

Next to Last Thoughts on Harry Smith – Raymond Foye

This is a re-working of the 2001 essay Harry Smith: The Alchemical Image, which can be found elsewhere on this website

There is a photograph of Harry Smith, aged nineteen, sitting in a Lummi Indian sweat lodge, at the controls of an audio recorder. It is a remarkable image that freezes Smith in an ideal setting he would live his life attempting to recreate: a tribal group where every person had a valued role, living in harmony with the environment and doing no harm; part of a culture rich in song and dance and works of art where shared values and meanings were not divorced from everyday life; and a society that placed at its center the honored and respected figure of the shaman. This was the social model that Smith pursued throughout his life, one which he most closely achieved in the 1960s, when the Chelsea Hotel was the tribe, and he was the shaman.

As a high school student on a weekend visit early in 1974, I met Harry at the Chelsea Hotel at a time when it had not yet taken on the expensive élan of its later years. A room could be rented for \$30 per night, slightly inflated from the ten dollars a night when Harry moved in, when the hotel was listed in “New York on Twenty-Five Dollars A Day.” Sitting in the lobby late one afternoon, Harry approached me. I had seen him passing in and out of the hotel several times that day. Gnome-like, with grey and white ponytail and bedraggled beard, he had sensitive blue eyes that peered

out from behind enormous spectacles. He wore thrift shop clothes in combinations of plaids and stripes that did not remotely match. The most distinctive feature about him was the way he smelled: a not unpleasant mixture of tobacco, incense, marijuana, and beer. He ambled up to me in the lobby and struck up a friendly conversation. After several minutes he extended an invitation to visit him later, in his high nasal pitch, a slight twang to a voice that was erudite, sardonic, and inveigling by turns: “Just remember, I’m in Room 731. That’s seven planets, three alchemical principles, and *one god*,” emphasizing the last two words by holding up a crooked index finger.

I decided to take Harry up on his invitation to visit. Fortunately, I first called up from the lobby on the house phone, as I later learned this was *de rigueur*. Anyone who violated this rule, even unwittingly, would find themselves the brunt of an outburst that would force one backwards into the hallway. His room was like stepping into a nineteenth century cabinet of curiosities. The most prominent feature was the enormous number of books and records, meticulously arranged on grey steel shelving, eight feet high by sixteen feet long, arranged in rows that formed narrow corridors within the room itself. The records were arranged not by subject or artist, but by the label they were released on, and further by numerical order of the serial numbers. Harry did not so much collect records as entire record labels. On his shelves stood the complete catalogues of Bluebird, Riverside, Vocalion, Smithsonian, UNESCO, Folkways, Ocora, Das Alte Werke, and so on. Sitting there one idle afternoon I

estimated there were almost thirty thousand records in this room. After smoking a joint Harry would often stand with arms folded in front of the collection and sigh in his familiar whine, with mock exasperation, “There’s *nothing* to listen to!”

Hanging out with Harry mostly consisted of smoking pot and listening to records. In those years the records he listened to most were: 1.) Kurt Weill's and Bertolt Brecht's *Rise and Fall of the City of Mahogany* (the 1956 recording with Lotte Lenya); 2.) Bob Dylan's *Highway 61 Revisited* and *Blonde on Blonde* (especially when psychedelics were consumed); and 3.) a tie between *Eskimo Songs from Alaska* and *Sounds of North American Frogs*—both Folkways lps. The cardinal rule in listening to records with Harry was NO TALKING: Absolutely none whatsoever until the record was finished.

His books were arranged by height, a curious system of organization and one I'd never seen before. When I asked Harry about this, he explained that it took up less space, and in any case, he always remembered a book visually by its placement. One was never allowed to touch the books or records—or anything else in the room for that matter. To casually pick something up was out of the question. I would often stand in front of the shelves (and later when he trusted me more, venture down one of the tiny corridors of shelving) to peruse the spines: volumes on Theosophy, Éliphas Lévi, the Elizabethan astrologer John Dee, Athanasius Kircher,

alchemists Robert Fludd and Ramon Llull; the complete British Journal of Psychic Research; Smithsonian journals on folklore and American Indian studies; the *Oxford English Dictionary*; books on linguistic theory by Ferdinand de Saussure and Roman Jakobson; expensive art books on Eskimos, Tibetan tankas, and ornithology. All were bookmarked with yellow slips of paper and extensively notated in pencil in the back. Occasionally Harry would take a book off the shelf to illustrate a point, and there was never a reference in any of the thousands of books that Harry could not explain in relation to numerous other subjects. In one of my notebooks of the time I have a quote from Harry: “Due to my own inability to cope with the world, I cannot find solutions. It’s as if the language was built incorrectly for discussing the subjects I really want to discuss.”

Out of reach and wrapped in plastic on a top shelf was the Uher tape recorder that Harry had used for so many of his field recordings. Reel to reel tapes, carefully labelled, were also stacked on the top shelves, with the more important ones stored in the dresser drawers. If he were editing a Folkways project or film soundtrack, he would always remove the tape from the recorder whenever he left the room, so if thieves stole the recorder they would not also get the tape. The dresser drawers contained a museum quality collection of Seminole garments which he once displayed for me, carefully unwrapping each folded piece from its tissue. Sitting on top of the bureau were every book by Frances Yates, and about fifty decks of Tarot cards

(Italian Renaissance, Romanian Gypsy, The Golden Dawn, etc.,) including an original deck which Harry himself had designed (I wonder what became of that?). There was also a collection of Ukrainian hand-painted Easter eggs, stacks of string-figures mounted on black cardboard, and the remnants of a collection of paper airplanes which Harry began picking up off the streets in the 1950s, when skyscraper windows could still be opened and bored office workers would sail gliders through the canyons of New York. Down through the years I often thought of Harry's rooms as living beings, and I think he did too. Every time he would leave, just as he was about to close the door and lock it, he'd peek back in and say, "Goodbye, room."

If Harry ever found a random note on the street, or especially a deranged screed posted to a lamppost, he would preserve it. He had a sense of historicity *in the moment*. I remember Harry's best friend at the Chelsea, Peggy Biderman, had a collection of letters from their mutual friend Jesse Turner—a young hustler and bank robber serving time in prison; Harry was adamant she should donate these to the Smithsonian. During Smith's lifetime (and after) many of his collections found their way into the Smithsonian. The irony of the name of that Institution was not lost on Harry.

The Chelsea lobby and rooftop were both hangouts for hotel residents, who were basically a bunch of bad children. Once when the gaggle of residents socializing

in the lobby numbered 15 or 20, the manager Stanley Bard emerged from his office, took in the scene with exasperation, and clapped his hands: “I want you all to go to your rooms!” and everyone dispersed. The Chelsea rooftop was a communal space for all the residents until the early 1980s, when a few of the wealthy residents with penthouse apartments carved it up for their private use, with tacit permission from management. Harry filmed parts of *Mahagonny* up there, as well as the kaleidoscopic footage of Wendy Clarke doing the Boogaloo in a Rudi Gernreich dress. The Grateful Dead and Jefferson Airplane both played impromptu concerts. One afternoon Leonard Cohen was waiting in the lobby for his mother to arrive from the airport—he was putting her up at the hotel for a week. When she arrived Leonard proudly introduced her to Harry. “Oh, Mrs. Cohen, you have a lovely son,” he whined, “but he has a *horrible* voice.” Leonard loved this.

The only other person in the hotel who remotely gave Harry a run for his money was the poet Gregory Corso. Gregory was equally fierce, brilliant, drunken and/or stoned, and capable of similar outrageous acts of social disruption. Interestingly, when the two were in each other's company, these attributes seemed to cancel themselves out and they both turned into peaceful and genial personalities towards one another. Sometimes the two of them would gang up on Peggy, their favorite victim, putting her undying love to the test. “In your world,” Harry used to tell her, “We are all supposed to be walking around wearing white robes bearing gifts of fruits and flowers. Life is not like that.” Peggy used to work at the bookstore of the

Museum of Modern Art, and Harry loved to introduce her at cocktail parties as “the curator of postcards” at MoMA.

Throughout his life Smith was a great student of children’s literature. He often filmed and taped children’s games and songs and made a careful record of hopscotch boards and other chalk–drawn diagrams whenever he encountered them on the sidewalk. (He once praised Pieter Bruegel the Elder’s work to me because of the painter’s eye for folklore and children’s games.) The collected works of Lewis Carroll always occupied a central place in his library, and Smith no doubt sympathized with Carroll’s true self, the Reverend C.L. Dodgson: church deacon, graphic artist, early photographer, member of the British Society for Psychical Research, and Oxford mathematics don, who frustrated his colleagues by being more interested in logic as a game than as a means for testing reasoning. Like Dodgson, Harry’s sexuality was ambiguous, although most considered him a non–practicing homosexual.

Harry once told me the only two things he’d ever fucked were knotholes in trees, and dogs. On another occasion he said, “I am an Onanist.” In the first case he was joking, in the second instance, I think he was not. There was one summer when he’d befriended a whole gang of teenagers on Christopher Street; their leader was a kid named Gluey Louie, and they used to sniff glue together—a favorite high of Harry’s. I think fifteen was Harry’s ideal emotional age.

Folding card tables were indispensable to Harry's work, and as a project extended in scope more card tables were added. A Bell & Howell 16mm projector was often perched crookedly on one of these card tables and Harry would project his films on the cream-colored wall, which was cracked and stained; the "throw" as they say was about two feet wide. (I'm amused these days by the many obsessive film purists and wonder if they realize how these films were originally shown by their maker.) Index cards were used extensively to classify and sort data. Charts and diagrams were assembled for nearly every project, whether the making of a film, a painting, or a Folkways recording. These diagrams, often drawn on graph paper and frequently color-coded using felt tip markers, represented the underlying structure, sequence, or plan of the work in progress, and were usually expressed in terms of numbers. In the case of particularly ambitious works, such as the film *Number 18* ("*Mahagonny*"), these charts eventually filled the entire room. This always represented for me one of the great paradoxes of Harry Smith; on the one hand seldom was there an artist so devoted to the practice of the derangement of the senses, while on the other hand seldom has any artist sought to organize those experiences through such hyper-rational systems as these blueprints represented. Perhaps one was a corrective to the other, in the same way that much of Smith's work is poised between formal rigor and lyrical exuberance.

Film No 18 (“*Mahagonny*”) is the apogee of Smith’s method of mining motifs from art, science, religion, natural history, and anthropology, to create a work where images and symbols by juxtaposition are divested of their ostensible meanings and then reinvested with the contiguous meanings of their symbolic counterparts. It was a mental game that Smith enjoyed playing, but it was also a profound and imaginative meditation on the interrelated forms of nature and art, as only Smith could imagine. As artistic method, it is the epitome of a post-modernist approach, where associations are formed not on external aspects but through a subtext of encoded meanings and correspondences. Not to mistake this for an up-to-date aesthetic, we should keep in mind it is the principle that animated hermetic philosophy for nearly a thousand years.

In a sense his films were never completed. Smith used screenings to reconfigure the experience of the films. Live improvised jazz soundtracks in the 1950s were paired with a variable speed 16mm projector, allowing Smith to adjust the visual rhythm of the film to the tempo of the music. Later, multiple projectors were combined with shaped or masked screens, colored gels and painted glass slides, etc., and the show would be improvised in the theater. Often at screenings he would provide a running nonsensical commentary and viewers would be yelling at the obstreperous figure in the back of the theater to shut up, without realizing it was Smith himself.

Throughout Smith's career, the paintings and films informed one another. An animated film involves twenty-four exposure per second, or 1,440 exposures per minute. "I can't believe I had the energy to do all that," Smith remarked later in life. In the making of *Mahagonny*, (1970–80), Smith was still engaged in the obsessively constructed work (as we know from endless indexed subject cards and editing charts), but the meticulousness of the earlier films gives way to a looser approach. *Mahagonny* is shot largely in live action, though it does contain animated sequences which reprise many of his favored techniques: time-lapsed photography, stop frames, sand and clay animation, painting on glass, animated three-dimensional constructions, etc., These sequences are carried out with the gestural economy of an aging master. Frequently Smith's assistant Peggy Biderman was unable to get her fingers out of the frame before Smith tripped the shutter, so her disembodied fingers intrude on the imagery. Smith was delighted with this effect and left them in.

Although exclusively urban in those days, Smith always spent a great deal of time in Central Park, and it was the abundance of nature imagery in *Mahagonny* that most surprised me when I first saw the film. Harry never forgot that nature is the great teacher, and the ultimate artist. Once sitting on a park bench in Washington Square as the orange glow of a sunset illuminated a cherry tree in full bloom. Harry said something that risks the mundane, but it was one of the few remarks I ever recall him saying with unabashed heartfelt sincerity: "No work of art can ever be this great."

Smith left the Chelsea Hotel in the mid 1970s after a tumultuous several years when the idealism of the nineteen sixties gloriously crashed and burned around him. After three fires in his room, the incarceration in prisons and mental institutions of numerous friends, the casting of endless black magic curses and spells, and an armed robbery in which he was tied to a chair, slashed with a knife, and pistol whipped by a drug-dealer “friend,” Smith decided it was time to move on. Under great secrecy he moved to the Breslin Hotel on 28th Street and Broadway. At the Chelsea he left behind a bill in the thousands of dollars. Shortly after he left, Stanley Bard confronted me, practically in tears. “What can we do to get Harry back?” He cared nothing about the unpaid bill. In the history of 20th century art, Stanley Bard must be included with the greatest of patrons.

For many years no one knew where he was. One day Peggy Biderman was waiting for a light to change on Broadway and 29th Street, and there was Harry across the street. He was cordial and invited her up to his room. She told me where he was and I was permitted to visit but was sworn to secrecy. The Breslin Hotel was a depressing S.R.O. (single room occupancy) mostly occupied by the indigent elderly. Smith seemed largely oblivious to his surroundings but maintained cordial relations with neighbors and management. Here he lived a peaceful and productive life, concentrating on painting, editing *Mahagonny*, and organizing further Folkways

releases (including a box set of shape-note singing that was never released). At one point he was invited to lecture at the Southern Folklore Society at the University of Mississippi at Oxford. He traveled there with Allen Ginsberg (who tried unsuccessfully to leave him behind in care of the locals). I remember his enthusiasm upon returning: in rural Mississippi he befriended and recorded a teenage musician who had rewritten numerous traditional folk songs with drug lyrics: “Froggie went a courtin’ and he did ride/with a bong and a banjo by his side...” went one version. It was exactly the sort of thing Harry loved: an unsentimental update of a still-evolving tradition.

The Breslin is where I spent most of my time with Harry. Back at the Chelsea I was too young and afraid. The Chelsea Hotel has been idealized by people over time but in those days there was serious criminality going on in practically every other room. You might be visiting somebody and suddenly the police would burst through the door. At the Breslin Hotel Harry had mellowed, and once again he was focused on his work. I would visit once or twice a week always following the same routine: we would smoke pot and listen to records, then go out for Japanese food around the corner on West 28th Street, up a flight of stairs. Mostly Harry ordered soup because his digestion was shot from drinking. This didn’t stop him from ordering sake, which he insisted on being served very hot. The proprietors liked him. He was editing some of his Kiowa recordings back then (love songs) and on more than one occasion after a

few bottles of sake he would cry as he described their plight. In Harry's room I met his other friends, Charles Compo and Scott Feero, talented musicians in their twenties, both chill and quiet and handsome—Harry always liked being around good-looking young men.

Harry could be a lot of fun to go out with because you never knew what was going to happen—he had a very Dadaist approach to life. He loved the midnight screenings at the Eighth Street Cinema, especially reggae films such as *The Harder They Come*, or *Rockers*, made by his friend and cinematographer Patrick Hulsey, who helped finance *Mahagonny* with the profits he made from that film. As soon as the lights went down Harry would light up a joint, and then the whole theater would follow. When it came to music he was pretty much up for anything that I wanted to see. One night I took him to Tier 3 in Tribeca to see a punk/rockabilly band called the Stray Cats, who he loved. At a Cro Mags show at Irving Plaza he knocked over his grapefruit and vodka on the dirty table and immediately got down and began drinking it up with the straw: he always knew how to out-punk the punks. He came with me to see Rick Danko and Eric Andersen at Wetlands, and politely chatted with them in the dressing room afterwards, discussing Son House. Parties he was not particularly good at. I took him to a hip literary cocktail party at Dennis Cooper's loft on 13th Street and took an immediate dislike to every person in the room, walking around insulting them one by one. I wanted to get him out of there as quickly as possible, so I began gently

pushing him to the door. Suddenly his hand shot out and clasped a bookshelf that ran the length of the loft. Despite being tiny and frail he had incredible strength and I could not manage to dislodge him. “Raymond,” he said calmly, “How would you like to see this entire bookshelf go flying across the room?” I immediately let him go and he proceeded to insult the few people he hadn’t managed to get to and then left quite content.

He was often depressed and maudlin and not always enjoyable to be around. I was also very depressed in those days, and I always assumed I was going to finish my life like Harry—alone in a cheap rented hotel room, so I’d best learn how to make the most of it. Harry could also be cruel and insulting. People have often asked why I spent so much time around him if he was so unpleasant, and I’ve often asked myself that question. First of all, I knew he was very special, even in the early days when I hardly even knew who he was. The first thing both Allen Ginsberg and Gregory Corso asked me when I met them was, “Do you know Harry Smith?” One time at the Chelsea Hotel Allen Ginsberg walked into the lobby, spied Harry, went straight up to him and got down on the ground and began kissing his feet. So obviously he was somebody.

Harry was like a good boxer in that he could size up your weaknesses right off. We all carry around a certain social armor as a barrier against the world. His job was

to tear down that armor to leave you naked and vulnerable. I know several people for whom his insults were so devastating they never spoke to him after the first encounter. I always thought one of his big problems was he was simply so much more intelligent than everybody else that he got bored easily, and when he got bored he got malicious. He could be terribly childish, such as making fun of people's names. "When you step down on the Hollis, don't forget to pull up on the Frampton," he would say when Hollis was in earshot. Brakhage was always "Breakage." He liked to stir things up between people; once I made the mistake of referring to Jonas Mekas as 'a professional peasant' and Harry immediately repeated it to him. Allen Ginsberg was a favorite target of Harry's, insulting his work with lines like, "I saw the best hotdogs of my generation destroyed by mustard..."

His naughtiness was part of his charm, and he was wonderfully funny and extremely tender once you earned his trust. One of the things I liked best about John Szwed's biography of Harry was the way it explicated his humor. I laughed out loud on practically every page.

I often kick myself for not taking better advantage of my access to Harry, such as asking him questions about his work. In all the years I knew him I never once had a discussion with him about his *Anthology of American Folk Music*. But he disliked being asked direct questions and would often answer with a mute stare as if to say,

‘None of your business.’ The truth is he was a very abstract and abstruse person and I am only now beginning to understand the implications of a lot of things that happened in those days.

It seemed as if one day out of nowhere Harry was possessed with the drive to suddenly complete his film *Mahagonny*, which had languished for almost ten years. The film’s length—2 hours and 21 minutes—and the fact that it required a four-screen simultaneous projection, made the cost of completing the film prohibitive. Funding was eventually provided through Henry Geldzahler, who as New York City’s Commissioner of Cultural Affairs, committed ten thousand dollars in discretionary funds to its completion, a courageous move considering the risks involved in channeling taxpayer’s dollars to such a famously unreliable figure. Geldzahler gave Smith a six-month deadline to deliver the film. Smith met his deadline to the day. That was my one chance to see Harry truly possessed by the creative spirit. Drive, intent, focus, all on a super-human level. It was his last great masterpiece. He seemed so old to me at the time. He was fifty-five.

Mahagonny premiered at Anthology Film Archives in New York, screened six times in two weeks in 1980 and not again until it was reconstructed in 2002. On opening night Smith introduced the film, and I still recall his startled look standing in front of the packed house. He peered out at the crowd through thick glasses, part

incredulous and part suspicious. His speech as usual was punctuated with long pauses between thoughts: “Some of you I recognize, and some of you are in this film. And then there are all these people who I’ve never seen before...” Susan Sontag was sitting next to me. “That’s called *audience*,” she remarked under her breath. Smith then quoted the final paragraph of Claude Levi–Strauss’ *The Origins of Table Manners*, that when man’s time on earth comes to an end, as inevitably it must, it will be through a failure to recognize himself as one amongst many species.

During his lifetime I often wondered if Harry’s artworks would survive him, not only because of the precariousness of his existence, but because he seemed so completely out of step with prevailing aesthetics. In 1983 I had the first intimation this might not be so. Viewing Francesco Clemente’s first exhibition in New York, suddenly here was painting that was about metaphor, illuminated poetry, Eastern philosophy, the Western occult tradition; some of the works had actually been made at the Theosophical Society in Madras, where C.W. Leadbeater wrote many of his classic books. I visited the show with Harry, who was likewise taken by the work.

A year later, after I’d met Clemente, I brought Harry by the studio. It was quite late at night, and Harry’s eyesight was not good in any case. As I introduced Harry, he gallantly strode across the studio to greet Francesco with hand outstretched, in the process walking across a large unstretched painted canvas that was lying on the floor.

Francesco was calm and bemused, and mentioned that one of his children had already done so earlier that day. After we left the studio Harry remarked on the vast quantity of art supplies Francesco had in the studio—more that he'd ever seen in one place in his life. I later mentioned this to Francesco, who put together a large box of paints and materials for me to bring to Harry. Harry was delighted with the gift, not only for the materials (which he desperately needed), but because they came from Francesco Clemente, something he took great pleasure in telling others. People often enjoy recalling stories of Harry's outrageous behavior (and there are many of them), but it was this sort of humility that I always found most characteristic of him.

“All ethnic music is Irish,” Harry once remarked as we listened to a recording of African pygmy music. It was typical Smith—epigrammatic, facetious, and true in some odd sense. I always thought the imaginative convolutions of Celtic art and music were a good model for how he defined the aesthetic experience. Aside from the hundreds of obscene limericks Harry had memorized, his fondness for the Celtic tradition was most evident in his nostalgia for the creative heyday of Theosophy during the Irish Literary Renaissance of the 1890s, and in his love of the work of William Butler Yeats. Perhaps the most important poet of the twentieth century to have forged a new sensibility from the union of art and the occult, there is no question that Yeats could have never achieved the revolutionary potency of his poetic images were it not for the visions revealed to him by his occult practice.

Much of Yeats's fascination with the symbols of the occult (especially the tarot) lay in the complex layering of the image—components and the knotted Celtic intricacies of those meanings. As Richard Ellmann observed of Yeats, “The first fascination of symbolism was that it did not altogether disclose the secrets upon which its use depended.” Symbolism is the secret life of images, and from ancient times occult practice has been preoccupied with the prognosticate power of the image (it's not possible to make an *image* without the *mage*). For Smith the notion of the artist as magician stemmed from the artist's ability to create images viable enough to have a life of their own. Smith disliked the cult of personality surrounding the artist and even avoided calling himself an artist. In the 1950s he favored the word “delineator,” implying word “delineator,” implying linear precision and discernment. Later “animator” served best, in its dictionary definition of one who imparts life to inanimate objects.

There is no question that a great deal of mythologizing has grown up around Smith in the past decade. A cult figure in his own lifetime, the cult of personality that still surrounds him both celebrates and obscures. Duchamp once noted that when a work of art leaves the studio, the artist must relinquish their hold on how the work will be seen and interpreted; and, moreover, all those different interpretations will eventually constitute a work's meaning. (This latter point was also Levi-Strauss' definition of myth.) I have seen Harry Smith's work make an unbelievable journey

from the hermetic to the public. It is ironic that his concerns which so utterly marginalized Smith as a visual artist during his lifetime are now the very subjects that make his aesthetic so prescient, and his work so appealing to the young. The wide range of interests pursued, collections formed, and media utilized, all make Smith an ideal mirror for our present moment, as we attempt to make sense out of the glut of information and juxtaposition of cultures, and more crucially the threat to creativity itself, from technology.

Smith himself was not above self-mythologizing and outright deceit, being a man of many facets and multiple personae. One might even say that Harry Smith was his greatest invention. But as much as I appreciate the fantasy and humor behind his invented identities, Harry was a very real person who made very real works. I remember one evening sitting in his room at the Breslin Hotel. It was snowing outside, and he had been collecting snowflakes out the bathroom window on a swatch of black velvet and examining them under a magnifying glass. We were smoking pot and he had a Woody Guthrie record on the stereo. Harry took out a Dover book where you detached the pages and folded tabs and glued together a beautiful model of Chartres cathedral. As we worked on the model silently, I was overcome by a feeling of serenity and contentedness as I'd never experienced. "Why can't life be like this always?" I thought. "Why do people decide they have to grow up, and stop having fun, and stop educating themselves?" I have always tried to preserve that moment.

