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The Man with Two Faces: Quoting the Collaborative Hand of Howard Arkley and Juan Davila

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the historical narrative of Howard Arkley and Juan Davila's collaborative art practice from 1984 to 1999. It is structured chronologically, to highlight a transformation in the duo's combined processes — the transition from decidedly tense forms of delineated authorship towards a merged, copycat aesthetic. I draw heavily on Charles Green's theory of the 'third hand' to define an alternate model of collaborative authorship, one which extends Green's considerations. This paper proposes that Arkley and Davila did not operate under the guise of the third hand, but rather through a form of composite authorship, where the authorial traces of the artists are blurred but still infer their own collaborative construction. The paper concludes with the discovery of a drawing, dated and signed by Davila, which I argue is a reference to his collaborative friendship with Arkley and, furthermore, is an indication of their journey towards a composite form.

The decision to teamwork with other artists ... involves shaping ways in which art finds its sensuous and intellectual place in the world.¹

In order to progress, people have to work together; and in the course of their collaboration, they gradually become aware of an identification in their relationships whose initial diversity was precisely what made their collaboration fruitful and necessary.²

The creative partnership between Melbourne-based artists Howard Arkley and Juan Davila was a testament to Claude Lévi-Strauss's belief that collaboration emerges from diversity rather than commonality. Amongst the experimentation and vivacity of Australia's postmodern era, an unlikely collaborative friendship flourished that challenged the ideals of autonomous authorship and extended the possibilities of second-degree quotation. Over a period of fifteen years, this duo produced a coherent body of work, ranging from large scale, three-dimensional installations to silkscreen prints and paintings. Arkley and Davila's mode of collaborative authorship drastically reinterpreted the processes of combined art production in their efforts to retain individual subjectivities and agendas. Quoting the narrative of their experiences as a duo, they constructed a highly self-conscious visual dialogue that documented their own collaborative practice. By working against the trends informing the conceptual and performative merging of identities, the duo's production methods proved instrumental in broadening the contemporary understanding of collaboration. Arkley and Davila's collaborative works make a rich contribution to an element of art history in Australia that, until more recently, has been greatly underappreciated.

¹ Roberts, 2004, p. 557.

² Lévi-Strauss in Wright, 2004, p. 533.



Fig. 1. Howard Arkley and Juan Davila, *Blue Chip Instant Decorator: A Room*, 1991–92, as exhibited in its original installation at Tolarno Galleries, Melbourne, July 1991. Two paintings, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, each 200 x 240 cm, painted walls, painted furniture and painted wood ‘rugs’; overall size of installation 300 x 876 x 100 cm. Collection: Benalla Art Gallery. (Photo credit: Mark Ashkanasy. Courtesy Juan Davila and The Estate of Howard Arkley, and Kalli Rolfe Contemporary Art.)

Blue Chip Instant Decorator: A Room (1991–92) is arguably the most spectacular outcome of Arkley and Davila’s collaboration (Fig. 1). Comprising two juxtaposed living rooms in a mirrored configuration, the installation heightened a sense of rivalry between the two artists. Arkley’s neatly contoured domestic interior was a face-off with Davila’s figurative contributions. The work narrated an artistic battle between one’s admiration for the domestic ideal and another’s insistent perversion of it. In their fanciful roleplaying, Arkley resided as the dutiful decorator and Davila, the vulgar interloper who muddled the carpet and set the sofa alight.

Speaking solely in terms of their aesthetics, Arkley and Davila were worlds apart. Arkley’s approach to painting was characterised by a clean and industrial aesthetic, a technique he accomplished with a hand-held air-brush that did not make direct contact with the canvas. The artist was known for his appropriation and manipulation of kitsch patterns, cartoons and graffiti that were reignited by his use of garish, psychedelic colour palettes. Like older Melbourne artists, the actor Barry Humphries and the acerbic painter John Brack, Arkley’s most significant works channelled a fascination with Australian suburbia and its role as an emblem of national sentiment and identity.

Davila's works, on the other hand, were driven by incessant political commentary and profanity. The Chilean-born artist worked on a monumental scale, fusing painterly skill with re-appropriated mainstream media and homoerotic imagery. The artist's compositions were explicit reactions to traditional histories and philosophies of art. Inherently critical and self-conscious, his work was described by Paul Taylor as 'a discourse about a discourse'.³ In a discussion about artistic intention, the artist perceived his creative output as 'fighting the illusory, idealistic and contemplative tradition in art'.⁴

The intrusion of another artist's hand came naturally to Arkley, who adopted the role of collaborator more frequently than Davila, wavering between numerous projects and alliances at any given time. This was in stark contrast to Davila, who always worked with assistants, but was portrayed as a definitively 'solo' artist prior to his artistic alliance with Arkley. Together, Arkley and Davila expressed a shared commitment to artistic subjectivity and authorship that far outweighed their stylistic polarity. Their union was founded upon a mutual concern for the conceptual and aesthetic implications of their partnership, with particular emphasis on the changes that occur to the individual artist's 'hand' during the collaborative act.

Current understandings of collaborative identities rely on a constant level of interdependency between artists to blur hierarchical notions of authorship and thus the obstruction of a simple set of meanings. The emergence of composite authorship, for example, exemplifies the true nature of the postmodern, polysemic artwork, by showing the signs of its collaborative, multi-layered construction. By disrupting the myth of autonomy and originality through alternate modes of authorship, collaborative art draws attention to the expansive possibilities of meaning by ridding the text of all unitary meaning and essentialism. More recently, Australian art historian and collaborative artist Charles Green developed the theory of the third hand, a construct applied to selected instances of collaboration from the 1960s onwards. Green defines this model of collaborative authorship as the ultimate joining of two artists where any traces of individual subjectivities are erased, leaving what can only be described as a third entity⁵ — a form of authorship that is greater than the sum of its parts.⁶

In his text, *The Third Hand: Collaboration in Art From Conceptualism to Postmodernism* (2001), Green engages with the experimental era of the 1960s and 1970s, utilising the ascendancy of postmodern thought to highlight an artistic crisis in identity. His case studies are highly specific, focusing on the effacement of individuality in light of family and lifetime partnerships and bureaucratic teamwork. His chosen examples of collaborative partnerships flux between literal collaboration as art (an interest in authorship, encoded identity and authority) and doubles and doppelgangers (the construction of inaccessible and/or unknown identities). Since its publication, Green's writing has incited a new level of enquiry into alternative authorships, among them: 'Art and Collaboration', a special issue of *Third Text* (2004); *Metaphor and Tension: Collaboration and its Discontent*, by Nikos Papastergiadis (2004); and 'Collaborations in Modern and Postmodern Visual Art', a special issue of *Colloquy* (2012). In the latter, Adrian Martin's article 'Artistic Tension' makes a convincing case against the feasibility of a truly harmonious collaboration. He questions the rarity of a combined practice where egotism is curtailed and a fusion of two unique sensibilities ensues.

³ Taylor, 1985, p. 7.

⁴ Davila in Foss, 1985, p. 11.

⁵ Green, 2001, p. 174.

⁶ Green, 2004, p. 596.

Countering the ‘romantic ideologies’ of collaboration as a ‘seamless’ vision,⁷ the critic argues:

I tend to believe that a person’s stylistic signature in any medium cannot — whether they like it or not — be simply melted into somebody else’s. What collaboration usually is, in reality, is a compromise-formation, a negotiation, an arrangement [...] a kind of machine, game or system that is set up and organised in advance of the creative act.⁸

This idea of tension holds certain currency in the case of Arkley and Davila; their practice emerged from tense forms of delineated authorship, which then moved towards a merged, copycat aesthetic. From the outset, their ambition was not to emulate an encoded or abstract form of combined authorship (as later theorised by Green), but to display the literal processes by which two artists negotiated each other’s visions. Unlike their contemporaries, Arkley and Davila projected an entirely different model of collective authorship: a composite form, which obscured individual signifiers without obliterating them, effectively dislocating the viewers’ expectations of both autonomous *and* collaborative authorship.

The collaborative canvas became the ultimate experimental zone, in which they could alter their subjectivity, expand upon cultural appropriative form, and play with the boundaries of what was permissible and what was sacred to the individual. The beauty of Arkley and Davila’s collaborative discourse was that it enabled them to quote without assuming a position, emulating the authorial ambiguity of a made-up transvestite.

From ‘Pictorial Battle’ to Aesthetic Transvestism

I see our collaboration as a wonderful travesty. Howard might not see it in these terms, but we are two transvestite painters, or camp decorators, who have no sense of taste, and we produced an intentionally bastard result. It has the appearance of a proper painting but as you come near the whole thing blurs, like make-up on a transvestite. We talked about being two prostitutes who would offer to decorate anything.⁹

— Juan Davila, 1995.

[Art that] set about jarring everyone’s expectations about the boundary between clean, cool abstraction and messy lurid decoration [...] Art can be highly local, highly refined and very rule-governed [where] everyone knows the language that has to be spoken. And then suddenly — the turn of a wrist, the squeeze of a tube, the choice of a canvas, and this mutation occurs.¹⁰

— Chris McAuliffe, 2006.

⁷ Martin, 2012, p. 218.

⁸ Martin, 2012, p. 219.

⁹ Juan Davila in conversation with Stephen O’Connell, 1995. Published: O’Connell, 1996, accessed online.

¹⁰ Chris McAuliffe in Smith et al., 2006, accessed online.

The intentions of Arkley and Davila's collaboration were to consciously evolve and expand upon the localised art context of the time. Theirs was a collaboration that amplified postmodern theories of deconstruction by breaking their *own* rules. In extending the possibilities of appropriative language, they simultaneously refracted the circulation of postmodern dialogue to just the two of them. In essence, they created and sustained their own warped dimension of the second degree.¹¹

Davila's concept of an 'intentionally bastard result' was very much in line with McAuliffe's notion of artistic 'mutation'; Arkley and Davila wanted to observe how far they could deface the integrity of each other's forms before their collaboration crumbled under the pressure of individual ego. Contrary to their own presumptions, the duo's union transformed from an arbitrary collaborative encounter to that of an innovative and cooperative entity. This chronological analysis will reveal an unexpected transition from one form of collaborative technique to another, from visions of a 'pictorial battle' to a quintessentially Davilian construct of bold aesthetic transvestism. The following narrative of Arkley and Davila's creative partnership highlights their collaborative transformation, commencing with their dabbles in small-scale experimental projects in the 1980s to their final declaration of carefully mediated, composite authorship in the late 1990s.

The duo first exhibited together under the theoretical sign of Neo Pop and New Wave in 1982. While it is believed that their friendship began after an encounter at Davila's first Australian show at Tolarno Galleries in 1977,¹² it was actually the National Gallery of Victoria's 'POPISM' exhibition in 1982 that marked the true beginning of their friendship. Following a second group show at the National Gallery of Victoria in 1983, 'Vox Pop: Into the Eighties', the duo embarked on a brief Surrealist-inspired project with fellow New Wave artist, Maria Kozic. The *Untitled (Exquisite Corpse)* series, created in 1984, marked the beginnings of a unique rhetoric between Arkley and Davila — one that abandoned caution and exuded energetic brashness and playful rivalry.

Throughout the late 1980s, Arkley and Davila also dabbled in collaborative mixed media works as opposed to the paintings both were best known for. Although minor in scale, these pieces marked the first stage of their transition into dual authorship. To offer a brief overview of their collaboration, before delving into specific examples, Arkley and Davila presented their first major collaborative installation, *Blue Chip Instant Decorator: A Room*, at Tolarno Galleries in 1991. This complex installation has been heralded as one of two milestones of their artistic partnership, revealing to the Australian art world the fervour both artists had in their commitment to explorations of postmodern identity. Shortly after *Blue Chip*, the duo created the silkscreen print *Interior with Built in Bar* (1992), a work which confirms the common thread amongst all their collaborations thus far: the creative pursuit of an imaginative, domestic environment. Arkley and Davila's final project *Icon Interior* (1994–2001) consummated the complexity and finesse of their collaborative effort. After fifteen years of creative partnership and towards the end of their epic production on *Icon Interior*, Arkley's life ended suddenly and unexpectedly. His untimely death in Melbourne in 1999 from a heroin overdose, after a highly acclaimed, international solo show at the Venice Biennale that year, saddened both those closest to him and the art community at large. With

¹¹ New Wave artists perceived culture as a multi-dimensional network, an environment in which to dislocate conventional, pre-existing codes and arrange them in a new context (theoretically referred to as the second degree by art historian and critic, Paul Taylor). See Taylor, 1984.

¹² Gregory, 2001, p. 3.

the support of Arkley's wife Alison Burton, Davila resumed work on *Icon Interior* alone, exhibiting the completed installation at the Australian National University Drill Hall Gallery in 2002.¹³ *Icon Interior* is a poignant piece that pays homage to the rarity of Arkley and Davila's partnership. It was a collaboration that did not comply with the obliteration of individual subjectivity and, thus, further problematised late twentieth-century understandings of combined artistic authorship.



Fig. 2. Howard Arkley and Juan Davila, *Blue Chip Instant Decorator: A Room*, 1989. Laser print, acetate sheet, synthetic polymer paint on card, 38 x 42 cm. Collection: Benalla Art Gallery. (Courtesy Juan Davila and The Estate of Howard Arkley, and Kalli Rolfe Contemporary Art.)

In 1989, Arkley and Davila had produced a laser print entitled *Blue Chip Instant Decorator: A Room* (Fig. 2). This work, despite its very small scale, became the prototype for larger scale domestic interior installations. Of all their collaborative efforts, the laser print *Blue Chip* (as it will now be referred to) is the greatest expression of their stylistic differences. With Frances Joslin Gold's 1976 publication *The Instant Decorator* at hand,¹⁴ Arkley set to work on the linear skeleton of the composition, carefully tracing projections of Gold's domestic interior sketches onto card.¹⁵ His blatant use of appropriated imagery ensured clean lines and mimicked the industrialised hand of a graphic designer. Arkley's skeletal-like framework created a clear delineation of craftsmanship to ensure — as he put it — that 'everything that

¹³ Gregory, 2006, p. 156.

¹⁴ Frances Joslin Gold, *The Instant Decorator*, New York: Clarkson N. Potter Inc., 1976. *The Instant Decorator* was a constant source of inspiration for Arkley and was a vital point of reference for his Mix 'n' Match series of the early 1990s.

¹⁵ Gregory, 1992, p. 4.

[went] in was yours'.¹⁶ Davila responded to this act of artistic generosity by filling the voids with painterly references to eroticism. Of significance here is how Davila worked within the confines of his partner's linear forms. *Blue Chip* presents a jarring dichotomy between Arkley's domestic world and Davila's unpredictable and confronting vision. The work is symbolic of the initial form that their artistic partnership took, one which was calculated and in fact accentuated a clashing of their artistic subjectivities, a 'tension between connectedness and individual ego'.¹⁷

The duo extended the delineated quality of their previous works to depict their creative process as an antagonistic and tense one — a 'pictorial battle' that potentially rejected the notion that collaborative artists worked in harmony.¹⁸ At the turn of the decade, Arkley and Davila released *Blue Chip* from the confines of its minute frame and transformed the print into a fully immersive, three-dimensional domestic environment. *Blue Chip Instant Decorator: A Room* (Fig. 1) was a two-year work in progress, first exhibited at Tolarno Galleries in 1991 and later in its completed state at the Melbourne Art Fair in 1992.¹⁹ The final version of *Blue Chip* comprises dual painted walls, each decorated with a large-scale canvas of a domestic interior. The space created between the opposing walls is furnished with a dining chair to one side and a small dressing table on the other, both of which sit on carpet rugs (which were replaced by elevated wooden plinths in 1992).²⁰ With each surface embellished in lurid patterning and figuration, all distinction between figure and ground is obscured, tempting the viewer to enter an 'all too familiar dream world'.²¹

Blue Chip boldly moves beyond the certainties of the canvas to create an expanded environment of mismatched, appropriated forms. Throughout the development of the work, Arkley and Davila put New Wave theory into practice by envisaging the canvas as a multidimensional network in which to dislocate and rearrange the meanings of specific signs.²² *Blue Chip* is referred to as an environment, not just in function and scale, but in its materialisation of the second degree: the creation of a visible, cultural sphere interwoven with indeterminate references and meanings. This work is the most monumental of their collaborative pursuits, both in its scale and the detail of its underlying meanings. Therefore, it demands a more extensive visual analysis be devoted to it.

¹⁶ Howard Arkley in conversation with John Gregory, 1992. Published: Gregory, 1992, p. 2.

¹⁷ John-Steiner, 2001, p. 63.

¹⁸ Juan Davila in conversation with Stephen O'Connell, 1995. Published: O'Connell, 1996, accessed online.

¹⁹ Stephen O'Connell, 1996, accessed online. In 1997, the Benalla Art Gallery purchased *Blue Chip* and, apart from its temporary loan to the National Gallery of Victoria for the Howard Arkley Retrospective exhibition in 2006, the work has since remained in that regional gallery's collection.

²⁰ Gregory, 2006, p. 149.

²¹ Gregory, 1992, p. 5.

²² Taylor, 1984, p. 158.



Fig. 3. Howard Arkley and Juan Davila, *Blue Chip Instant Decorator: A Room*, 1991-92: left half. Two paintings, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, each 200 x 240 cm, painted walls, painted furniture and painted wood 'rugs'; overall size of installation 300 x 876 x 100 cm. Collection: Benalla Art Gallery. (Photo credit: Mark Ashkanasy. Juan Davila and The Estate of Howard Arkley, Courtesy Kalli Rolfe Contemporary Art, Photograph.)

Davila's evocations of the past blended South American imagery with typically Western popular culture references. To the left of the installation, Davila's hand dominates the background and lower foreground of the canvas as distinguished by his painterly gesture (Fig. 3). The imagery on the far wall is a direct appropriation of Diego Rivera's *The Flower Vendor (Girl With Lilies)*,²³ an image that is consistently reproduced within Western art histories as solely emblematic of South American art. Among similar references to Davila's heritage, the man's face peering through the bordering window could be interpreted as a portrayal of the fascist Chilean President, Augusto Pinochet (from whose regime Davila had fled). With his downturned mouth and pencil moustache, the Pinochet-like portrait is the focal point of the canvas, depicting an authoritative figure who directs his gaze upon the domestic interior setting. Interestingly, the blue rays which cast down in triangular form from the subject's left eye are highly evocative of the all-seeing eye, a symbol of divine power also present on the one-dollar banknote of the United States of America. Furthering this sense of

²³ Diego Rivera, *The Flower Vendor (Girl with Lilies)*, 1941.

meta-symbolic movement, Davila utilised Arkley's diamond shaped grid to draw the eye diagonally across the centre of the painting by carpeting the couch and floor rugs in the floral iconography of William Morris. In the left-hand corner sits an empty armchair, decorated with similar patterns and miniature references to Chilean Surrealist imagery. On the arm of the chair, Davila has quoted a figure of a horse's head, a symbol featured in a photograph of Davila visiting an exhibition held at the Chilean-French Institute of Culture in Santiago, 1975, titled *Six Approximations to Surrealism in Chile*.²⁴



Fig. 4. Howard Arkley and Juan Davila, *Blue Chip Instant Decorator: A Room*, 1991-92: right half. Two paintings, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, each 200 x 240 cm, painted walls, painted furniture and painted wood 'rugs'; overall size of installation 300 x 876 x 100 cm. Collection: Benalla Art Gallery. (Photo credit: Mark Ashkanasy. Courtesy Juan Davila and The Estate of Howard Arkley, and Kalli Rolfe Contemporary Art.)

The Surrealist spectacle created by Davila continues on the adjacent side of the installation (Fig. 4). The three dimensional dressing table positioned in front of the canvas is veiled in the melodic linear forms and primary colour palette reminiscent of Wassily Kandinsky, a Russian painter of the Modernist *Der Blaue Reiter* movement. Davila then created an identical focal point within the composition, directing the eye towards a painterly representation of the poster for Terry Gilliam's *Brazil*, a cinematic exploration of a dystopian society that assumes the panoptical, big brother narrative of George Orwell's 1984. In other areas, Davila

²⁴ Juan Davila at the exhibition *Six Appropriations to Surrealism in Chile*, Chilean-French Institute of Culture, Photograph taken in Santiago, Chile, 1975. Image featured in Brett & Benjamin, 2006, p. 1.

expanded his appropriation of national signifiers through a parody of Australian works such as Brett Whiteley's *Self Portrait in the Studio* of 1976,²⁵ and Frederick McCubbin's *The Pioneer*.²⁶ To the lower right-hand corner of the canvas, Davila liberally quotes from Whiteley's self-portrait, utilising Arkley's round, decorative object on the table to mimic Whiteley's hand-held mirror. The mirror's reflection crudely portrays Whiteley as a seemingly unhinged clown from a 1980s horror film. Davila also transformed the exterior view of the suburban back yard into a McCubbin-esque landscape, reconfigured with a dinosaur in it. This reflects Davila's use of satirically charged quotations, conveying Australian art history as heavily burdened by conservatism.

Davila's appropriative imagery oscillates between serious political critiques and playful re-enactments of Chilean and Western art and political history. Nevertheless, it must be reiterated that the intentions of this essay are not to discuss the range of meanings behind Davila's visual analogies, rather to observe that these loaded quotations exist within the work and establish an interconnectedness between these references. In this instance of collaboration, Davila's contributions created a critical sub-narrative that was elaborately woven into Arkley's contextual frame.

While Arkley's appropriated forms were far less overt than Davila's, they were none the less pertinent. Arkley did not signpost his quotations; rather, the postmodern sentiment of his work was founded in his stylised technique and his choice of compositional frameworks. Akin to its preliminary two-dimensional print format (of 1989), the pictorial layout of *Blue Chip* evolved from Gold's domestic illustrations in *The Instant Decorator*. Chris McAuliffe viewed Arkley's initial markings of the canvas as evocative of abstraction and hard-edge, colour field painting. What truly belied the ornamental surface and black lines of Arkley's paintings was a marriage between geometric shapes and colour blocking that was heavily reminiscent of Frank Stella's ultra reductive, uniform paintings of the 1970s.²⁷ Much like Davila and his network of quotations, but perhaps with more subtlety, Arkley was said to be 'carefully mediating an engagement with abstract art and its languages'²⁸ by merging the hard-edge style of abstract painting with postmodern appropriative forms.

Arkley's more overt appropriative statements were to be found predominately in his decorative forms and figurations resembling home décor catalogues and fabric swatches. Drawing motifs from everyday pop and consumer culture, Arkley embellished the canvas with commerciality and kitsch rather than socio-political critique. By accentuating the appropriative nature of the domestic realm, Arkley's interior homes connected to a quintessentially *Australian* experience of living in the 1980s. He mismatched traditional and contemporary furniture styles, from Chesterfield and pseudo-Georgian pieces, to modernist furniture designed by the likes of Børge Mogensen, Eero Saarinen and Mies van der Rohe. The artist's clichéd quotations of various bourgeois, eurocentric designs create a cumbersome and kitschy, yet deeply nostalgic representation of Australian suburban taste.

Arkley's mechanical approach to painting was heightened by his use of a spray gun and hand-made stencils, devices which, when combined, created a mural of commercial patterning and pop-inspired Ben-Day dots. His painterly gesture was transformed by the

²⁵ Brett Whiteley, *Self Portrait in the Studio*, 1976.

²⁶ Frederick McCubbin, *The Pioneer*, 1904.

²⁷ Chris McAuliffe in Smith et al., 2006, accessed online.

²⁸ Chris McAuliffe in Smith et al., 2006, accessed online.

spray technique, softening and distancing the authorial hand in reference to street art and graffiti and to the rhythmic aesthetic of 1970s disco. Arkley therefore expanded upon his Disco and Muzak murals of the early 1980s, transforming the ceilings and floors of the *Blue Chip Instant Decorator: A Room* interior into a 'spectacle of light and movement'.²⁹ From digitised dots to systematic linear grids, Arkley underlined Davila's figuration by creating pictorial representations of hypnotic sound. As McAuliffe noted, Arkley's preoccupation with Muzak is certainly something to consider further in regard to his collaborative technique. Described as 'heavily engineered [and] constructed for public spaces in order to control people's moods and emotions in a consumer environment',³⁰ Arkley's re-appropriations of Muzak murals in *Blue Chip* may have been a system by which he could regulate the chaos of his partner's semi-Surrealist desecrations.

In presenting two distinct authorial hands, *Blue Chip* reveals a great deal about the power dynamics and work processes that marked Arkley and Davila's unique mode of collaboration. The use of found objects such as the dressing table and chair evolved from Arkley's three dimensional installations of the early '80s works including *Muzak Mural — Chair Tableau* 1980–81³¹ and *Logitex (Table and Chair Tableau)* of 1980–84.³² As previously mentioned, Arkley laid the foundations of the piece using a diamond-shaped grid pencilled over the canvas to achieve proper perspective and perhaps to act as a division of artistic labour between the two artists. The visibility of Arkley's bold linear forms suggested that there was an underlying system by which Davila respectfully abided.

Nevertheless, to suggest that *Blue Chip Instant Decorator: A Room* was entirely derivative of Arkley's practice simplifies Arkley and Davila's intricate layering of 'quotations and counter quotations'.³³ Davila's hand spontaneously emerges, gaining precedence in the figurative sense as well as in his jarring use of neutral and sepia tones that, in effect, dirty Arkley's pristine lines and fluoro colour palette. The installation of *Blue Chip Instant Decorator: A Room* employed the same delineation of labour as the print version. However, in this instance the individual hand is less discernable, suggesting the gradual influence and veiling of each other's style. Davila made the palpable shift from pornographic imagery to more ornate designs, particularly in his appropriation of Morris's patterns, which compliment Arkley's decorative theme. Arkley too was influenced by his collaborative counterpart, as his stencilled spray technique loosened and became noticeably less industrialised, drawing attention to technical flaws in his application of paint.

Ultimately, the pictorial relationship between Arkley and Davila was a complex one, amounting to imagery that is simultaneously rich and unashamedly challenging. The two artists severely questioned each other's practice by continuing to assert their individual identities. This idea was validated by Davila when he described *Blue Chip* as a 'pictorial battle'.³⁴ Certainly, each contributor fought for precedence within the composition, but it was equally apparent that the two artists could not help but feed off each other's creative energy. *Blue Chip* highlighted the problems both artists had in compromising a sense of autonomy

²⁹ Crawford & Edgar, 1997, p. 38.

³⁰ Chris McAuliffe in Smith et al., 2006, accessed online.

³¹ Howard Arkley, *Muzak Mural Chair Tableau*, 1980–81. Four chairs, synthetic polymer paint on composition board, floor, vinyl tiles; two canvases, 205 x 320 x 90 overall.

³² Howard Arkley, *Logitex (Table and Chair Tableau)*, 1980–84. Synthetic polymer paint on canvas and wood, woven rug: chair, 87 x 87 x 38 cm; table, 74 x 65 x 65 cm; rug 110 x 110 cm; painting, 162 x 162 cm.

³³ Gregory, 2001, p. 4.

³⁴ Juan Davila in conversation with Stephen O'Connell, 1995. Published: O'Connell, 1996, accessed online.

within collaborative practice. This issue of relinquishing control and altering the authorial hand was a facet of their transition into composite authorship which Arkley and Davila hoped to pursue further.

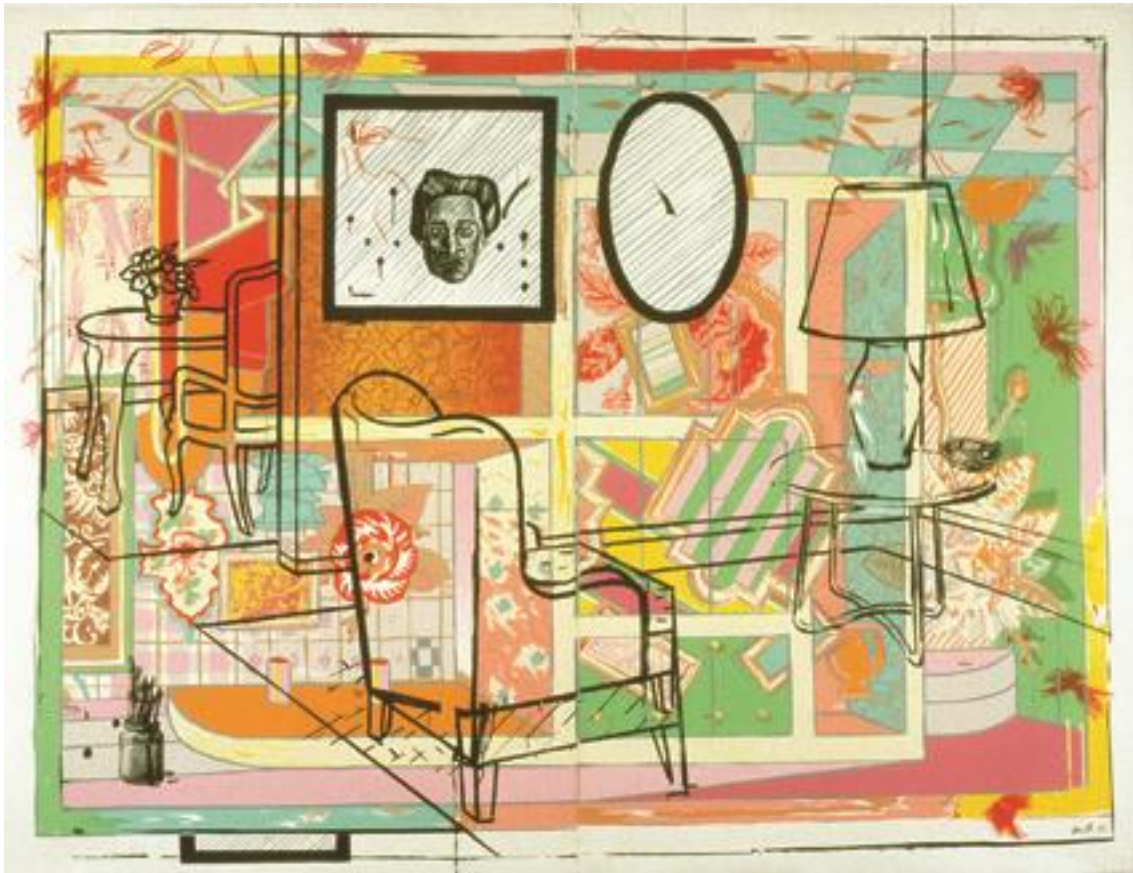


Fig. 5. Howard Arkley and Juan Davila, *Interior with Built in Bar*, 1992. Silkscreen print on paper, 163 x 216 cm. Collection: Benalla Art Gallery. (Courtesy of Juan Davila and The Estate of Howard Arkley, and Kalli Rolfe Contemporary Art.)

Interior with Built in Bar draws attention to this subtle shift, by embodying a ‘seamless expression of a merged vision’³⁵ — closer to Green’s notion of the ‘third hand’ — rather than an allusion to collaborative antagonism (Fig. 5). This silkscreen print of 1992 is more refined and strategic than their previous works. This may be in part due to the medium demanding more precise contributions or because they became more aware of what they wanted to achieve as collaborators; a dramatic alteration of subjectivity. This work represents the key point at which Arkley and Davila ‘turned contradiction and tension [into] creative advantage.’³⁶ Arkley and Davila adopted a copycat mode of authorship where the hand was deliberately muddled through appropriations of each other’s form and style. Instead of filling Arkley’s interior frame with Davila-esque provocations, Davila began to mimic that which was characteristically Arkley. The black skeletal tracings of interior designs, for example, were appropriated by Davila (suggested by the untidiness of his linear forms). Similarly, Davila turned to more modest configurations, complying with Arkley’s pastel colour palette and stencilled ornamental forms to compliment his co-artist’s use of embellished patterns.

³⁵ Heartney, 1989, p. 143.

³⁶ Gregory, 2006, p. 156.

The composition of *Interior with Built in Bar* reflects Arkley's abandonment of proportion and perspective, in response to Davila's skewed and inverted vision of the interior. Picture frames hang lop-sided, the floor tilings appear on the ceiling rather than the ground, and on close inspection, viewers can see Davila's figurative depictions intertwined with Arkley's patterns. The interior framework was no longer Arkley's domain to control. Nevertheless, this project was not a matter of cooperating or conforming, it was about manipulating the perceptions of the viewer. The logic behind *Interior with Built in Bar* is that it systematically blurs the signifiers of authorship. Although it lacks the spontaneity of earlier works, the print seemed to legitimise the strength of their collaboration because there was a clear method underpinning how they obscured their individual subjectivities.



Fig. 6. Howard Arkley and Juan Davila, *Icon Interior*, 1994–2001, Oil, enamel and synthetic polymer on canvas and MDF, comprising canvas, 160 x 119 cm; two cut-out tables with lamps, each 139 x 73 cm; chair 86 x 38 x 39 cm, with base 60 x 60 cm; 'rug', 15 x 160 x 54 cm; two double-sided screens, each 242 x 122 cm. Private collection, Melbourne. (Photo credit: Mark Ashkanasy. Courtesy Juan Davila and The Estate of Howard Arkley, and Kalli Rolfe Contemporary Art.)

A work in progress for approximately seven years (1994–2001), the artists' third collaborative project, *Icon Interior*, is the pinnacle of their collaboration, signifying a genuine dedication to and understanding of each other's style and technique (Fig. 6). *Icon Interior* pushed the aesthetic and theoretical boundaries of their partnership like no other collaborative work. In their search for true composite authorship, Arkley and Davila distorted their use of quotations by appropriating from each other, thereby drastically manipulating the traces of

the individual. They utilised collaborative form to extend the possibilities of New Wave quotation, presenting a pertinent challenge against the ‘purity’ of the artist’s hand.

Similar to *Blue Chip Instant Decorator: A Room* in many respects, although far more complex and elegant, *Icon Interior* is a three-dimensional configuration of a suburban interior. While the work retains the characteristics of an illusory and otherworldly space, their construction of true-to-scale rugs, a chair and a room divider denote a more plausible living environment that the viewer could foreseeably inhabit.³⁷

Arkley and Davila continued their exploration of an environment in which to ‘inhabit the second degree’³⁸ by creating a space that simultaneously foiled spectatorship and encouraged it. *Icon Interior* is a spatial play on obstruction and visibility where the duo utilised cut outs to demand multi-perspective viewing. The partitioning screen, for example, offers glimpses into the interior through sharp Matisse-style cut outs, which mimic the shape and scale of the flattened tables framing the central painting on the far wall.³⁹ Despite their two-dimensional form, the ‘cut out’ tables and lamps appear as functional furniture pieces, creating the illusion of a space that extends beyond the supporting wall. Arkley’s functional furniture pieces recreate the flat-pack, hard-edged form of his *Muzak Mural* and *Logitex* furniture installations of the early ’80s for *Icon Interior*. It has been said that he made the surface and dimensionality of these pieces as flat as possible so they would mimic the canvases of Frank Stella.⁴⁰ In this particular instance, the symmetrical, central chair allowed the duo to divide and decorate its surface area in two distinct halves, presenting a delineation of authorship that was highly evocative of their *Blue Chip* laser print of 1989. Arkley and Davila’s clever construction of a multi-faceted environment was crucial at this point in their postmodern partnership; *Icon Interior* went beyond a visual dialogue between two artists by acknowledging the spectator as a vital presence within their collaboration.

³⁷ *Icon Interior* was installed for Davila’s huge survey show at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney in 2006 and subsequently at the National Gallery of Victoria International from 2006–7. Since then, it has remained uninstalled as a private acquisition of the Estate of Howard Arkley.

³⁸ Taylor, 1984, p. 167.

³⁹ Brett & Benjamin, 2006, pp. 57–58.

⁴⁰ Crawford & Edgar, 1997, p. 57.

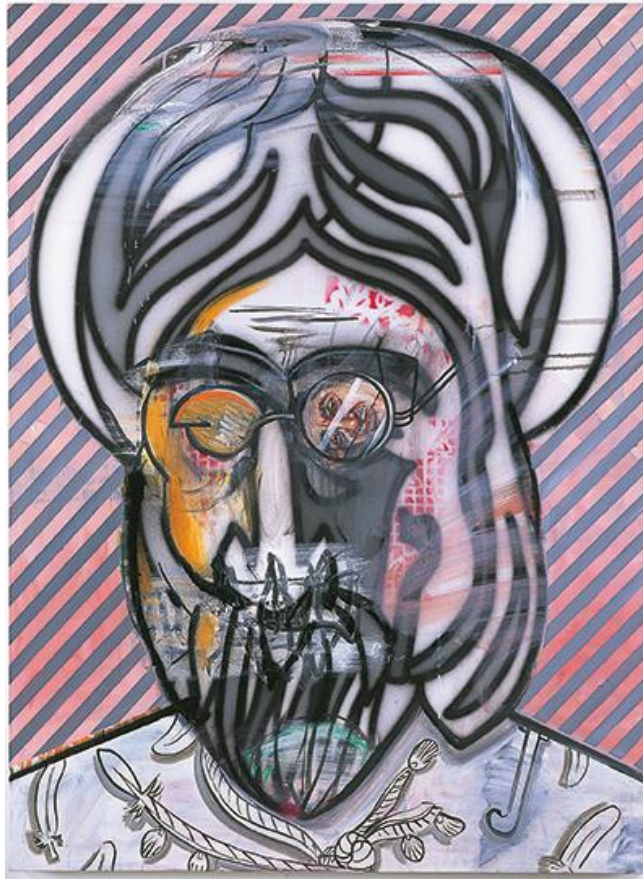


Fig. 7. Howard Arkley and Juan Davila, untitled canvas from *Icon Interior*, 1994–2000. Oil, enamel and synthetic polymer on canvas, 160 x 119 cm. Private collection, Melbourne. (Photo credit: Mark Ashkanasy. Courtesy Juan Davila and The Estate of Howard Arkley, and Kalli Rolfe Contemporary Art.)

The focal point of the installation is a disfigured version of Arkley's *Icon Head*, the work that hung at his memorial service at Monash University in 1999.⁴¹ This is a painting that combines Davila's forceful gesture to recall the collaborative antagonism of their earlier works and revives a heady discourse on the intricacies of postmodern authorship (Fig. 7). Supposedly, the work was treated as a 'found object' given to Davila by Arkley with the strict instruction to 'ruin it' and 'mask it'.⁴² The central portrait depicts a defaced icon of Christ, veiled by spectacles that contain a miniature study of Sigmund Freud in the left lens. Again, Davila toyed with the symbol of the all-seeing eye, an imposing figure that presided over the interior from the vantage point of a window-like frame. Paradoxically, *Icon Interior* impairs the authority of the figure by obscuring the lenses and disfiguring the mouth shut. John Gregory describes the work as an 'iconoclastic act' referring to the 'breaking of images' or more specifically 'the systematic destruction of religious images on the grounds of their supposedly idolatrous character'.⁴³ By merging an image of Christ with Freud, Davila raised critical debates over society's oppressive power structures. In the act of silencing and debasing iconography through 'politico-psychoanalytic' appropriations, Davila implicated Arkley (and the spectator) as co-creators of this provocative dialogue.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Gregory, 2001, p. 17.

⁴² Gregory, 2006, p. 156.

⁴³ Gregory, 2001, pp. 15–16.

⁴⁴ Gregory, 2001, p. 4.

Alternatively, the portrait could be viewed in light of Kantian ideals of the artist as both enlightened and divine. Throughout the Romantic era of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it has been suggested, 'the artist not only inherited the mantle of priests and became the revealer of divine truths, but also assumed a semi-divine status as an heir to the original "Creator" himself.'⁴⁵ Perhaps the Christ-like portrait was an attack on artistic integrity, on the modernist worshipping of the lone artistic genius who was perceived as god-like and displayed the accoutrements of a higher being. The destructive elements of the *Icon Head* support this reading, particularly as the eyes and mouth of the subject are masked, muting the viewer's understanding of modernist authorial positioning. Ultimately, Arkley and Davila were creating a vision of the autonomous artistic genius rendered impotent by the collaborative hand. In light of this interpretation, *Icon Interior* symbolises a subversion of the mythologies that supported artistic individualism throughout the twentieth century.

Of their collaborative technique, it should be recalled again that Davila had remarked of the work that 'it [had] the appearance of a proper painting but as you come near the whole thing blurs, like make-up on a transvestite'.⁴⁶ In order to create a joint-aesthetic, *Icon Interior* blurred the working processes of two artists; the effects of which suggested a more calculated and cooperative partnership. In deciding to appropriate each other, they shaped a peculiar kind of self-referential framework that circulated their own collaborative efforts and ideas. The mechanical quality of Arkley's spray technique and stencil patterns ensured that Davila could frequently reproduce and exploit Arkley's signature style. Shortly after *Blue Chip*, Davila had created a large-scale, jet-sprayed print entitled *3-D Self Portrait* of 1993.⁴⁷ Viewers would have been forgiven for mistaking the piece for a work by Arkley. Davila's use of overlaid stencils and domestic subject matter are direct references to Arkley's depictions of the suburban interior and reveal a patent appropriation of his working method. This signifies Davila's apparent ability to adopt his counterpart's technique with unaccountable ease.

Throughout *Icon Interior*, small decorative elements waver between Arkley and Davila's aesthetic. Again, the layers of Ben-Day dots and stencilled floral patterns that were sprayed across the surfaces of the room partitions and lamp shades, seemed distinctively attributable to Arkley, evoking earlier images of his Muzak murals and decorative fabric swatches. Yet the application of paint lacks precision, appearing too uneven and out of sync with his careful technique. Along the baseline of the screen partitions are stencilled patterns that allude directly to Arkley's hand. However, this same sprayed pattern, which upon closer inspection depicts homoerotic sex acts, also features in Davila's *Bottle* of 1993.⁴⁸ The impact of this appropriation was that it significantly perverted the decorative sentiment of *Icon Interior* and displaced the viewer's belief in the sanctity and autonomy of the artist's hand. The stylistic line that once symbolised the division of their authorship was thereafter, perpetually blurred, but not synthesised.

Interior with Built in Bar and, more significantly, *Icon Interior* demonstrate that Arkley and Davila's composite authorship resides in the circulation of a mutual discourse, rather than a collaborative persona (a third entity, per se). The duo's work is a complex, visual dialogue between historical and cultural references, the artists themselves and the interpreter. For

⁴⁵ Parker & Pollock, 1981, p. 82.

⁴⁶ Juan Davila in conversation with Stephen O'Connell, 1995. Published: O'Connell, 1996, accessed online.

⁴⁷ Juan Davila, *3-D Self Portrait*, 1993. Jet spray on vinyl, 222 x 757 cm.

⁴⁸ Juan Davila, *Bottle*, 1993. Oil, enamel and collage on board, 269 x 148 cm.

Arkley and Davila, the encounter between reader and author was to be contextualised by an immersive and dynamic physical environment. Their materialisation of a sphere in which a postmodern dialogue circulates is a deliberate extension of Martin's interpretations of New Wave artists, who pursued a 'total' (albeit two-dimensional) environment of appropriated imagery and cultural experience.⁴⁹ Evidently, Arkley and Davila distinguished themselves from other artists of the movement by realising their visual discourse into a multi-dimensional forum. *Icon Interior's* complexity lies in its alteration of pre-existing signs from previous works.

Throughout their partnership, Arkley and Davila appropriated elements of the third hand, but still in contrast to Green's confined terms. Over the course of their collaboration, the duo proposed a form of negotiated mayhem; obscuring the signs of authorial attribution by way of calculated roleplaying. In this sense, the duo toyed with the idea of collaborative fusion to their own advantage by creating a composite or pastiche of their creative differences. This exercise in visual trickery holds greater resonance with Martin's view of the collaborative act as a jovial 'game'.⁵⁰ After all, Davila and Arkley's was — first and foremost — an artists' friendship. To return to Lévi-Strauss's pertinent words on collaborative intent, it was the presence of 'initial diversity [that] made their collaboration fruitful and necessary'.⁵¹ From the antagonism of their early years towards their mimicry of each other's style, Arkley and Davila can be read today as a parody of the more cerebral and romantic ideologies of conceptual collaboration.

The Man with 2 Faces

In the process of researching this paper, a new work was discovered; it is attributed to Davila and titled *The Man with 2 Faces* (Fig. 8).⁵² This drawing was located within the Howard Arkley Archive, an extensive catalogue of the artist's diaries, primary drawings, source material and personal memorabilia bequeathed to the Australian Manuscripts Collection, State Library of Victoria in 2010. While details of its provenance are unknown (including its date), there are certain indicators that suggest the significance of this piece as a primary source for the Arkley and Davila collaboration. *The Man with 2 Faces* illustrates a subject whose two replicated faces are joined by a central third eye; the two parts appearing side by side, almost as a mirrored reflection of a single subjectivity. Below the portrait the title is inscribed, 'The Man with 2 Faces', and signed 'Juan' in the right-hand corner. Additionally, along the top of the drawing is the annotation 'Howard = 1st sketch!' The paper is lined by a central, vertically folded crease, which suggests an exquisite corpse mode of creation, a reference to their earliest collaborative alliance. Likewise, the central eye elicits Davila's appropriations of the all-seeing eye, a symbol that stood as the focal point in *Blue Chip Instant Decorator: A Room*. The title alone is highly evocative of composite authorship, carrying strong connotations of artistic doubling and copycat personas. Perhaps this was a preliminary sketch for a future collaborative project left unresolved, or simply a gift that

⁴⁹ Martin, 1996, p. 111.

⁵⁰ Martin, 2012, p. 219.

⁵¹ Lévi-Strauss in Wright, 2004, p. 533.

⁵² The author has received permission from Kalli Rolfe (Juan Davila and The Estate of Howard Arkley) as well as the Australian Manuscripts Collection, State Library of Victoria to document and introduce this work into the academic field.

Davila had given Arkley to commemorate their long-standing friendship and creative partnership. Our limited understanding of what this drawing represents, what circumstance it was born out of, renders the following interpretation — for the time being — pure speculation.

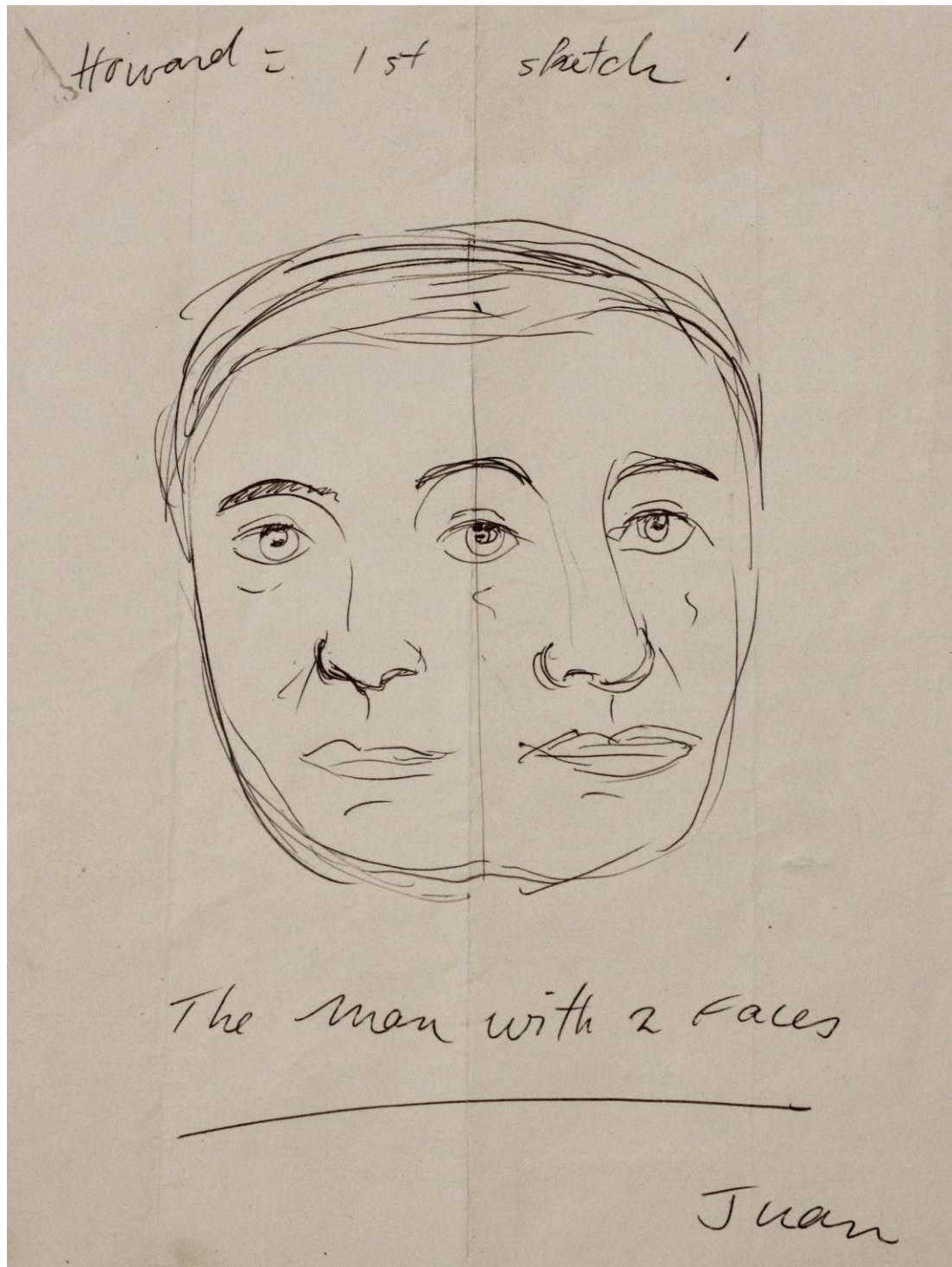


Fig. 8. Juan Davila, *The Man with 2 Faces*, not dated. Pen on paper, 21.6 x 16.5 cm. MS 14217/1/1678, Howard Arkley Archive 1968–1999, Australian Manuscripts Collection, State Library of Victoria. (Photo credit: James Tunks. Courtesy Juan Davila and The Estate of Howard Arkley, and Kalli Rolfe Contemporary Art.)

Davila's drawing exemplifies notions of subjective duality, imitation and fusion. The peculiar convergence of two faces, brought together by a third eye holds strong resonance with theories of the third entity and the coexistence of two individuals within a shared realm. In light of this viewpoint, *The Man with 2 Faces* illustrates the conjoining of Arkley and Davila into a composite force, where they share the same eye and therefore, the same collaborative vision, without completely effacing their own. This work elaborates on the duo's ability to imitate and echo each other's practice. The notion of the portrait as a mirrored image in *The Man with 2 Faces* furthers our understanding of Davila and Arkley's collaborative authorship as self-reflexive, self-critical and cross-quotable.

The effect of the third hand was that it resonated with a singular, authoritative notion of artistic identity despite the clear absence of individual subjectivity. This was in stark contrast to the collaborative methods of Arkley and Davila who did not pursue a form of composite authorship that claimed an authoritative, essentialist voice. Instead, they used collaboration as an art form to expose and track the processes of production, the ever-changing power dynamics that defined them, and the special understanding and appreciation they had for each other's craft. Each artwork was a document of an exchange that authenticated a collaborative process, as much as a resolved composition. This truly complex form of collaboration informs a positive reconstruction process, where the deconstructed elements of the Postmodern image are reformed into a composite authorial whole.

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List of Illustrations

Fig. 1. Howard Arkley and Juan Davila, *Blue Chip Instant Decorator: A Room*, 1991–92, as exhibited in its original installation at Tolarno Galleries, Melbourne, July 1991. Two paintings, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, each 200 x 240 cm, painted walls, painted furniture and painted wood ‘rugs’; overall size of installation 300 x 876 x 100 cm. Collection: Benalla Art Gallery. (Photo credit: Mark Ashkanasy. Courtesy Juan Davila and The Estate of Howard Arkley, and Kalli Rolfe Contemporary Art.)

Fig. 2. Howard Arkley and Juan Davila, *Blue Chip Instant Decorator: A Room*, 1989. Laser print, acetate sheet, synthetic polymer paint on card, 38 x 42 cm. Collection: Benalla Art Gallery. (Courtesy Juan Davila and The Estate of Howard Arkley, Courtesy Kalli Rolfe Contemporary Art.)

Fig. 3. Howard Arkley and Juan Davila, *Blue Chip Instant Decorator: A Room*, 1991–92: left half. Two paintings, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, each 200 x 240 cm, painted walls, painted furniture and painted wood ‘rugs’; overall size of installation 300 x 876 x 100 cm. Collection: Benalla Art Gallery. (Photo credit: Mark Ashkanasy. Courtesy Juan Davila and The Estate of Howard Arkley, and Kalli Rolfe Contemporary Art.)

Fig. 4. Howard Arkley and Juan Davila, *Blue Chip Instant Decorator: A Room*, 1991–92: right half. Two paintings, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, each 200 x 240 cm, painted walls, painted furniture and painted wood ‘rugs’; overall size of installation 300 x 876 x 100 cm. Collection: Benalla Art Gallery. (Photo credit: Mark Ashkanasy. Courtesy Juan Davila and The Estate of Howard Arkley, and Kalli Rolfe Contemporary Art.)

Fig. 5. Howard Arkley and Juan Davila, *Interior with Built in Bar*, 1992. Silkscreen print on paper, 163 x 216 cm. Collection: Benalla Art Gallery. (Courtesy Juan Davila and The Estate of Howard Arkley, and Kalli Rolfe Contemporary Art.)

Fig. 6. Howard Arkley and Juan Davila, *Icon Interior*, 1994–2001, Oil, enamel and synthetic polymer on canvas and MDF, comprising canvas, 160 x 119 cm; two cut-out tables with lamps, each 139 x 73 cm; chair 86 x 38 x 39 cm, with base 60 x 60 cm; ‘rug’, 15 x 160 x 54 cm; two double-sided screens, each 242 x 122 cm. Private collection, Melbourne. (Photo credit: Mark Ashkanasy. Courtesy Juan Davila and The Estate of Howard Arkley, and Kalli Rolfe Contemporary Art.)

Fig. 7. Howard Arkley and Juan Davila, untitled canvas from *Icon Interior*, 1994–2000, Oil, enamel and synthetic polymer on canvas, 160 x 119 cm. Private collection, Melbourne. (Photo credit: Mark Ashkanasy. Courtesy Juan Davila and The Estate of Howard Arkley, and Kalli Rolfe Contemporary Art.)

Fig. 8. Juan Davila, *The Man with 2 Faces*, not dated. Pen on paper, Melbourne, Howard Arkley Archive 1968–1999, Australian Manuscripts Collection, State Library of Victoria. (Photo credit: James Tunks. Courtesy Juan Davila and The Estate of Howard Arkley, and Kalli Rolfe Contemporary Art.)