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Good morning, my name is Ed Kienholz...:' Rethinking the Artist's Self-Presentation

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Feature Damon Willick

Good morning, my name is Ed Kienholz

I still think of myself as a farmer. A part of me still thinks in those terms. I think in terms of seasons as farmers do.

—Edward Kienholz, 1971¹

The great green simpleton image I push all the time, the butterball of good-natured fun, is defense.

—Edward Kienholz, 1970²

Our thesis is that from the moment when the artist made his appearance in historical records, certain stereotyped notions were linked with his work and his person—preconceptions that have never entirely lost their significance and that still influence our view of what an artist is.

—Ernst Kris and Otto Kurz, 1934³



Edward Kienholz, *The Wait*, 1964-65. Mixed media, 80 x 248 x 78 inches.

On a flight from Washington D.C. to Los Angeles in 1968, American artist Ed Kienholz (1927–1994) reluctantly checked-in an ornate, well packed Tiffany lamp and lampshade he and his wife, Lyn, had received as a gift. [SEP]He had planned on carrying the items on board, but the airline insisted that it be checked-in. Kienholz was so concerned about the handling of the items that he had the airline insure the package before takeoff. Upon arrival to LAX, Kienholz discovered the lampshade shattered and irreparably damaged. He explained: “I went in [to baggage claim] and told them that I had this lampshade, how I had with great reluctance shipped it through, and that I wanted to open it there and be sure it was okay. Of course, I opened it, and it was busted.”⁴ After having the lampshade appraised, Kienholz submitted a formal reimbursement

claim with TWA, only to have the airline refuse payment and accuse him of fraudulently packing a broken item in the hopes of recovering a cash settlement. More disturbed at being called a liar than by the loss of the lamp, Kienholz threatened an airline customer service representative that if the matter was not resolved by the time he returned to LA from an exhibition out^[SEP]of town, he would enact equal damage to TWA as the airline had caused him. While waiting for the airline's response, Kienholz consulted with an attorney (who encouraged the artist not to take justice into his own hands), then returned to LAX with a typewritten letter, a photographer, and an ax.⁵ Kienholz's letter bluntly stated: "Good morning, my name is Ed Kienholz...you broke my lampshade and I'm really unhappy...so I'm going to cause TWA an equal amount of damage. I'm going to destroy a desk for TWA."⁶ This is exactly what Kienholz proceeded to do; he destroyed the desk and, somehow, made it back to his car before being apprehended by the Los Angeles Police Department. Though cited and fined for disturbing the peace, Kienholz was eventually reimbursed, and vindicated, for the lampshade through a small claims court victory against the airline, and no further charges were filed or pursued. Throughout the incident, Kienholz not only documented his actions through photographs and writing, he also garnered and exploited a tremendous amount of local and national media attention. He summarized the incident as follows: "It takes a lot of 'Up, up and away' ads to overcome the humorous, negative publicity TWA got out of that. They would have been a lot better off to not call me a liar."⁷



Robert Bucknam, *Ed Kienholz vs. TWA*, 1968. Copyright Estate of Robert Bucknam, permission granted by Lyn Kienholz.

The so-called “TWA Incident” is the perfect starting point to readdress issues of the art historical construction of Kienholz. Most art historians utilize the story, along with other anecdotes and biographical material, as evidence of the artist’s pragmatic sense of justice and his frontiersman, maverick mentality. Interestingly, these character traits parallel characterizations of the artist’s work. As written of the incident in the exhibition catalog to Kienholz’s 1996 posthumous retrospective: “With his ax he made a gashed work of art out of a TWA steel desk. His rage was always acted out on the object which was faulty or which was a representation of some injustice that was not being handled responsibly.”⁸ Such conceptions of the artist and his work overlook the significant planning, deliberateness, and concern for documenting a seemingly unplanned action and, instead, present these actions as the product of a bold and spontaneous artist. Exemplary of such characterizations of the artist and his art, *Time* art critic Robert Hughes wrote, “Kienholz didn’t believe in refinement. What he believed in was a combination of technical know-how, moral anger and all-American yawp.”⁹ In such histories, the artist’s aggressiveness overshadows his incredible self-awareness, media acumen, and performative self-presentation.

This essay reexamines aspects of Kienholz’s biography in order to highlight the artist’s cunning self-presentation. Many of Kienholz’s actions, especially those that the artist had documented in interviews, photographs, and film, can be viewed as a type of postmodern self-portraiture. Just as painted self-portraits are deliberately staged and constructed, so too are aspects of artists’ public personas. Such an interpretation is supported by Erving Goffman’s characterization of self-presentation as a type of performance in which the performer attempts to express ideal standards by enacting a persona appropriate and befitting an intended audience.¹⁰ The audience in Kienholz’s case was the postwar American art world in which the rough and tumble,

uneducated, and masculine artist was well established and privileged.

For those unfamiliar with Kienholz, he is best known for his socially critical, environmental assemblage sculpture of the 1960s and '70s, known as tableaux. Works such as *The Illegal Operation* (1963), *Backseat Dodge* (1965), and *The Portable War Memorial* (1968) exemplify such sculpture. There has been only one monograph published on the artist (Robert Pincus's *On a Scale that Competes with the World*, UC Press, 1990), with most scholarship on Kienholz taking the form of biographical exhibition catalog essays and reviews. In the introduction to Kienholz's 1977 oral history, author and interviewer Lawrence Weschler described Kienholz as the untrained, intuitive master of assemblage art and located the nature of this work in the artist's biography. Weschler wrote: "It is difficult to trace the precise genesis of Kienholz's art. It is as though there has never been a division between his quotidian^[SEP] life and his artistic production."¹¹ In such conflation of the man and his work, historians essentialize the artist as the untrained, intuitive master of California Assemblage, blessed with instinctive know-how and skill as opposed^[SEP] to intellectually refined knowledge and intelligence. California Assemblage, like Kienholz, is usually described as grittier, harsher, and without art historical influence^[SEP] or reference from past European arts. For example, a 1996 *Art in America* essay distinguished Kienholz's lack of good taste from Robert Rauschenberg's elegance: "A comparison of the two contemporaries may be useful, as critics of the time saw each artist's work as a continuation of Dada impulse. Both were hicks from the sticks, but Texas-born Rauschenberg attended art schools in Kansas City and Paris, and his work, for all its unconventional elements, is often quite elegant. Kienholz was never guilty of good taste."¹² As such, Kienholz's work is outside educated thought and precedent.

Art history's penchant for the image of the artist as laborer has its roots in the discipline's earliest accounts. In their 1934 Warburg Institute study on the stereotypical portrayals of artists, Ernst Kris and Otto Kurz characterized the image of the pastoral or working class artist as a leitmotif that has reoccurred in artist biographies since ancient Greece.¹³ In fact, Kris and Kurz argued that this theme appeared throughout artist biographies in order to construct an image of the artist as somehow separate from and extraordinary in relation to ordinary folk. This image of the untrained genius produces a heroic subject that is both alluring and memorable. Cultural historian Raymond Williams elaborated upon Kris and Kurz's genealogy of the modern artist-figure by identifying two dominant modernist personas—that of the artist as blue collar worker and the artist as aristocrat.¹⁴ Both images, according to Williams, work to differentiate artists from the bourgeois masses. As Williams explained, the bourgeois were reviled by the lower classes for being their employers and money controllers, while the upper class aristocracy attacked the emerging bourgeois as vulgar and socially inept. Modern artists, though usually from the middle classes, could overlap with the complaints of both lower and upper classes against the bourgeois reckoning of the world. It is thus not unexpected that artists and art historians have relied heavily upon the dominant tropes of the extraordinary artist, and one only has to look to Van Gogh, Pollock, or Duchamp to see these artist-images in action.



Edward Kienholz, *The Back Seat Dodge '38*, 1964. Paint, fiberglass and flock, 1938 Dodge, recorded music, and player, chicken wire, beer bottles, artificial grass, and cast plaster figures. Dimensions variable. Museum Number: M.81.248a-e, Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Purchased with funds provided by the Art Museum Council Fund. Photograph copyright 2005 Museum Associates/ LACMA.

In fact, Kienholz deliberately amplified his farming, working background in interviews, written essays, and public presentation as seen in photographs and film. From his earliest public interviews, Kienholz asserted his rural-ness and outsider status. For example, he often made sure to separate his artistic technique from the majority of current and past art practices. He stated, “A brush is not a tool that I am naturally attuned with. But I understand an electric drill very well.”¹⁵ In a 1966 interview with art historian and critic Barbara Rose, he answered her question as to why he became an artist with the following overboard statement: “While sitting in the barn, I used to milk the cows and sit there with my head nestled against the flank of a cow. She was always hitting

me on the right side of my face with the shit from her tail. Cuz when she'd swing her tail, it would come around and slap me on the right side. So I'd wipe that shit off and I'd look out through the barn door and forty miles distant was the faint aura of lights from Spokane, Washington. I knew that there was more things in the world than milking cows and listening about folk on the radio, and I wanted to know what it was about."¹⁶ Though accurate in some respects—Kienholz probably did milk cows and dream of the excitement of city living while a child in Fairfield, WA — he undoubtedly dramatized and elaborated on the roots of his artistic aspirations. For instance, Kienholz studied art at both Eastern Washington and Whitworth Colleges respectively, and he visited the studios of established artists while traveling through San Antonio and upon his arrival in [SEP]Los Angeles in the early 1950s. In fact, Kienholz was savvy enough to collaborate with Walter Hopps in 1957 to [SEP]found the seminal Ferus Gallery, widely recognized as an integral component to the emergence of Los Angeles as a contemporary art center.

In addition to the artist's referencing his non-artistic upbringing and background, Kienholz also made sure to project his working-class affinities through photographs and film. For example, in the 1962 television documentary, *Portrait of an Artist*, Kienholz was in rare performative form. The thirty-minute program aired nationally as part of television producer David Wolper's weekly *Portrait* episodes. The series consisted of a number of documentaries that focused on disparate professionals that included a matador, congressman, football coach, comedian, foreign correspondent, clown, mayor, and boxer. *Portrait* [SEP]of an Artist followed Kienholz through his daily activities as he prepared for an exhibition at the Ferus Gallery. Throughout, Kienholz's masculine, worker's mentality [SEP]was highlighted and on full display. Included in the film are scenes of the artist engaged in a series of physical activities: scavenging through junkyards in search

of materials for his work, hammering and welding these materials into assemblage sculpture in his studio, drinking and socializing at the popular artist hangout Barney's Beanery, trading a rifle for a motorcycle, and hunting ^[L]_[SEP]deer in the Santa Monica mountains. The film exposes Kienholz's full stockpile of guns and rifles, at least two closets full, and we hear the artist describe the sense of fulfillment he gets from killing the food he eats.



Robert Bucknam, *Kienholz in Junkyard*, 1960. Copyright Estate of Robert Bucknam; permission granted by Lyn Kienholz.

The images and accompanying voice-over of Kienholz hunting for food in the residential canyons of Los Angeles are the most endearing, though the most highly staged and humorous of the documentary. However, the ^[1]_[SEP] allure of these projected images worked to reinforce Kienholz's association with the masculine, working-class constructions of many postwar American modernists (think Jackson Pollock). This rugged persona can be seen as calming and countering American anxieties regarding the perceived femininity of modern European culture and artistic practice. Kienholz even tells us that artists were considered feminine and suspect on the farm, and as a result artistic activity was perceived as the hobbies of women. He explained, "In a farm community artistic stuff is suspect if you're a boy. I mean it's nice for girls to do watercolors or something, but a boy's got to do something, like hammer and pound and be involved with cars and machines and that stuff."¹⁷ He elaborated elsewhere, "I'm a good carpenter. I can hold my own with a foreman on ^[1]_[SEP] a construction crew. I can anticipate the work. I know ^[1]_[SEP] how to put a house together. I know how to keep workers supplied with materials. I know how to build cabinets, and I can build damn near anything that I want. You know I can make it."¹⁸ I read the "you" in this quote as referring to art critics and historians, for most writers have stressed the artist's resourcefulness and abilities in carpentry ^[1]_[SEP] as important roots of his work. For example, from the pages of a 1965 *Studio International*, John Coplans wrote: "Kienholz was brought up on a ranch, and exercises—to the fullest extent—those rough, manly skills associated with ranching. A true rancher in the United States, even today, has to be able to do something of everything: to be a carpenter, plumber, electrician,

mechanic, and engineer, as well as handle animals, hunt and skin a trophy.”¹⁹

However, we can loosen such images of Kienholz and others by not only rethinking the performative nature of the artist’s actions and words, but by raising ignored aspects of the artist’s biography that contradict past stereotypical and simplified readings. One can read a certain amount of intellectual effort in Kienholz’s projected anti-intellectual persona. For example, in the epigraph to this essay, Kienholz acknowledged his playing the part of the modern naïf by stating that his “great green simpleton image” was intentionally purposeful. In his 1977 oral history interview, Kienholz privately recorded a message to interviewer Lawrence Weschler in which he admitted to his deliberately difficult and performative nature. He said, “I’ve been purposely cantankerous. I think that’s just part of the fun of it. If it were all serious, I couldn’t take it.”²⁰ Such statements, along with the performative nature of many of the artist’s actions, like the TWA incident, reveal awareness, if not a deeper intellectual deliberateness, that is overlooked in histories of Kienholz in which the artist is cast as intuitive and spontaneous.



Paul J. Karlstrom, *Ed Kienholz in Hope, Idaho*, November 11, 1975. Courtesy of the Photographs of Artists Taken by Paul J. Karlstrom Collection in the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Kienholz could also discuss aspects of his work in a theoretically sophisticated manner. For example, he explained of his art practice: “I mostly think of my work as the spoor of an animal that goes through the forest and makes a thought trail, and the viewer is the hunter who comes and follows the trail. At one point I as the trail-maker disappear. The viewer then is confronted with a dilemma of ideas and directions.”²¹ Though obscured in hunting metaphors and allusions, Kienholz essentially reiterates here the poststructuralist idea of the death of the author as being significant for the birth of the reader. As Roland Barthes wrote in 1968: “The reader is the space on which all quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text’s unity lies not in its origin but in its destination... the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author.”²² Though falling outside the scope of this paper, what past assessments of Kienholz’s assemblage tableaux have hinted at, but not thoroughly explored, is the dynamic viewer interaction the work relies upon. One only has to look to such work as *The Friendly Grey Computer–Star Gauge Model Number 54* (1965) or *Still Live* (1974) to get a sense of Kienholz’s theory in action.²³

French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has identified art history’s discourse of biography as playing an important role in the constructed values of the Western artist.²⁴ He explained that art history’s reliance upon anecdotes, quotes, and aspects of the artist’s life were the result of the discipline’s attempt to create its subjects as memorable and unique. Bourdieu wrote: “The discourse of celebration, notably the biography, plays a determining role [in art history]. This is probably due less to what it says about the painter and his work than to the fact that the biography establishes the artist as a memorable character, worthy of historical account.”²⁴ To be worthy of such account, artists need to exhibit, or be identified as exhibiting, specialized talents and attributes that are made evident through biographical detail. Modern

artists, like Kienholz, have utilized images such as the blue-collar worker in order to differentiate themselves from the conformist bourgeois, whether imagined or real. To rethink the artist's biography—which encompasses statements, dress, and actions—as deliberately performed dispels the majority of monolithic art historical characterizations. In Kienholz's case, the inherent qualities and attributes derived from his rural upbringing—and used in descriptions of his assemblages—become the product of art historical preference and a portion of the artist's performance.

To illustrate his multiplicity, Kienholz stated of his public persona: "I don't think of myself as an artist. I'm an artist, I'm a carpenter, I'm a mechanic, you know, a mother,^[1]a dad—I'm like all things."²⁵ It is with this unfixed and loosened image of Kienholz, one which stresses the "both/and" qualities of the artist over the "either/or" categories of current histories of art, that we can return to Kienholz's work in order to start rethinking its importance in histories of postwar art history. As such, the artist-figure Kienholz becomes an unlimited case study for contemporary issues concerning artists such as Joseph Beuys, Pollock, Andy Warhol, et al.

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Footnotes

1. *Speculation #241: The World of Ed Kienholz*. Host: Keith Berwick, Director: Alan L. Muir. PBS. KCET, Los Angeles, 1971. ↵

2. Art Seidenbaum, "Goodbye Ed Kienholz: Who Would Have Thought That You^[1] of all People Would Find Hope?"^[1] *West Magazine*, November 1970, p. 9. ↵

3. Ernst Kris and Otto Kurz, *Legend, Myth, and Magic in the Image of the Artist* (New York and London: Yale University Press, 1979 [1934]) p.

15. Arthur Secunda, "Interview with Edward Kienholz and John Bernhardt," *Artforum* vol. 1, no. 5, November 1962, p. 33. ↵

4. ↵

4. Lawrence Weschler, ed., *Los Angeles Art Community, Group Portrait, Edward Kienholz* (Los Angeles: University of California, Los Angeles Oral History Program, 1977) p. 491. ↵

5. Accompanying Kienholz were his wife Lyn, good friend and patron Monte Factor, and photographer Bob Bucknam. ↵

6. Weschler, ed., p. 491. ↵

7. *Ibid.*, p. 500. ↵

8. Monte Factor, "I Quit," *Kienholz: A Retrospective* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1996) p. 278. ↵

9. Robert Hughes, "All-American Yawp," *Time* vol.147, no. 19, May 6, 1996, p. 81. ↵

10. See Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Woodstock, New York: The Overlook Press, 1973 [1959]). ↵

11. Weschler, ed., xi. ↵

12. Reagan Upshaw, "Scavenger's Parade," *Art in America*, October 1996, p.100. ↵

13. See Ernst Kris and Otto Kurz, *Legend, Myth, and Magic in the Image of the Artist* (New York and London: Yale University Press, 1979 [1934]). ↵

14. See Raymond Williams, "The Politics^{[[SEP]]}of the Avant-Garde," *The Politics of Modernism: Against the New Conformists* ed. Tony Pinkney (London and New York: Verso, 1989). ↵

16. Barbara Rose Papers, Getty Research Institute, Box 1, Folder 41. ↵

17. Weschler, ed., p. 30. ↵

18. *Ibid.*, p. 37. ↵

19. John Coplans, "Assemblage: The Savage Eye^{[[SEP]]}of Edward Kienholz," *Studio International*, September 1965, n.p. ↵

20. Weschler, ed., p. 503. ↵

21. Carrie Rickey, "Unpopular Culture (Travels in Kienholzland)" *Artforum* vol.21, no, 10, June 1983, p. 13. ↵

22. Roland Barthes, "*The Death of the Author*," *Image Music Text*, Trans. Stephen Heath (New York: The Noonday Press, 1977)^{[[SEP]]}p. 148. ↵

23. See Damon Michael Willick's "Conceptualizing Kienholz: Reconsidering Ed Kienholz in Contemporary Art History" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles, 2004). ↵

24. Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, Trans. Randal Johnson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993) p. 260. ↵

25. Weschler, ed., p. 397. ↵