, repetition, and masking to destabilize artistic boundaries and to reflect on, comment on, and critique other kinds of boundaries in the lived world of social relations. Amundson has found a trope for his art in the investigations of nineteenth century men of science who used systematic classification to determine societal norms. Among their tools for “objective” analysis was the close and accurate observation of amassed specimens and photographic documentation. Amundson has found particularly fecund the medical photographs of Edward J. Kempf, a prominent psychiatrist from the turn of the last century who sought to identify sexual perverts, including homosexuals, through the study of physiognomy.

Amundson responds directly to Kempf’s medical contributions in his construction entitled *Dr. Kempf’s Nightmare*, but has also used the structure of the photo document as a central component of his various investigations, where it is reconstituted as video and photographic transfers on latex, cloth, and bars of soap, and where it informs his painted works. Amundson employs the techniques of repetition and collection in his constructions to mirror and critique the way that the amassment of empirical evidence was used to support social and biological theory and categorization in earlier times. The repetition of single photographic frames in Amundson’s work not only harks back to the last century’s scientific observations; for the contemporary observer, it can also be viewed in cinematic terms, where it comes to imply sequence and narrative. The viewer is tempted to supply supplemental information as if s/he were

sorting through broken and fragmented reels of film.

There are three components to Amundson's oeuvre that can provide a basis for further investigation—content, process, and installation. In his work, Amundson conflates queer theory with anecdotal information gleaned from his life lived as a gay male. He hints at his long-term domestic relationship, rails against derogatory labeling, explores the history of societal oppression, and seeks to confute societal expectations. Some of these concerns are addressed in his assemblage entitled *1000 Fags*, where Amundson investigates the relationship between language, labeling, and the subtle ways in which description becomes communication. The work is also meant to be commemorative of the struggle of gays for fair treatment, and questions who is gay, or a *fag*, and what that term actually means. In his installation *False Faces*, Amundson employs stitched together autobiographical photo vignettes that depict aspects of his life with his partner. The masks are without eyes or mouths, a physical symbol of the invisibility and powerlessness of his social position.

In Amundson's hands, process also becomes content. The evidence of the physical manipulation of materials is most often left unmodified in his artworks, and Amundson employs techniques that are not typically associated with fine art modes—sewing is chief among these. In pieces like *Meet the Artist*, *False Faces*, and *Dr. Kempf's Nightmare*, the in-your-face stitching together of photo images that have been transferred to latex or cloth reinforces the marginalization of his subject in relation to dominant culture. Sewing has traditionally been regarded as women's work, and even the most accomplished garment or tapestry is degraded with terms like "decorative arts" in so-called high art circles. Feminist artists in the 1970s embraced sewing's political potential, and Amundson, too, exploits this quality. Even in works that could pass as paintings, Amundson attempts to confound hierarchical artistic practices, and, in so doing, brings into question other forms of arbitrary meaning. The individual wooden panels of *1000 Fags* are roughly cut, almost hacked, and the word *fag*, which appears over each face, is raggedly carved into the surface. The renderings of the individual faces, which are largely derived from magazine illustrations of the news-worthy or commercial models, are crudely drawn and dissonantly colored. Formal aesthetic issues are not obviously engaged in this work; one is more taken with the sheer number of panels, and their amassment. Which introduces the subject of installation.



In *1000 Fags*, accumulation plus repetition equals critical mass. Depending on the space, Amundson has arranged this work so that the placement of the panels spells out the word *FAG*; he has created an oblong rectangle with them; and, most effectively, he has built an eighteen-foot-high column of fags that towers over the viewer. Here, the physical presence is overwhelming, a visual analog to the gay pride slogan "We're here, we're queer; get used to it!" With other installations, Amundson has parodied ethnographic museum display, as found in his mounting of *False Faces*, where each mask is set off the wall on a thin rod. In museum parlance, this sort of treatment is meant to indicate that what is displayed is not art but artifact. Amundson recreates a furniture showroom setting for *Dr. Kempf's Nightmare*, where the bed, beautifully made, is presented as if showing off a fancy line of bed linens. At the same time that Amundson uses the bed to underscore dominant society's stereotypic assignment of sexuality as central to gay life, he also references the labor ghetto of so-called gay jobs, which includes interior decorators as well as hair dressers, florists, et al.

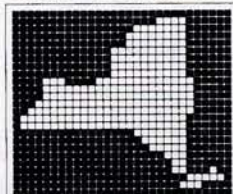
Like other artists who raise critical questions about the role and function of art in today's society, Garth Amundson's engaged aesthetic is sure to elicit a varied response. Still the surprise of his work, its transformation of the familiar, aggressive focus, and underlying irony and humor, enables it to be cannily soothing even as it prickles and piques.

Thomas Piché Jr.

Thomas Piché Jr. is senior curator at Everson Museum of Art in Syracuse, New York.

All images are details from Garth Amundson's *Dr. Kempf's Nightmare* 1995; muslin, embroidery, and transfer Varied: queen size bed

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