

Reading Arnold Kemp
JOAN

But which Arnold Kemp? When preparing to write this essay, I got sent an email with a PDF of a book called *Eat of Me: I am the Savior*, written by the *other* Arnold Kemp. Confused, I stayed up all night reading, captured by the long first sentence—batty, really—describing the neighborhood in which I now live: “The screaming people overflowed onto the Harlem street; scrambling for position, they jammed the revolving door, gutted the narrow stairway; mouths wide, they jumped on and off furniture, crushing under-stuffed chairs and couches (already sagging with an accumulation of age, dust, and nocturnal ‘quickies’)”.

Existing within these crevices, *this* Arnold Kemp has been collecting *Eat of Me, I am the Savior* since the early 1990s. Published in 1972, *Eat of Me* is a text emerging from what the critic Michele Wallace would later name black macho. The cover features a man with the top of his head hollowed, cut off—smooth, like his black sunglasses. In lieu of a brain, a haloed Christian cross is speckled with three drops of blood falling down the vertical arm.

One of the central pieces of this exhibition at JOAN spins around *Eat of Me*. Or should I say, carries it. The 2021 sculpture, *Mr. Kemp (Yellowing, Drying, Scorching)* displays thirty-eight hardcover and paperback copies of that book on a shiny black vinyl reading chair, which itself stands on a large wooden pedestal. The books are clearly placed so that several photographic portraits of Arnold Kemp on the back cover are prominent. But the books are also stacked and, a contrast to *Eat of Me*'s trope of under-stuffed Harlem chairs, the chair is overstuffed— with books under and behind the cushion, and along the arms. A thermometer is fastened to the back of *Mr. Kemp*, a reference to one of Hans Haacke's early works, *Condensation Cube* (1965), which posits art as living organism, a responsive and physical practice. As this exhibition coincides with the COVID-19 pandemic, the reference obviously stretches, signaling perhaps also a temp check. Where do you stand in this installation, in this narrative, among these characters? Are you with it? The parenthetical in the title—(*Yellowing, Drying, Scorching*)—suggests material fragments, moving from noun to verb and back again, telling its own story about the sensorium of a beginning, middle, and end.

At this point, in my mind's eye, I had seen:

- Arnold Kemp, the novelist
- Arnold Kemp, the artist

I soon learned of more Mr. Kemps:

- Arnold Kemp, the artist's grandfather
- Arnold Kemp, a Scottish journalist
- Arnold Kemp, an English professor

- Arnold Kemp, a blogger and creator of a sci-fi being creature, the False Hydra, which gave this show its title

When I first thought that *False Hydras* sounds like the name of an aquatic flower, one that closes and opens with light, I see now that Arnold Kemp is slipping, collecting and archiving Arnold Kems. He is expanding identities. The proliferation is playful, almost extremist in its desire for coincidence. And here, literature is ascendent: adaptable and reflexive. Writing on classic New Narrative writers Robert Glück and Kathy Acker in an essay called “Situations,” published in a 2017 book called *From Our Hearts to Yours: New Narrative as Contemporary Practice*, Kemp wrote, “My participation in reading their work suggests identities that are as experienced as imagined and as concrete as hallucinatory. As a reader I find myself less associated with and less interested in a singular programmatic stance.”

Indeed, there are multiple Arnold Kems, multiple programs, and most illuminatingly, multiple spheres of association.

—Tiana Reid