



BRUCE
MURRAY
ARNOTT

Into the Megatext

VILLA-LEGODI
Centre for Sculpture

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Front cover

Bruce Arnott, detail of *Punch III*,
1979. Bronze, 440 mm (h). Photo:
Geoff Grundlingh.

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Bruce Murray Arnott: Into the Megatext provides the first comprehensive overview of Arnott's life and work. His influence as an artist, scholar, designer, curator, and educator runs deep; intuited through the work of many of South Africa's leading contemporary scholars and practitioners. Through an intrinsic understanding of the human condition, and the balancing of the intellect with creative endeavour, Arnott bridges continents, space, and time. This is reflected in the monumental scope of references embedded in his work, and in his view that 'All sculptures are "points of entry" into the great sculptural megatext.'

Similarly inspired by history, mythology, psychology, philosophy, education, ecology, and sustainable design, this exhibition serves as one such point of entry. It includes over fifty sculptures and drawings, produced between 1962 and 2018, as well as an array of archival documents related to his practice, in particular his large public commissions.

The exhibition prefigures the launch of a publication of the same name. It includes contributions by a range of authors who delve into different aspects of Arnott's life's work: a selection of Arnott's own writings, chosen to represent the breadth and depth of his oeuvre; a chronological catalogue of his sculptures from 1961 to 2018; and a visual timeline that contextualises his long and multi-faceted career.

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Introduction

Sven Christian

Before we begin, I must make a small confession: I'm a little embarrassed by the kind of language adopted in the exhibition statement. For starters, the works, texts, and archival documents gathered are far from "comprehensive." If anything, they represent a small blip against the backdrop of Bruce Arnott's oeuvre. Nor could this (or any other) exhibition truly claim to provide some kind of bird's eye view of a life lived.

Such language is typical of retrospective exhibitions, and although empirical information about the amount of works on show or the periods in which they were produced may be useful to art historians, archivists, and insurance brokers, it does little to put meat on the bones. Arnott recognised as much in his editorial to the first issue of *Artworks in Progress* (1989):

. . . [It] has always seemed to me that cold lists of exhibitions and titles must either be supremely unappetising fare for those unfortunate functionaries fated to digest them, or else stimulate a host of spectral visions which can hardly reflect the truth and which might, indeed, be positively unhealthy.

As such, I'd like to avoid the term "retrospective," which seems to imply some kind of clarity about the past. Instead, I'm tempted to think of this exhibition along the lines of a living tribute; to recognise the historical specificity of Arnott's work *and* its reach — in other words, to remove the full stop that would have us believe that his work be read in isolation from the world we inhabit. After Kim Gurney, Arnott had an uncanny ability to anchor a "rich arc of historical, mythological, and literary worlds . . . in the contemporary, welding the past to possible futures."

Her view corresponds with that of Ashraf Jamal, who writes that if Arnott “is capacious in his grasp of forms, worlds, and the divergent symbolic forces they accrue, it is because life, irrespective of where and when it is lived, is subject to a greater story.”

Jamal’s essay, commissioned for the upcoming monograph, was penned in response to Arnott’s inaugural lecture at the University of Cape Town in 2003. Both have been republished here, and in some sense, the exhibition can be viewed as a physical extension of the publication — an attempt to bring the ideas embedded therein to life. This catalogue, in turn, serves as a halfway house between the two. I hope that it might provide sufficient nourishment, or at least, that it inspires an abiding curiosity about his work and the continuum to which Arnott devoted his life.

My sincere thanks to Mari Lecanides-Arnott, who is the real backbone of this exhibition.



Shaping ideas: the visual forming of meaning

Bruce Arnott

A sculpture has been defined as — “something you bump into when you stand back to look at a painting.” Nowadays the thing that you tread in when you step back to admire a sculpture might very well be a painting, or a print in the form of a frozen chicken or a chocolate body part. That is good. Such developments extend the boundaries of art. Nevertheless that old definition of sculpture is more useful than one might suppose, because it emphasises the qualities of “solidity” and “thingness” that still describe the essentials of the art form. It reminds us that sculpture is fundamentally concerned with mass (therefore with gravity), with volume (therefore with space), with the object (therefore with materiality and identity).

There have been some moralistic attacks on the commodification of the “object,” but art objects have not noticeably diminished. The fruits of trade still subvent our salaries. It should also be remembered that we look to objects for clues to the origins of art. In the archaeological record, lumps of patterned ochre, or fragments of carved and incised mammoth ivory, are understood to hint at the ordering of the human mind, or the celebration of shamanic sorceries. These objects, classified by ethnographers as “portables,” are really proto-sculptures that possibly predate the diffused traditions of palaeolithic rock painting and engraving.

Present day readings of cave and rock art in Western Europe, and in Southern Africa (as elsewhere), indicate that the artists who made these works knew precisely what they were doing; that “portable” and mural images were integral to ritual practice; and that they very likely mark attempts to resolve problems of consciousness and survival; to influence natural processes — even if only symbolically. Studies of San social structures enumerate classes of shaman — shamans of the game, shamans of

the rain, shamans of the sick, shamans to propitiate the spirits of the dead. It must be assumed that these offices point to ancient practices that ease psychological survival. Many of the rock art images describing this material refer to trance-associated experiences; and were made with divinatory and prophetic purposes in mind.

In the intellectual traditions of Western high art, where processes of art making are not primarily communal, there is less certainty about the societal functions of art than exists in the primitive model. There is a lingering sense of having lost the way. Robert Motherwell, for example, expressed the concern that it is more difficult for a modern artist to know what to make, than to know how to make it.¹ There is a line of argument that suggests that, in Western Europe, the tradition of Romanesque sculpture was evidence of a healthy recovery from the barbarian depredations of the Dark Ages. That is, until the year 1260, when Nicola Pisano perversely shifted the paradigm by quoting Classical art in his marble pulpit for the Baptistery in Pisa.

This signaled the end of the anonymous medievalism of Romanesque and early Gothic sculpture; and the beginning of the self-conscious creative processes of Renaissance art — individualistic, intellectual and modern. Unfortunately, the artistic flowering of the Renaissance did not give birth to significant developments in the language of form. In embracing the intellectual traditions of Greek classicism (including the notion of Man as the measure of all things), the sculptors of the Renaissance locked onto the habits of Classical representation — adopting an essentially idealised naturalism.

Neoplatonism was the dominant philosophy in Europe from the third to the thirteenth centuries, and was revived in Italy in the fifteenth century. This doctrine ascribed moral value to beauty, and therefore significantly encouraged the making of art. It also endorsed the notion of the supremacy of Classical ideals. The court of Lorenzo de Medici, the brilliant patron of Michelangelo, was particularly interested in the Platonic doctrine of Ideal Forms; the view that all things aspire to the perfection of ideal archetypes.

Plato distinguished between “relative” and “absolute” form. He saw *relative* form as “form whose beauty is inherent in the nature of living things”; and *absolute* form

as shapes and abstractions (straight lines, curves, and the surfaces or solid forms), produced from the analysis of living things by geometrical means. This is also known as symbolic form.

It has been suggested that the painters of the Renaissance applied an understanding of both relative and absolute form in composing their works of art. The sculptors, however, have been chastised for having “sedulously copied the external experience” of Greek and Roman classical form, and to have merely deferred to classical content.

As far as sculpture was concerned, therefore, the innovations of Nicola Pisano were intellectual and psychological — not formal. This bias persisted from the time of the Renaissance, through the stylistic developments of the Baroque and Rococo, to Neoclassicism and Romanticism — from the mid-thirteenth to the early twentieth centuries.

A “modern” self-consciousness, that preferred subjective strategies to communal values, is revealed in the rugged individualism portrayed by Donatello’s sculpture of the *condottiere*, *Gattamelata* (1453), even though the work also looks back to the Middle Ages; Michelangelo’s *Youthful Captive* (1534) introduces an eroticised emotional form that anticipates the Baroque energies of Bernini’s *Apollo and Daphne* (1624), which in turn pre-shadows the elegant Neoclassical form and classical allusion of Canova’s *Paulina Borghese as Venus* (1807). All of these works contribute, in one way or another, to the expressive abstract physicality of Rodin’s *Walking Man*, completed in 1911. For some centuries, then, the limits to stylistic innovation in sculptural form were set by Bernini’s emotionalism on the one hand, and Canova’s intellectualism on the other. Otherwise, the gaze remained fixed on Classical, Hellenistic and Roman models. Sculptures were made in rhetorical service to Church or State, or as votives to a Moral Beauty.

Classical tradition still has an impact on our thinking. But if we look at the really big picture (30 000 to 300 AD), this episode in Western cultural history may be characterised as a brilliant but flawed deflection from a mainstream of artistic expression. In Western Europe that mainstream might be described as art with

roots in the pre-historic, pre-literate, ancient, tribal and folkloristic; pre-Classical and therefore pre-Christian. It would include accomplished early works such as the marble Cycladic *Figure* from the Syros group, dated at about 2500 BC; and a Late Minoan *Goddess* of the thirteenth century BC, from Knossos in Crete. It would also embrace the archaic Greek traditions, the art of the Celts, and vestiges of these origins in Romanesque and early Gothic art.

All of these forms may be categorised as primitive — that is to say, both primordial and original (but certainly not inferior). They are concerned with the expression of group values, and they are characterised by a synthesis of relative and absolute form — an acknowledgement of natural form expressed in innate geometries (symbolic form), in which detail may be manipulated in the interests of the iconic.

In broad terms, these qualities are common to widespread material cultures, including those of North America, South and Central America, Australasia, Oceania, West and Central Africa; and (of particular interest) Southern Africa — particularly in the rock paintings and engravings of the San, and their antecedents.

These qualities are reflected in the structure of such works as this traditional West African mask from the Ivory Coast; and in the formal innovations and signifying detail of San images. These are objects and ideas that would not have met the needs of Florentine merchant princes, nor found a place in the political convolutions of the Counter Reformation, nor the rationalistic ethos of the Enlightenment. However, they did provide an antidote to the dead hand of Classical formalism in Western sculpture.

Van Gogh and Gauguin were largely responsible for recognising a submerged mainstream of art. They discovered evidence of such a phenomenon in antiquarian and ethnographic artifacts and art objects that surfaced in France at the Paris World's Fair of 1889. In short, they were responsible for generating a wide enthusiasm for a “pre-literate,” “primitive” tribal antiquity,² for precisely those values that had been by-passed by revivals of Classical form. Their point of view became known as Primitivism.

Anthony Blunt described Primitivism, more broadly, as “an international taste, rooted in English romanticism, in the writings of Rousseau,” and in the doctrines of David’s pupils; a “revolution against civilization, stimulated in the second half of the nineteenth century by a growing dislike of industrialism.” He saw it as “the motive behind the medievalism of William Morris and Gauguin’s move to Tahiti,” that found a voice in Van Gogh’s letters and Picasso’s *Arte Joven*.³

Pre-Cubist responses to primitive art are to be found at an Expressionist/post-Expressionist interface, in the work of Kirchner and Gauguin. Responses to African sculpture in particular, were reflected in robust execution, a degree of abstraction and the use of emotional colour and form. Cubist and post-Cubist painting, collage and sculpture reveal less sentimental responses to Primitivism, a more intellectual analysis of structure and creative process, and an unapologetic appropriation of stylistic detail.

John Golding explains that Picasso initially responded to the rational qualities of certain African sculptures — particularly geometrical abstraction. This is reflected in works such as *Head of a man*, which he made in 1930, in collaboration with Gonzalez, while his *Woman carrying a child* (1953), demonstrates an understanding that “ultimately the process of creation is one of intuitively balancing formal elements; [that] in the case of the most abstract sculpture, the finished product has the quality not of representation but a symbol — a re-creation rather than a reinterpretation.”⁴

The subtle geometries of African art had a catalytic affect on European art, from 1905 onwards. As far as sculpture is concerned this is where rational form caught up with intellectual content, but without losing touch with feeling. Brancusi’s radical abstractions equaled Picasso’s innovations. Works such as Brancusi’s *Princess X* (1916) in polished bronze; or, the *Portrait of Nancy Cunard* of 1928, approach the perfection implicit in the Platonic notion of Ideal Form.

Subsequent developments in modern sculpture may be followed through the works of the likes of Jacques Lipchitz and Isamu Noguchi, in the evolution of a

formalism that was rational, geometric and symbolic. Israel (Lippy) Lipshitz, who taught sculpture at the Michaelis from 1950 to 1968,⁵ was an important link to this ethos. He studied in Paris under Antoine Bourdelle, the leading pupil of Rodin; he was directly influenced by the Postcubist work of Ossip Zadkine; and he was inspired by the spirit of Primitivism that was still prevalent in the School of Paris in the late 1920s.

It should be noted that, in later developments, the Figure shares the stage with the Ambiguous Object (favoured by Dadaists and Surrealists such as Duchamp, Man Ray and Oppenheim); and that both figure and object were challenged by Non-objectivism and Conceptualism. Ultimately this pluralism enriched the formal resources of modern sculpture in general. It led to the elegant constructivism of Caro, the ethically “green” strategies of Joseph Beuys, and to Jeff Koons’ sophisticated Pop.

Evolution in the visual arts is driven by heterodox and often iconoclastic impulses. These are not necessarily the iconoclasm that have the frenzied sculptor smashing a path through the park like a marauding Ostrogoth (although some of the soapstone objects in Kirstenbosch Gardens invite such attention). As civilised beings we remind ourselves that it is not necessary to physically eliminate offending images; that it is possible to defeat them by subtler strategies.

Satire, comedy and absurdism in Art are rooted in spontaneous acts of subversion of the authoritative text, or the orthodox point of view. Acts of seditious comedy occur throughout the history of theatre where buffoonery, comic dance and mimicry run counter to the core script — relieving or testing it (as in Greek “new” comedy of the fourth century BC). This tendency occurs in other early art forms, to lesser but still significant degrees — as droll marginalia in medieval manuscripts, autonomous detail in Romanesque and Gothic stone carvings, in medieval mural and panel painting, and in graffiti daubed by painters, or scratched into walls by sculptors at Delphi or Pompeii.

In 1964 I came across this inscription in an Oxford pub: “balls to Picasso.” It has probably since been enshrined in anthologies of mural art, but I like to think that I

once stood before the original — a brittle Oxonian gloss on Cubism. It records that Picasso put the lid on Classicism. This inscription, “There’s a naartjie in our sosatie,” on the wall of the Deanery in Orange Street in the mid-70s signalled the collapse of Empire. It encapsulates the political frustration and anger of the time. It also reminds us why anarchistic tendencies still lurk behind much contemporary art in South Africa. Anarchism has a place in the dynamics of creative polemics. Although it might be the preserve of young poets and snake-oil salesmen, we must also be reminded that breaking rules is part of the fun of testing the bounds.

How important are innovation and originality? We can argue with the semiologists that every work of art is a “text-like collection of signs;” that details are “cultural messages;” and that “style is coded culturally and historically.” If we accept that it is “the notion of the ‘original’ that is perverse,” that “all texts are ‘copies’ in an infinite regress, it follows that any single text is only a point of entry into all texts;” therefore that “the concept of ‘originality’ has been replaced by one of ‘borrowings’ or the meeting of texts.”⁶

My own sculptures, for better or worse, are referentially complex. This comes from being an academic and an artist (but not, I hope, an academic artist). One is concerned with making fresh and meaningful metaphors, but as part of a continuum. Reference is made to my own works on the assumption that all sculptures are “points of entry” into the great sculptural megatext.

I made the sculpture titled *Sphinx* in 1977. It is cast in bronze, and is 1,2 metres long. The work was commissioned by the late Jack Barnett, the architect of the Baxter Theatre, and is positioned as a fountainhead at the top of the ramp to the theatre’s northern entrance. It alludes to classical Greek thought and to the enigmatic Theban *Sphinx*, whose riddle Oedipus famously answered. The Baxter *Sphinx* did not evolve from any classical model, although human, leonine and winged forms have been abstracted. Its mood is essentially benign, whereas Classical sphinxes are often dramatic and threatening.

My large *Numinous Beast* was commissioned to be cast in bronze for the SA National Gallery in 1979. It is 2,8 metres high, stands on a granite plinth, and faces the entrance to the Gallery. I made the first sketches for this work in December 1976. The sculpture refers to San therianthropic imagery, in particular to a small painting of a karossed, antelope-headed figure on Whale Rock, at the foot of Mpongweni mountain in the South Eastern Drakensberg. With hindsight it is possible to speculate that the germinal image depicted a shaman-of-the-game; a “kaross-clad figure with an antelope-eared cap, whose function it was to entice animals towards the waiting hunters’ bows.”⁷ But it was more the ritualistic undertones in an ambiguous confluence of human and animal attributes that inspired the *Numinous Beast* — a subjective reading of the semiotics. Works such as these have led scholars to understand that form and content in San art often have metaphoric functions; that they are capable of holding complex meaning.

My large bronze *Alma Mater* (or *Caryatid figure*) was commissioned by the University of Cape Town, and installed in 1996. The sculpture is 2,88 metres high, mounted on a column 6,4 metres high, and located outside the Kramer building on the Middle Campus. The fact that the sculpture was made for the Faculty of Education and now guards the Faculty of Law is only mildly confusing. This work alludes to the caryatid figures that support the entablature of the *Erechtheion* on the Acropolis in Athens. Originally an Ionic temple (built between 421 and 405 BC), the *Erechtheion* became a church in the seventh century, and was occupied by the harem of the Turkish commandant during the Ottoman occupation in the fifteenth century. The caryatid porch is itself probably a reference to the Archaic period, when female figures had been used as columns in Delphi.⁸ This architectural conceit points to the interdependence of systems, and historic continuity — the contemporary concern of the *Alma Mater* sculpture.

The formal language of the bronze caryatid is one in which a volumetric geometry replaces the linearity of the marble caryatids. The sculptural mood of *Alma Mater* (as suggested also by the fragment of entablature) reflects Doric sobriety rather than



Ionic elegance. However, rhetoric is strategically destabilised by the inclusion in the composition of two chameleons that “provide a counter drama to the stasis and solemnity of the figure.”⁹ One chameleon is perched on the apex of the sculpture, the other moves up the column, tying this supporting element to the whole. These details challenge the ruling order of the composition — and allude to change.

Titled *Swansong of the sausage dog*, this small work (38cm high), was commissioned by the University of the Witwatersrand about 1990. It is included in the collections of the university’s Gertrude Posel Gallery. I modelled the sculpture directly in wax, for casting in bronze. It depicts an enigmatic top-hatted figure jumping a sausage-dog through an impossibly high hoop, a knife and fork held ominously behind his back. The work is absurd and obsessive. My sculpture acknowledges some of the formalisms of Daumier’s (1850) figurine of *Ratapoil*; the geriatric dandy of the French Comedy in top hat and frock coat. This small bronze sculpture, also modeled directly in the wax, has a fluent expressionistic style that anticipates the work of both Rodin and Medardo Rosso (1858–1928). Daumier’s humorous intentions are as craftily delineated in the round as in any of his lithographic caricatures. He also looks back to the drawings of Callot.

Trickster is a bronze sculpture, 1,4 metres high, mounted on a granite plinth 84 cm high. I made this work for the Department of Psychology at UCT in 1987. It was originally sited in the foyer of the PD Hahn building, but was relocated to the courtyard of the Graduate School in Humanities when the department moved in 2001. This sculpture is linked to a series of *Punch* sculptures. Like the previous piece, it acknowledges the Italian and French Comedies, Callot and Daumier.

The *Trickster* makes specific reference to Alfred Jarry’s (appropriated) Ubu character; and to the “psycho-sexual fantasy of mechanical power,” in his absurdist novella *Supermâle*, published in 1902. In that narrative the “Superman” falls in love with an electric chair — the only device that can satisfy his passions.¹⁰ Jarry’s works influenced the Dadaists and the Surrealists, notably Picabia and Duchamp. Cyril Connolly wrote that “Ubu’s appeal, like Mr Punch’s, is universal, he is the Id in

action.”¹¹ My *Trickster* sculpture looked to gloss the ambiguous symbolisms of *Ubu* and the *Supermâle*; the quaint monocycle and ineffectual weapon propose to subvert Jarry’s proto-Futurism. The *Trickster* as anti-hero flirts with the monstrous Ubu/Punch. I remember a wonderful production of *King Ubu* at the Little Theatre in the late 60s; the indelible image — Ubu, the butcher, swathed in sausages.

Citizen is a monumental bronze sculpture, 2,25 metres high, mounted on a stone-clad plinth. It is sited at the entrance to the Johannesburg Art Gallery in Joubert Park. My maquette for this work was an award winning entry to the Johannesburg Centenary Sculpture competition in 1985. The sculpture is an ironic gloss on the *genre* of the heroic monumental statue — in part a response to the paternalism of Anton van Wouw’s *Kruger* in Pretoria.

Citizen wears a bowler hat, a morning coat, and a rosette in his lapel. He flourishes his cane and carries a rolled copy of the *Financial Times* under his arm. These are attributes of entrepreneurial power. The figure strides confidently into the future, a tank-like image with rifling on his cigar. *Citizen* is a modern day *condottiere*, without a horse. In pursuing that simile, it was tempting to quote Verrochio’s *Colleoni* of 1467, but it is too ripely Renaissance for my theme. And, in fact, it has roots in an earlier, distinctly more primitive work of art, Paolo Uccello’s *Hawkwood* made in 1436. This seven metre high fresco, painted by Uccello in the Cathedral in Florence, is a commemorative monument to Sir John Hawkwood, an English professional soldier formerly in the hire of the state. James Beck notes that the painting “is not so much a portrait of a warrior as a portrait of an imagined bronze monument,” and that “the *Hawkwood* survives as a powerful image in which Uccello’s perspectival interests are united with ideas about reality.”¹² In citing the Uccello *Hawkwood* my intention is to draw attention to a consummate sculpture encoded in painterly conceits, and to the juicy ironies that can attend the practice of making Art about Art. Soon after the installation of the *Citizen*, I was informed that the sculpture had elicited an unhappy response from the politicians at Shell House, just up the road.



“Come the revolution,” they muttered, “that sculpture will be the first thing to go!” They had, it seems, missed the point.

The sculpture is still there, nearly twenty years later. The bronze has acquired a patina of grilled sausage from the street vendors encamped at its feet. The solid brass cane has been regularly liberated by the scrap-metal collectors, and carefully restored by the Gallery, in a reciprocal exchange of wealth and culture that suggests a subliminal understanding of some of its precepts. Perhaps the good spin-doctors have come to admire mercenary daring; and now emulate the merchant princes of Italy — those wily patrons of the Arts.

Plato was disinclined to admit artists to his ideal Republic. Apparently he doubted that art could “embody and communicate knowledge and truth.” That might have been valid in an age of Postpericlean rhetoric. If we turn to the primitives, however, it is evident that symbolic form can hold and impart profound meaning. Their lesson is that the making of art is a celebration of the imagination — a moral, and far from frivolous pursuit.



Into the megatext

Ashraf Jamal

“All sculptures are ‘points of entry’ into the great sculptural megatext.” Bruce Arnott’s assertion (2011: 160), delivered in his inaugural lecture at the University of Cape Town in 2003, reveals the importance of wisdom and humility. In a world lost to both history and the future, with no understanding of a greater continuum, such qualities are lacking. Arnott was not one to damn us for our delinquencies or our vainglorious self-regard, yet his speech was nonetheless designed to remind us of the problem of selective memory, the dangers of acculturated tradition, and the blindness upon which these subsist. “If we look at the really big picture (30,000 BC to 300 AD), this episode in Western cultural history may be characterised as a brilliant but flawed deflection from a mainstream of artistic expression” (2011: 156). Arnott is speaking about art history and culture from the Renaissance to the present which, in his view, is profoundly and damagingly stunted. “Unfortunately, the artistic flowering of the Renaissance did not give birth to significant developments in the language of form,” he says. “In embracing the intellectual traditions of Greek Classicism (including the notion of Man as the measure of all things), the sculptors of the Renaissance locked onto the habits of Classical representation — adopting an essentially idealised naturalism” (2011: 154).

If Arnott finds the merger of the ideal and natural concerning, it is because this fusion did not do justice to either condition. The root of the problem (which remains with us) is Platonism, “the doctrine of ideal forms; the view that all things aspire to the perfection of ideal archetypes” (2011: 155). At first glance, this belief is not inherently damaging. On closer inspection, however, one realises that both realms (the ideal and the natural) are skewed and misappropriated in favour of a reductively cultural and civilisational vision of the world. In brief, Platonism proposed two categories: the relative and the absolute. As Arnott notes, the first

embraces “forms whose beauty is inherent in the nature of living things,” while the second recognises the “shapes and abstractions” built into them — “straight lines, curves, surfaces or solid forms” (their symbolic essence)(2011: 155). In the West, however, a transduction occurs: the essence of natural things is placed in the service of an unnatural representation of the human condition. This is why Arnott speaks of Western cultural history as “a brilliant but flawed deflection.” What of art’s “roots in the pre-historic, pre-literate, ancient, tribal and folkloristic,” he asks, what of the “pre-Classical and therefore pre-Christian” (2011: 156)?

If, for Arnott, sculpture (made whenever) is always an insertion in a greater megatext, it is because it cannot be solely subject to the time of its making. It must also (and always) be understood in spite of its partiality or favoured construction of the relative and absolute. Forms are never as pure or as innocent as we imagine them to be. They are imposed upon; reshaped in the image of the culture they feed. What of the “material cultures” of “North America, South and Central America, Australasia, Oceania, West and Central Africa and (of particular interest) Southern Africa” (Arnott 2011: 156–7)? If Arnott is capacious in his grasp of forms, worlds, and the divergent symbolic forces they accrue, it is because life, irrespective of where and when it is lived, is subject to a greater story. That he expresses a particular interest in the sculpture of Southern Africa, reveals his personal engagement within this greater continuum. It is telling that he should note that the “objects” produced, say, in Southern Africa, “would not have met the needs of Florentine merchant princes, nor found a place in the political convolutions of the Counter Reformation, nor the rationalistic ethos of the Enlightenment.” However, and here is the crux, “they did provide an antidote to the dead hand of Classical formalism in Western sculpture” (2011: 157).

That this “dead hand” would maintain its control of the Western imagination from the Renaissance through to the beginning of the twentieth century reveals the extent of its power. However, a profound break in Western aesthetics did occur. Its source? None other than “the subtle geometries of African art,” which Arnott



recognised to have had “a catalytic effect on European art, from 1905 onwards” (2011: 158). But it is his following wager that is particularly insightful: “As far as sculpture is concerned this is where rational form caught up with intellectual content, but without losing touch with feeling” (2011: 158). The subtlety of this interpretation deserves consideration. If Western art bent the natural world to suit its intellectual perception thereof, then what occurred from 1905 was nothing short of an epistemic, psychic, and cultural volte-face — a return to values which predate Platonism, Christianity, and the Enlightenment.

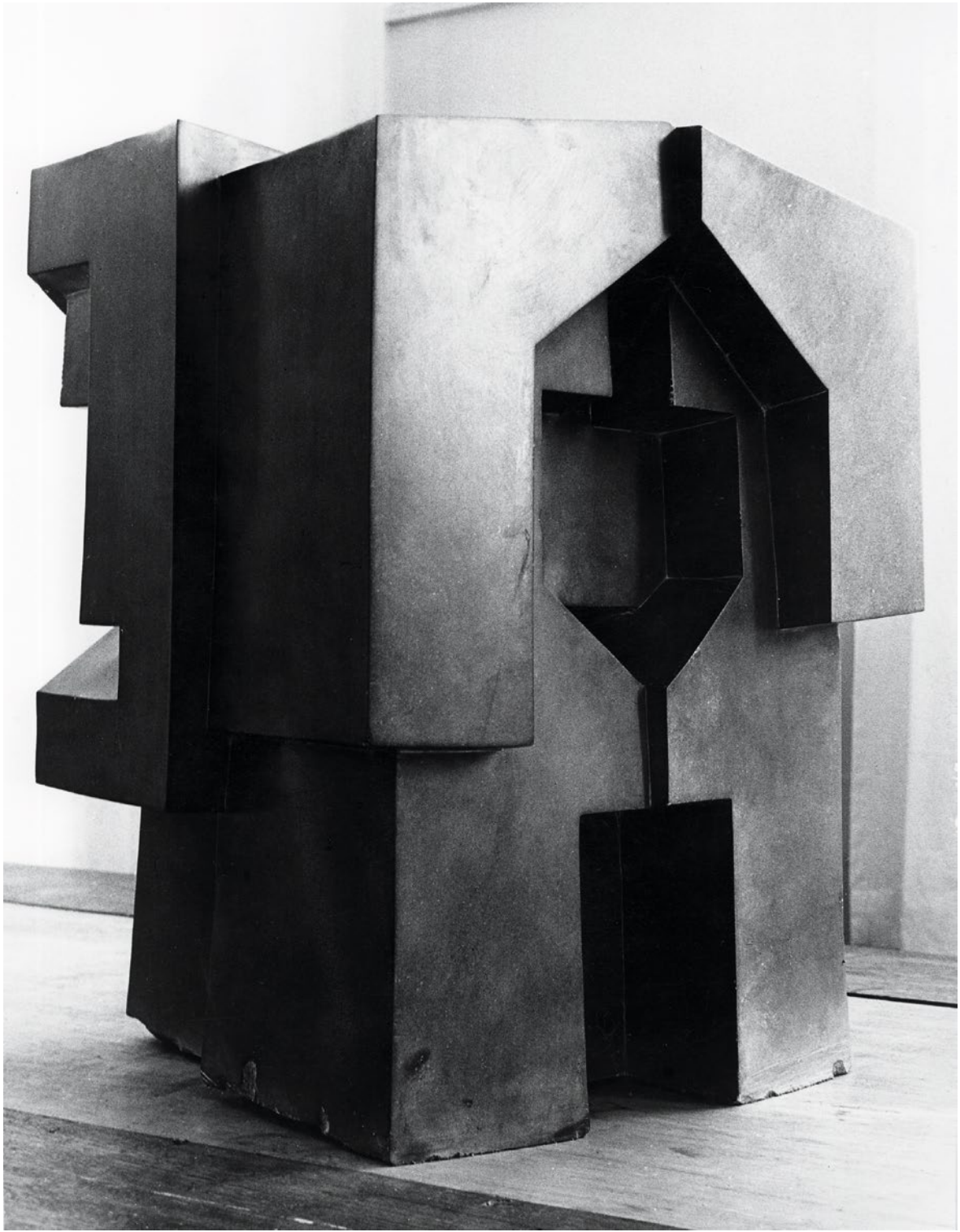
The English critic, Roger Fry, is surely a source of inspiration for Arnott’s insight. As Fry noted in 1920, it was the artists of Africa who “really conceive form in three dimensions” (Hall 1999: 219). In hindsight, attuned as we are to sculpture’s gravity and mass, its volume and space, its reified and material identity, Fry’s wager is astonishing, until we realise just how relatively recent three-dimensionality in Western

art in fact is. From Greek Classicism to the Renaissance and onto the modern era, when Auguste Rodin broke the mould, Western sculpture was primarily a pictorial affair. As Leonardo da Vinci noted (c. 1500), “Low relief entails incomparably more intellectual considerations than sculpture in the round . . . because it is indebted to perspective” (Hall 1999: 53). For centuries, this view was lore. Pictorialism was aligned with intellect and by extension, perception, meaning, and value.

As James Hall (1999: 53) notes in *The World as Sculpture*, “By turning the world into a picture one could believe that one was in control, observing events from a fixed and privileged vantage point.” It was precisely this anthropocentric view—“Man as the measure of all things”—which troubled Arnott, and for good reason. It is the deep-seated distrust of sculpture in the round which distinguishes Western culture. Because three-dimensionality refused a singular vantage, it was believed to be anarchic and disorientating. It had to be resisted at all costs. In the 1940s, Bernard Berenson, a leading scholar of Italian Renaissance painting, noted that the new-found obsession with three-dimensionality post-1905 (notwithstanding Rodin’s revolutionary incursion) was irksome. “What of it? What if they are in the round?” And “what has their roundness to do with their being great works of art? Are not gasometers in the round?” (Hall 1999: 219). His dismissal is virulent. What Berenson failed to grasp — because he refused to — is that three-dimensionality travestied the founding faith of Western art. It refused its inherited belief in clarity, its tactical and acculturated convergence of the absolute and relative, and the centralisation of the Western mind and imagination through pictorialism. At the core of Berenson’s distrust, even dread, lay the realisation of the existence of an “archaic” knowledge and experiential system. Much to Berenson’s disgust, all that Western rationalism had suppressed — what Arnott terms “Shamans of the game, shamans of the rain, shamans of the sick, shamans to propitiate the spirits of the dead” (2011: 154) — were suddenly and incontrovertibly garnering widespread interest.

Unsurprisingly, the greatest object of this dread was African art, which historically (predictably) has been both revered and maligned. Long before Berenson, the historical figure most aggressively resistant to sculpture in the round was Adolf von Hildebrand (1847–1921). It is he, Hall notes, who loathed Rodin for the anarchic and Dionysian power of his sculptures; he who decried the rise of “statuemia” (the acceleration in the second-half of the nineteenth century of public sculpture); he who held fast to a defining Western dogma that unity and truth resided in “pictorial clearness” (1999: 236). For Hildebrand, it was sculpture’s democratising influence, its increasing presence in the public domain, its collective value, which was onerous. No longer entombed and sacral (visible to a select few), sculpture, in moving away from bas relief to its fully rounded public presence, threatened its elegiac, formal, and funereal Greek origin. Of a public sculpture, a horrified Hildebrand notes, it is “as though they had just climbed up into their positions . . . What is here constructed is not a picture seen, but a drama acted out” (Hall 1999: 223). His distaste for public pleasures is astounding. For someone like Arnott — preoccupied with collective ritual, with art as an integral aspect of the human cycle — this stance would surely be abhorrent. But it is salutary to realise that in the year prior to his death, Hildebrand’s exclusionary vision was universally countermanded. Roger Fry’s essay is a hallmark of dissent. Far more than Rodin, it was African art which profoundly challenged (if not undid) the West’s preoccupation with pictorialism.

Writing in 2020, the persistent belief in pictorialism as the apogee of truth is perplexing. Why, one wonders, should “pictorial clearness” and “unity” be the province of two-dimensionality? Hildebrand is by no means the only culprit, yet as Hall noted in 1999, “Hildebrand’s diagnosis was so compelling that until recently it was treated as virtual art historical ‘fact’ that sculpture in the round is quintessentially modern, and that earlier sculpture is demurely pictorial” (1999: 224). I err on the side of Fry, although I would question whether sculpture in the round is uniquely African. What exercises me far more is why visual “clarity” (aesthetic, intellectual, emotional) is a two-dimensional affair. Is it because, from a Western perspective,



meaning or feeling or truth require contraction, sublation, a flattening idealisation of the world? Because perspective — indebted to the Renaissance Quattrocento system — requires a centred and sentient being who can manage all that they see? Because what can't be seen (or rather, not seen in its totality) must be banished? Is pictorialism, therefore, totalitarian? An art for the all-seeing eye? Panoptic? And is it this which sculpture in the round refuses? Or is sculpture not, rather, the expression and iteration of a very different understanding of meaning, truth, value, art?

In the case of his own sculptures — the bulk of which are cylindrical, cubic, rotund — Arnott appears unmoved to puncture their bloated surfaces (in the manner, say, of Henry Moore or Barbara Hepworth). True, his surfaces are scarified — they bear witness to the hollows and protuberances that signal human, animal, and mythic forms — but it is their resistance to a distinctive or signatory artistic incision which best speaks to their refusal of an individualistic claim upon the world. A sculpture, for Arnott, does not exist as a mirror of the self. The artist is a conduit (a shaman). Bronze is his medium, although he also used wood and clay, all of which are subject to a singular goal — *incarnation*, art as a *bringing into being*. His approach runs radically counter to the so-called clarity of pictorialism, which supposes being as an a priori condition for the making of art — something a painting or relief sculpture inhabits, and not the fulfilment of the work. Let me be clear. Essence is believed to be the seed of painting. Essence inhabits being. In Arnott's case, I'd argue that essence can never precede being; that they are one and the same, and that they can only be resolved — brought together in unison — by an artist who is humble enough to recognise his secondary role as a conduit and medium, and not the primary and inflated role ascribed to the artist as creator.

“One is concerned with making fresh and meaningful metaphors, but as part of a continuum,” wrote Arnott (2011: 160). At the very start of this remark, it is relative anonymity — “one” — which distinguishes all that follows. Arnott's concern is how one breathes life into what already exists. He is the creator as emissary; a man amongst others, caught in a relay. It is not tradition that interests him but something more

ancient and amorphous — a primordial continuum. Quoting Arnott, Kim Gurney (2018) writes of this continuum as “a notional submerged mainstream’ in Western European art with its roots in the prehistoric, ancient, tribal and folkloristic.” This is true, but it is not solely thus. Gurney recognises this by noting the importance of Zimbabwean San figures, Ivorian pendant masks, Sufism, alchemy, Druidic culture, along with Jungian archetypes.

The spectrum of influence is vast, as modern as it is primordial. To suppose a finite source of inspiration for Arnott’s sculpture is therefore dubious. This makes the sculptor’s formulation — “a notional submerged mainstream” — especially intriguing. The meaning of “notional” is twofold: a proposition and a speculation. There is something reassuring about this optic; the sense that one cannot be wholly wrong nor wholly right when making any assertion on Arnott’s behalf. If Gurney recognises a submerged seam or stream — a buried consciousness, some intuited condition for making — it is because the artist makes no finite or absolute proposition. Instead, he allows himself to be carried, buoyed, shunted, and shifted by currents in the moment of making. That said, there is nothing happenstance about the initiation or outcome of his work. It does not gain its meaning through time, nor is it made because of its time. Rather, his sculptures are engendered in time’s honour — *through the grace of time*. There is something honorific about Arnott’s approach, something sacramental. Even works that seem more distinctly modern, timely, or even contemporary, possess this sense of the otherworldly, of somehow being otherwise. This is because the sculptor lays no claim upon the world. He does not reflect the world in his own image but finds himself inside of a greater sculptural “megatext.”

I began by asking why pictorialism came to dominate the art world, and why sculpture was regarded in the West as an anti-intellectual or anti-cultural enterprise. Why, in other words, were sculptors regarded in the European art world as secondary citizens? Given the global prominence of artists like Jeff Koons (a sculptor of whom Arnott remarked approvingly)(2011: 159) or Anish Kapoor, it is strange to imagine

a time when the medium was perceived to possess a diminished value. But this is the case. As Comte de Caylus noted in 1759, “Sculpture, more locked away in studios, less visible, harder to move, slower in its operations and less extensive in its compositions, not only shortens and restricts, but clouds an artistic career” (Hall 1999: 1). Once again, we are presented with a pervasive sense of disregard. In our current historical moment, in which sculptures are being toppled the world over, one wonders whether “statuemia” (a pre-eminently secular obsession) is reaching its end. What are we to make of the destruction of imperial secular figures? Are the orders of power — empire and nationalism, and the faux democracies upon which these were built — over? Has sculpture as a representational and ideological vehicle met its match? If so, what will replace it? What society? What vision for art?

I imagine that Arnott might say, “Let’s forget about secular imperial icons, businessmen and statesmen, inventors and scientists, slaveowners and slave drivers; let us return to the ‘shamans of the rain, shamans of the sick, shamans to propitiate the spirits of the dead,’” thus, not an end to sculpture, but a return to its original and long suppressed force. If one turns Comte de Caylus’ dismissal on its head, we arrive at a very different understanding of sculpture that is closer to Arnott’s vision. Here, sculpture becomes mysterious, intractable, ruminative, and meditative. In its operations and compositions, it becomes slower, less extensive. All of which suggest an artist removed from the world’s hurtling, invasive, presumptive, seductive, and exploitative interface. And is this not precisely an endeavour which best befits a temperament which chooses to bypass easy pleasures and gratifications?

That a dramatic “volte-face” occurred in 1905 in no way obscures its persistent, longstanding, and eternal subterranean strength. Sculpture, when seen through Arnott’s eyes, is the measure of a quiet persistence and belief in a quality and value, blithely dismissed in the West, which could no longer be derogatively compared to painting. I have mentioned the seismic importance of Roger Fry’s insight regarding sculpture in the round, and its origin in Africa, but it is perhaps more surprising that the American guru of Abstract Expressionism, Clement Greenberg, called sculpture

“the representative visual art of modernism” (Hall 1999: 5). How so? Why would sculpture, finally, be recognised? The answer, I wager, lies in its tactility — its appeal to conditions for living which were no longer ruled by the ideational. The rational mind which dominated how one saw art, why one valued it, came unstuck at the start of the twentieth century. But how truly sudden was this change? Was Rodin really an anomaly? What of Manet or Impressionism? What of the encroaching realisation which consumed the nineteenth century that the world could no longer be quietly and sagely apportioned its meaning and value? Is sculpture — in particular African sculpture — not the trigger for a more enduring and profound epistemic, cultural, and psychic shift? Whether sudden or not, is it true that one could no longer imagine oneself at the centre of the universe? The Quattrocento system was shot, and along with it the belief in a middle ground which mediated worlds, foreshortened or distant. Paintings stopped making sense (or rather, sought a different sense; a radical indifference to sense). As for sculpture, it told us that our paralysis could be circumvented — that one could see all, if only ever partially, and that one could join what had been shattered, or shore up the shattered fragments against total ruin. If sculpture came to define modernity, it was because its very density and its quiet proved consoling. One could hug a sculpture, or weep; one could be saved, or not.

As Anish Kapoor remarked, “We are, and I somehow include all of us, religious beings, and religion doesn’t necessarily have to be doctrinal. It can also be about a kind of symbolic continuum that life and all its tragedy seems to keep throwing up. And art finds ways of pointing at that” (Chan 2020). Here we return to the prevailing seam of Arnott’s work — the belief in a greater continuum, irreducible to the doctrinal beliefs which keep us in their thrall. What Kapoor intimates is the existence of conditions for living that precede and exceed the frameworks we enshrine. While I find the volte-face regarding sculpture in Europe to be salutary, even explicable in the face of a collapse of mind, I cannot believe that its newfound force stems simply from negligence or ignorance. There is always another order of



being. Another path. The stigma associated with sculpture — that it is laborious; that it vulgarly displays labour — is, paradoxically, its greatest strength. It is especially now, as we enter a Fourth Industrial Revolution in which labour is further excised — the world consumed and defined by technology and left with even less of a sense of its worth — that the work of sculptors reminds us what it means to be physical beings. The more sleekly inhumane the world becomes (the outcome of a continued trauma), the more vital sculpture becomes. It is through the human-hewn that we will save ourselves.

The return to the artisanal signals a counter-intuitive drive. Which is not to say that Leonardo da Vinci's scorn does not persist. It does, perhaps even more so in our mediatised and antiseptic environs. He dismissed sculpture as a “mechanical art,” not a “science.” For him, sculpture “causes its executant sweat and bodily fatigue,” as opposed to a painter who works “with greater mental exertion” (Hall 1999: 13). We can see the prejudicial basis of the argument — painting is akin to the life of the mind, while sculpture is perceived as base. Of the painter's studio (and here we should also reflect on the clinical domain of the digital arts), he wrote: “it is clean and adorned with delightful pictures” (Hall 1999: 14). If painting is effete, sculpture is boorish. The painter's world enjoys “the accompaniment of music or the company of various fine works that can be heard with great pleasure without the crashing of hammers and other confused noises” (Hall 1999: 14).

Snobbery runs deep and is age-old. If I have chosen to focus on it, it is because, through contradistinction, it helps us to understand Arnott's world. When read as a mechanical art, his work may seem noisome. On the contrary, it possesses its own sublimities and pleasures — some ancient, other modern. The mood of *Sphinx* (1977), its cultural and aesthetic influences whittled away, the figure reduced to a rotund bipedal rudiment, is considered by Arnott as “benign” (2011: 161). His *Numinous Beast* (1979) — widely regarded as his most commanding work — is a fusion of the primordial and cardinal. It is both ancient and stately. Given our current obsession with avatars, this figure might seem rather modish, when in

fact it is locked into ancient realms, where prayer and blood rites are profoundly entangled. Here, as with *Sphinx*, we are reminded of that which long predates the whims and fancies of the Renaissance — a period of European history which defines its error-stricken vainglory.

In addition to Arnott's love for the stately and eternal is a strong streak of the comedic. His *Swansong of the Sausage Dog* (1990) is, as he says, "absurd and obsessive." As is his preoccupation with Alfred Jarry's "psychosexual fantasy of mechanical power" (2011: 164). This preoccupation with the absurd and machinic (a direct outcome of post-war Dada and Futurism) is shared by William Kentridge. If Jarry's *Ubu Roi* (1896) has had a decisive impact on South African artists, it has everything to do with its surrealist take on fascism — its belief in unreason as the answer to a fascistic and grimly utilitarian application of reason. Unlike Kentridge, however, Arnott was never swayed by unreason as a counter to fascism. He saw no grace in dementia in and for itself. Rather, everything South Africa's counter-culture sought to reject remained manifest within it. Fascism cannot be spoofed. Mockery is no answer to horror.

Given that Arnott was no card-carrying radical; given the fathomless depths of his quiet (hardly a quality we prejudicially associate with sculptors), how, one wonders, did he survive an unsurvivable condition? Was it a "notional submerged mainstream" that bodied him forth? As Gurney (2018) notes, "There is always something in [Arnott's] artworks to hold onto — a hopefulness that the future may still turn out better or, at least, that a wry sense of humour about our fraught predicament . . . might just be our saving grace." Gurney is correct in this regard, but only partially so. As I understand it, Arnott's love of life (his readiness to participate within it, to imagine a future) and his sense of time far surpassed the quotidian realms of family, education, or secular systems more generally. From the start, his has always been a primordial and ancient world which tolled within the present. That world, if it can be given a name, would be the Drakensberg — a mountain range near the place of his birth, to where he retreated (abandoning all secular demand) to build a home and

make art. It was, I imagine, during that time of relative isolation, before his return to the greater world, that Arnott became the creature he would remain — sentient, still, wakeful, lost within the greater continuum of life in which individual needs, wants, and achievements mattered little. If all sculptures are “points of entry into the greater sculptural megatext,” so is life a point of entry, a point of departure, within a greater realm in which it barely matters, and yet, despite its relative insignificance, matters all the more.

This is because Bruce Arnott is a primitive. One may think him cultured when one reads him, one may even regard his forms too elegant, or too absurd. But that, in my view, is deceptively so. At the root of the man is the “archaic” and “primitive.” As Arnott notes, primitive “symbolic form can hold and impart profound meaning. Their lesson is that the making of art is a celebration of the imagination — a moral, and far from frivolous pursuit” (2011: 169). Even when he engages with it, it is Arnott’s removal from frivolity and, more significantly, his asceticism and renunciation of life while in its very midst, which signals his constant searching for all that was least within him — all that was freed from the burdens of power, authority, race, gender, civilisation, vocation, presence, futurity; all that flew in the face of the Western narrative of life and art. All of this he chose to unobtrusively embrace, and it is this which we must now re-examine.

Arnott reminds us that humans were never the measure of things — not then, not now. If sculpture was feared because of its mutability, it is because we are mutable. We cannot know ourselves. Reason is not only a damaging conceit but humankind’s greatest and worst frivolity, at the devastating root of which lies vanity. It is against this historical burden, and in spite of it, that Arnott created his soul-world. His sculptures — their bold mass and gravity, shape, abstraction, their innermost sense of unspeakable ancient truths, their thrust and fathomless depth — speak to an everlasting and ever mysterious continuum. It is these works, the ones which toll this greater reach, that will remain long after we have gone, when all we value has come to naught.

Catalogue of works



Punch III

1979

Bronze

633 (h)

On loan from the Jack Ginsberg Collection



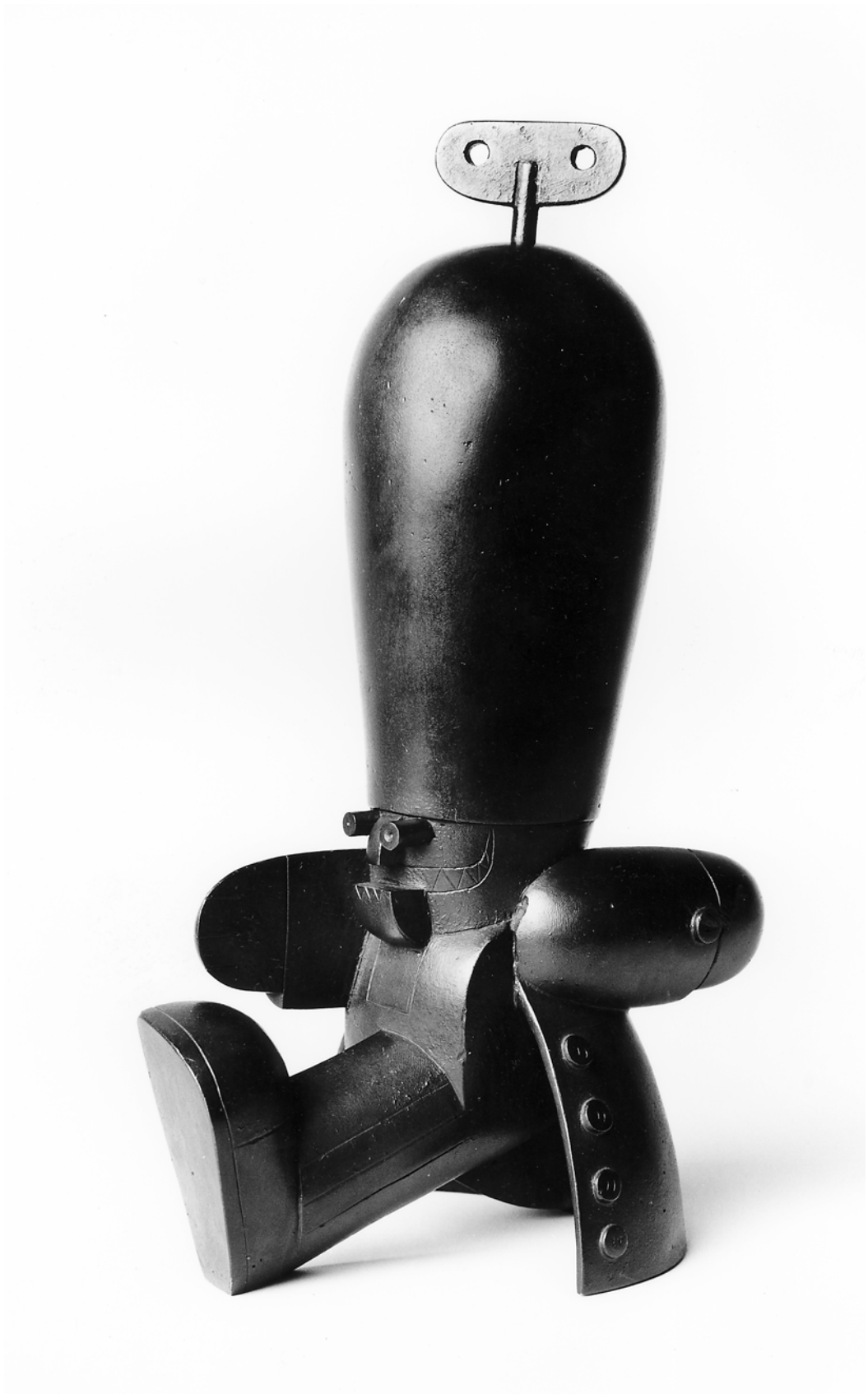
Punch II

1979

Bronze

650 x 420 x 400 mm

On loan from the Sanlam Art Collection



Clockwork Klopjag

1985

Bronze

305 x 210 x 150 mm



Mrs K. 1

2001

Bronze

120 x 80 x 80 mm

On loan from a private collection



One Man Band (miniature)

2001

Bronze

180 x 85 x 85 mm



Jury with chef, 2001. Bronze, 170 x 145 x 50 mm

Jury with clown, 2001. Bronze, 170 x 145 x 50 mm

Jury with crocodile, 2001. Bronze, 170 x 145 x 50 mm



Featherhead (miniature)

2004

Bronze

175 x 80 x 80 mm



Catnapper (miniature)

2004

Bronze

83 x 80 x 80 mm

On loan from a private collection



Seth

1977

Bronze

300 x 300 x 300 mm

On loan from a private collection



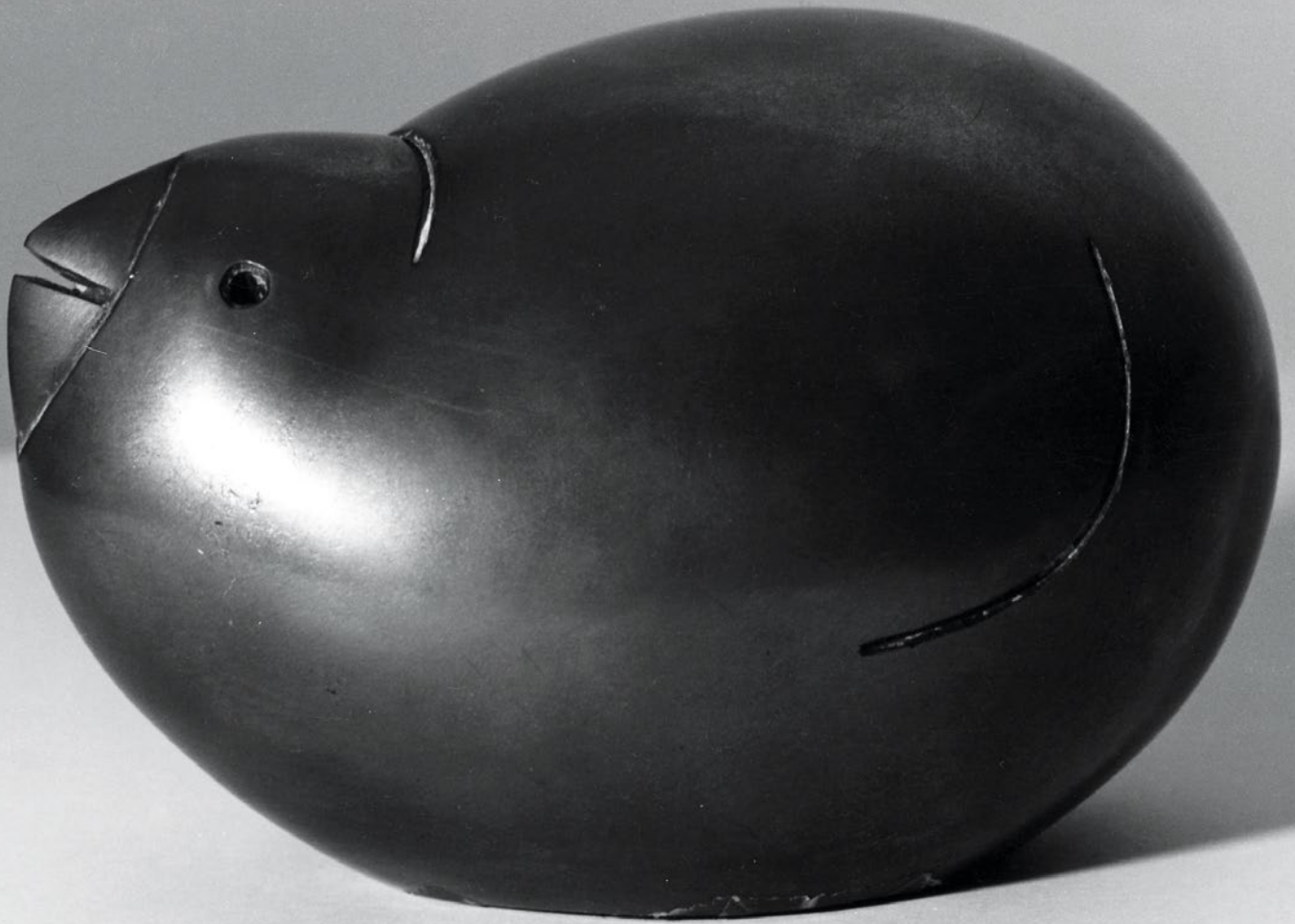
Adam (Long thin man)
1984
Bronze
405 x 45 x 35 mm



Eve
1984
Bronze
280 (h) mm



Winged Figure
1962
Bronze
650 x 150 x 115 mm

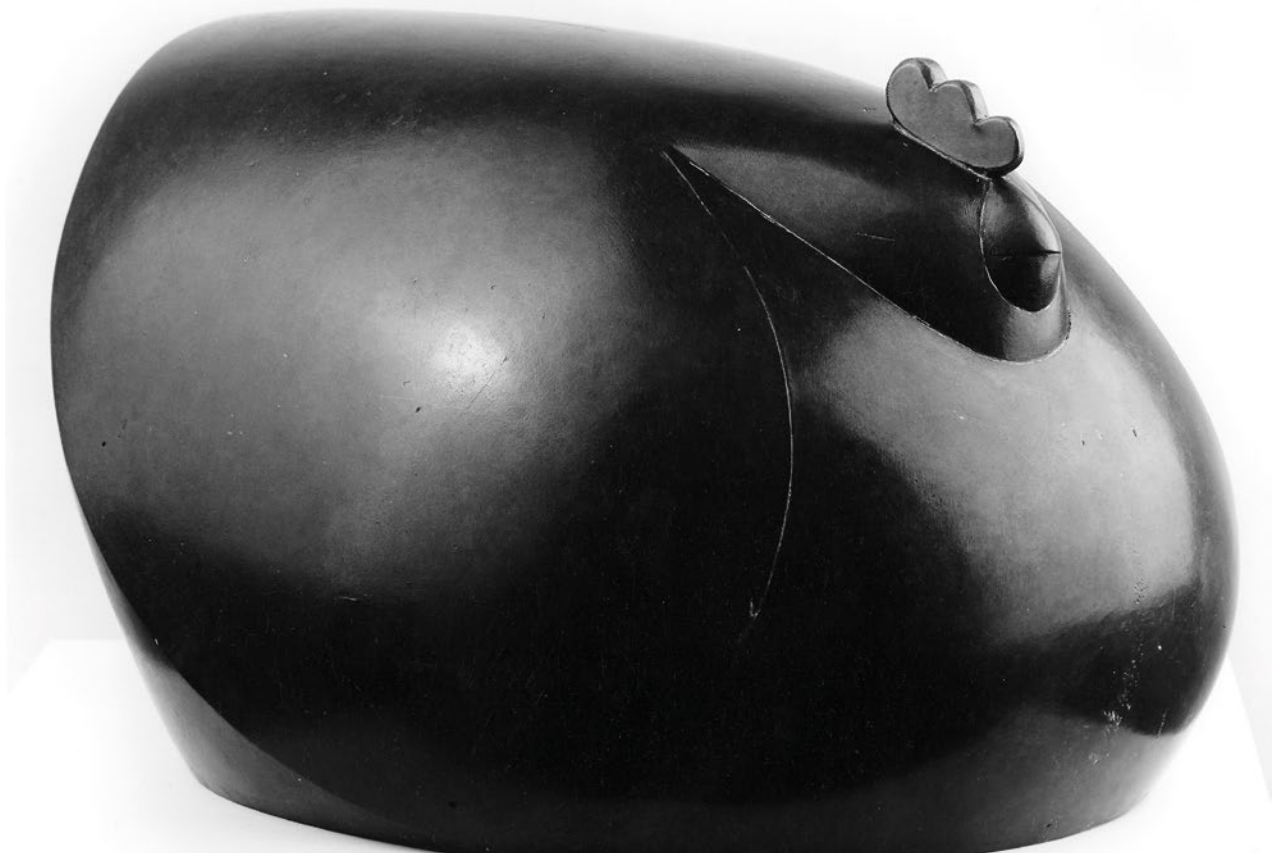


Squab

1975

Bronze

90 x 140 x 90 mm



Broody
1977
Bronze
190 x 365 x 265 mm



Rooster

2016

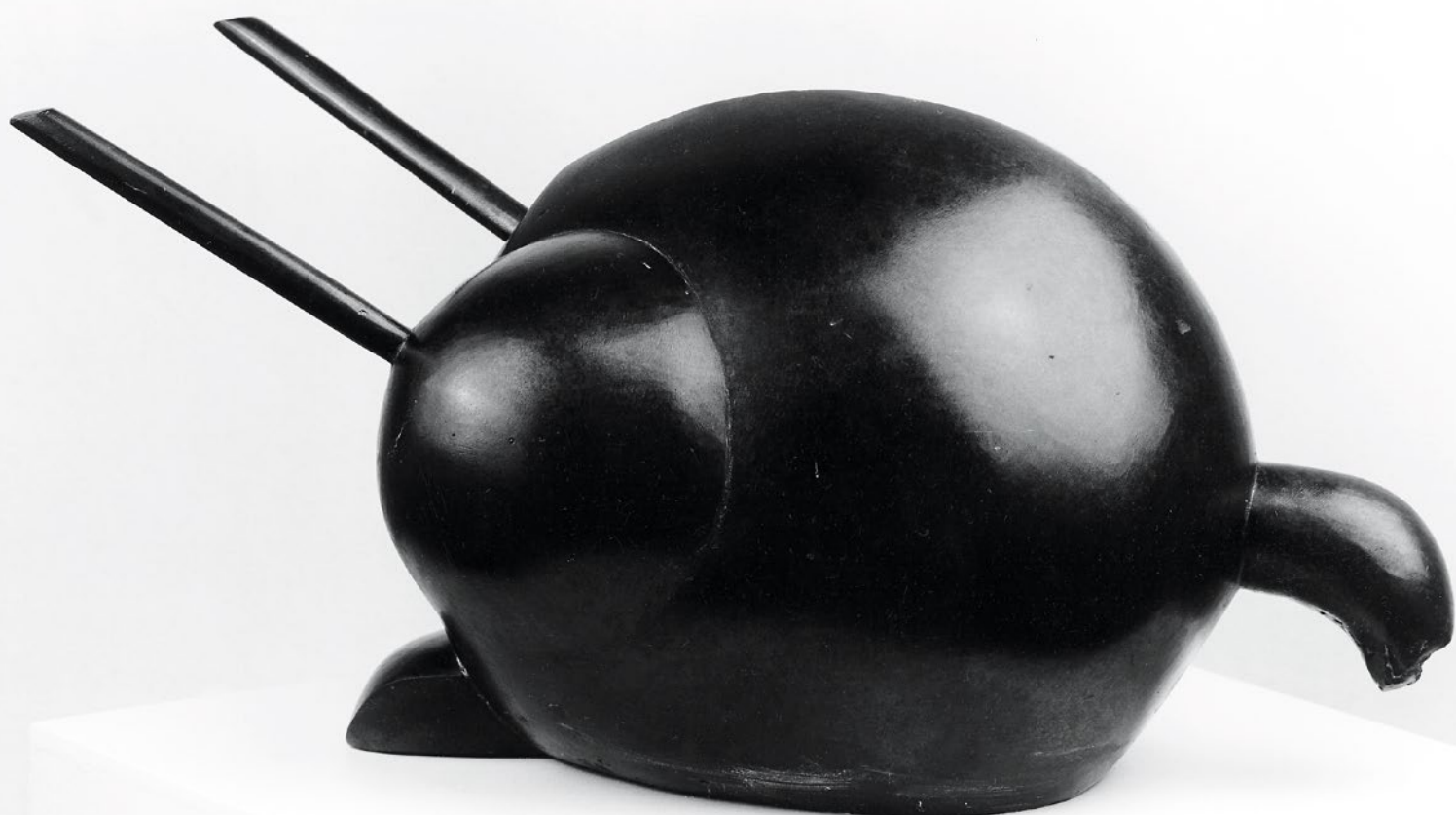
Bronze

660 x 530 x 200 mm

On loan from the Peter Cohen Collection



Karools
1977
Bronze
395 x 260 x 100 mm



Cull

1980

Bronze

410 (h) mm

On loan from the Jack Ginsberg Collection



Centaur woman
2001
Bronze
330 x 90 x 120 mm



Centaur man

2001

Bronze

360 x 90 x 120 mm



Exile man
1999
Bronze
415 x 190 x 80 mm



Exile family (maquette)

1997

Bronze

230 x 90 x 40 mm



Exile family (medallion)

1999

Bronze

130 x 130 mm



Green Man head

2001

Bronze

375 x 200 x 280 mm

On loan from the Peter Cohen Collection



Marat
2018
Bronze
430 x 340 x 200mm



Alma Mater (Caryatid, maquette)

1995

Bronze

375 x 200 x 280 mm

On loan from The Brenthurst Library, Johannesburg



Aphrodite

2015

Bronze

790 x 320 x 170 mm



Rites of Demeter I

1994

Bronze

463 x 180 x 100 mm



Athenian Princess #2

2010

Bronze

660 x 310 x 160 mm



Athenian Prince: Horns

2004

Bronze

190 x 210 x 85 mm

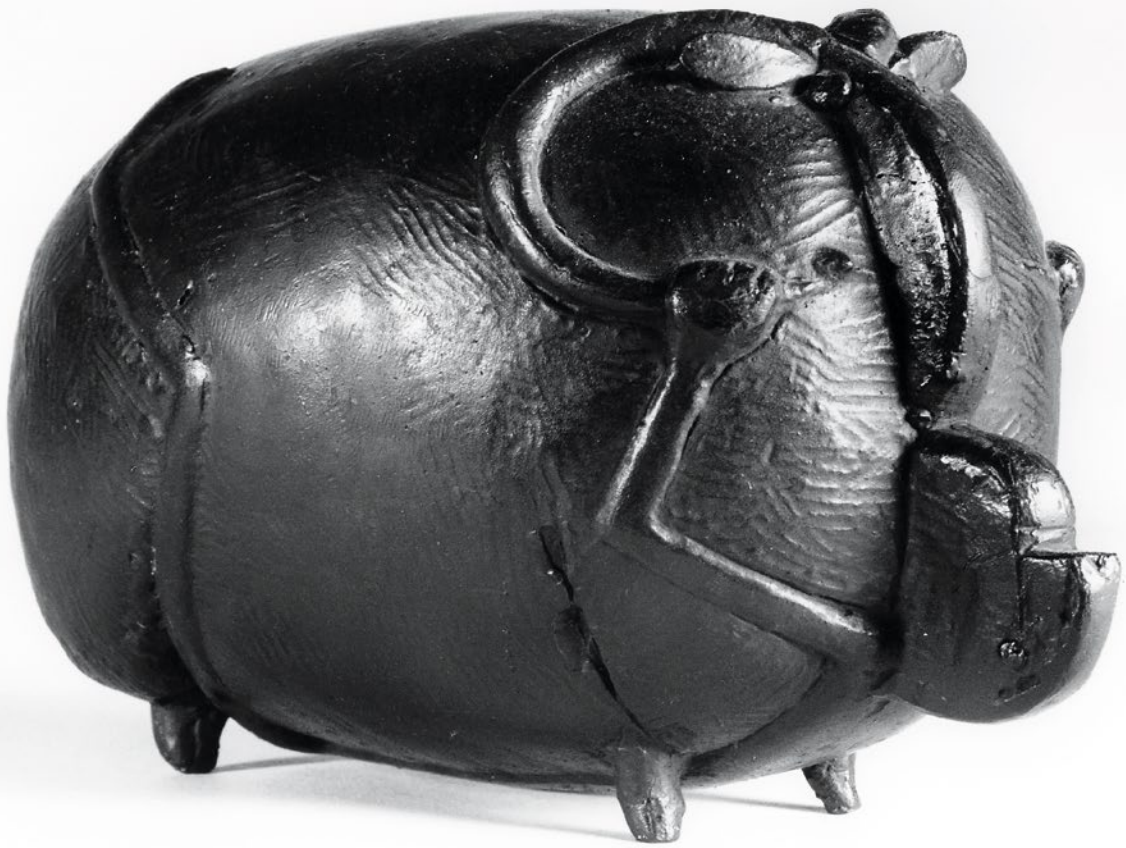


Minoan Princess: Axes

2004

Bronze

175 x 200 x 60 mm



Ulysses

1984

Bronze

140 x 210 x 120 mm

On loan from a private collection



Biggles #2
2010
Bronze
650 x 170 x 150 mm



Seer #2
2010
Bronze
465 x 290 x 130 mm



The Joker/Bang!
2010
Bronze
520 x 155 x 145 mm



Knave of Hearts/Spin

2011

Bronze

480 x 180 x 260 mm



Topsy Turvy Man
2013
Bronze
460 x 250 x 200mm



Conjurer

2012

Bronze

410 x 350 x 205 mm



Levitor #2

2010

Bronze

270 x 430 x 175 mm



Joburg Ice Cream
2012
Bronze
410 x 300 x 300 mm



Catnapper
2004
Bronze
250 x 100 x 85 mm



Monocyclist #1: FTOK!

2004

Bronze

290 x 70 x 140 mm



Oskar: Shouter

2004

Bronze

300 x 100 x 180 mm

On loan from a private collection



Icarus Relunched

2004

Bronze

260 x 85 x 90 mm



Green Man Dreaming

2004

Bronze

270 x 60 x 80 mm



Oskar: Banger

2004

Bronze

300 x 100 x 110 mm

On loan from a private collection



Cloud Surfer

2004

Bronze

190 x 290 x 150 mm



Hoopoe Attack

2004

Bronze

220 x 210 x 110 mm

On loan from a private collection



Storm Wizard

2004

Bronze

273 (h)

On loan from a private collection



Gem

1993-4

Wood, paint, and pastel

170 x 150 x 150 mm



Sheep

2015

Bronze

985 x 830 x 400 mm

On loan from a private collection

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