



Harry Smith, *Homage to Oskar Fischinger*, ca. 1950. Work destroyed.

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PAOLA IGLIORI: *When did you first meet Harry?*

JORDAN BELSON: Well, I met Harry in Berkeley, about 1946, and I think I was still a student at the University there, in my last year. I had a coterie of friends that were all artists and a generally bohemian group, and one of them went for a walk in the hills. Have you ever been to Berkeley?

*No, I haven't.*

It's a university town with a lot of trees; it's built on a hillside and it's got a lot of beautiful redwood homes. So my friend went for a walk up there around the fraternity houses and he looked. There was one window that was at eye level, so he had no problem looking in, not intentionally, but the interior of the room was so striking that he peeked in the window and looked it over and then came back and mentioned this to me, and maybe another person or two, and we went up to take a look ourselves. It was like a little museum gallery in there. It was all very neat, lit dramatically, with lights right over some artwork on the wall, and Harry had a kachina doll, and a few mysterious paintings, and nothing much more than that. He had a very tidy bunk, with a cot in one corner, and a rather large desk, and it was a nice little room. And as we were looking through the window, he came out and invited us in for peppermint tea. He used to always serve peppermint tea and he pronounced it "pepmit," just to be amusing, I think. He was so odd and strange, you know, a gnome-like, intense creature, and I don't think any of us knew quite what to make of him. I, myself, was very suspicious of the tea, actually, because he would make it in the other room. He had a little tiny bathroom which served as kind of a kitchen-bathroom, a little cubicle, and I often wondered what went on back there. He just seemed so strange and we were all fairly naïve; we had never met anybody

quite like Harry. He was extremely ingratiating, and charming and dressed in a sort of shabby, professorial manner with a tie and a dress shirt and a regular jacket; none of us were like that. We were very sloppy, paint-smearing art students. He had a few strange phonograph records around; he played for us jazz, very antique jazz recordings. He didn't have very many records around; he had a huge collection somewhere but I never saw it. They were old and scratchy records, a lot of hillbilly music, and there were his own paintings that were sort of like Paul Klee's; I guess Klee would be the nearest thing. One of them had a humanoid made up out of triangles and it had the letters S-S-S-S coming out of its mouth that later proved to be an illustration of someone turning on, or smoking dope. None of us had ever had much to do with that either. He was a very mysterious but intriguing character.

*Was he already doing the paintings of the music?*

No. Actually, it seemed that most of the work he was doing was somewhat along the lines of...the name eludes me...they were cut-out collage work, old steel engravings from the last century... Max Ernst. Max Ernst put out a very influential book of collages and these works of Harry's were very much in that vein. He'd also done the same thing with copy or text, and cut it up and rearranged it, so that it took on a different meaning than originally intended, and it was put under the illustrations. They were extremely neat and well-executed. He had a series of them on one wall. As it turned out, collage was a medium he worked in all of his life and the films that he's best known for are all collage films.

*So he was already interested in the Surrealist idea of automatic writing and the randomness.*

Right. As a matter of fact, at that time, I would characterize Harry as being highly influenced by Surrealism and Dadaism. Sometimes, when we'd go up to visit with him, we'd play that game, "Exquisite Corpse," which he introduced us to. It was a typical thing one might do, among other things, when visiting Harry. So we'd listen to his music, play with the "Exquisite Corpse," and scrutinize the strange

collages. He always had some interesting books around. I know he had a book on Méliès, for example.

*Who's Méliès?*

Georges Méliès was a French filmmaker. He was the one that made *Trip to the Moon*, back at the turn of the century. He was a magician and he became aware that film was a perfect medium for magic tricks. He did dozens, hundreds of trick films.

*When did you see that Harry started studying the correspondence between sound and color and experimenting with different media?*

Well, it was soon after getting to know Harry and visiting with him a number of times, and he had also been to my studio; that was just about the time a series of avant-garde films were being shown at the San Francisco Museum of Art. It was called Art in Cinema, a rather well-known, famous series. That's where I got to see for the first time, Oskar Fischinger, Norman McLaren, the Whitney Brothers, and other pioneer abstract filmmakers that were shown, as well as other types of material, such as Surrealist films like *Un Chien Andalou*. And I remember being at Harry's once when he received a call from the director of those film programs asking what the appropriate music would be to play along with *Un Chien Andalou*. And he immediately snapped back Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde* which was the music played when it was originally shown. So he already had encyclopedic knowledge in two or three areas that I know of; he knew a lot about experimental film, folk music and jazz, and art, also. I think he was trying to actually instigate a number of Dadaistic events whenever possible.

*Like what?*

Doing outrageous things. There was this crippled black student that hung around with our crowd and one time, we were sitting in a restaurant with Harry and he put mustard on this fellow's finger and decided to gnaw on it in a mock ferocious way. We were all disgusted, of course. And I remember he would do things like taking a hairbrush and pounding on the back of his hand and then rotating his

hand, his arm, very rapidly, so that blood would appear on all the little spots where the brush had hit, and he would lick a slug from the garden, anything that would get a strong reaction. They were all relatively harmless. I understand that as he got older and got more deeply into drinking and drug-taking in New York City, he was more outrageous than when he was still a relatively mild youth in Berkeley. I guess he was about twenty years old.

*Actually, he was twenty-three. He was born, I think, in 1923.*

Oh really? I was born in '26 and he always seemed a little older, but he was never open about things like that; he'd make up stories, be mysterious. He knew a lot about Northwest American Indians, too. Apparently, he had studied anthropology at the University of Washington.

*I also think he grew up partly on a Lummi reservation, because his mother was a teacher there, so he must have had some early contact with a lot of the Native culture.*

Right. He was engaged in a certain amount of scholarly work, transcribing some folktales, myths, and whatnot. He claimed he was a teaching assistant in the Anthropology Department on the Berkeley campus but I don't believe that's true. I never saw any indication that he'd even been on campus. I think possibly the reason he might have come to Berkeley was that there was a well-known folklorist teaching there. I think his name was Paul Radin. What was it about Harry that got you interested in writing a work about him?

*Well, the first time we met we started talking and didn't stop for about three hours and talked about all kinds of things that I didn't even know I knew. I think he kind of tapped into some universal source of memory. And what really fascinated me was the way he associated different things and how he kind of really observed patterns and found correspondences from one to the other. I read somewhere that very early on when he was young, he started wanting to record some Indian dances on the reservation where his mother was teaching and where he partly grew up. And in recording Indian dances, he started finding a method of taking notes, and*



Harry Smith with August Martin, Jimmy Morrice, and Patrick George of the Lummi tribe, *American Magazine*, March 1943.

*transcribing these dances, that was visual, and at that point the notes were so interesting themselves that he started getting interested in music in relation to existence. And I think the basis of a lot of his work is to see those connections; he is an alchemist of those connections. That really resonated with me. So I wanted to ask you about his first experiments with sound and color...*

Rani Singh sent me a photograph of Harry on the reservation recording some chiefs; you must try to get hold of it. It was in a magazine article about a young boy-anthropologist recording Indians; he was probably was sixteen or seventeen years old. It shows him inside a teepee with a wire recorder or whatever recorder was used in those days [Harry is shown with a phonograph-recording apparatus] and the Indians are around a fire, all dressed in full regalia. The article tells a little bit about Harry and what he was doing. She found the

picture in a boy's magazine, like *Boy's Life*, something from the early '50s. Anyway, I think Art in Cinema had a big stimulating effect upon him wanting to produce moving pictures and sound together in a way that he'd never done before. I know that it had that effect on me and a few other artists.

So, I'm just trying to fill you in on what got him started along those lines. He very industriously got to work, painting directly onto the film. It was rather amusing to watch him do that. He would have the clean film, with a thin coat of emulsion on it so that it would hold the dye, and a lot of colored inks, and a mouth atomizer that artists use for spraying on their drawings. He used it for painting, which was a good trick. I, myself, eventually started using the mouth atomizer. He would block out certain areas of the frame with pressure-sensitive tape, gummed labels that were cut in circles or squares or things of that sort, and stick them onto the film. And then he would spray the ink on it, on the parts that were not covered, so it would soak up the colors and texture. And then he spread petroleum jelly all over the film. Then he removed the tape and that would allow him to spray another color on there, inside the areas that had been previously covered, without affecting the areas that had the jelly on it. This is a technique that he sometimes referred to as his "batik" technique. He had some concept of the meaning of these circles and squares and triangles. I was never too clear on just what they meant to him. He did five or ten minutes of that kind of stuff and then he turned to other ways of making films. He was using the camera, but no longer painting on the film. He got paint all over this nice room that he had. He did it on the floor, so that the floor was sprayed these different colors, and generally made a mess of this room, which was previously remarkably neat, neater than any room he stayed in would ever be again, I suspect. From that point on, I know that the various places he lived in were always tiny little rooms, no bigger than a large closet, usually, and he'd crowd everything that he owned into it. So he had things hanging from the ceiling and things hanging from the bed; there was no room to move around at all; he just moved from furniture to furniture without ever touching the floor.

*I remember you saying that not many people realize that his paintings are more important, in a way, or at least as important as his films.*



Harry Smith with his mural at Jimbo's Bop City, ca. 1950. (Photograph by Hy Hirsh.)

More important, I think, but films seem to have more of an influence on people than painting, for some reason.

*When did he make those paintings to music?*

He didn't paint those in Berkeley. He painted those some two years or so later when he moved to San Francisco, into a rather disreputable neighborhood called the Fillmore District. He had his own motivations for doing that. He'd gotten a little room right over an afterhours jazz joint, where musicians would come and play.

*Was that Jimbo's Bop City?*

Jimbo's Bop City. It was very important to him. Apparently, he got very seriously interested in bebop music, particularly Dizzy Gillespie's work, and all of these paintings that you're referring to were synchronized to Dizzy Gillespie's classics and the bop mode. On the slides that I have he wrote the name of the music that goes with the painting. There are about ten of those paintings, I guess, and a whole



Harry Smith with his "brain drawings," ca. 1950. (Photograph by Hy Hirsh.)

bunch of drawings that he also made at the same time, but I don't think the drawings had too much to do with the music. He called them "brain drawings." The meaning of them is somehow immediately apparent; I guess you'd describe them as automatic drawings, which allow a certain freedom for the hand to move without too much interference from the mind, from the subconscious.

*And was he doing the "brain drawings" around 1950?*

Yes.

*I heard descriptions of Harry showing his films to the musicians at Jimbo's Bop City, who would just improvise music on the film. Were you ever there when that happened?*

He did that. I was never at Jimbo's, but I did see him do that at the San Francisco Museum of Art. Somehow it was arranged that he would have an evening of film showings and a lecture. He had some live musicians there, at that time. He used to show his hand-painted films at different speeds; he'd never really settled on any one tempo for them;

either he'd run the projector real slow or speed it up. I don't think he ever really had any definite music in mind for them, because he kept changing the soundtrack throughout the years depending on what his interests were at the time, I guess. I'm not sure what music went along with those hand-painted ones. He considered the bop musicians to be some kind of geniuses and he never failed to promote them and their music whenever he could. He tried to get Hilla Rebay of the Guggenheim Museum interested. He did manage to reach her with some paintings that he did in that non-objective style, and promised her that he could make some films that looked just like the paintings. She financed those particular films and made it possible for him to go to New York. He did make those films. They were called *Film Studies* or something like that, and they were all based on those paintings.

*I also read somewhere, that with these correspondences between different things, he was noticing the rhythm of the breathing, and that we breathe thirteen times a minute (I think that's what he said), and that our heart beats seventy-two times a minute; he kind of interlocked those two rhythms in different sequences, and used them as rhythms for the images of his films. I guess you would call it his observation of patterns of human activity.*

He always maintained that he was trying to analyze or study the phenomena of creativity and he had a lot of theories about it that I didn't always understand or agree with. The one about the breathing and the heartbeat eluded me. I never saw his films in that way, and I never remember him insisting upon anybody seeing them that way.

*I just thought it was really interesting that he was constantly observing natural patterns and then taking them in creatively in his own artwork. It seems to me this correspondence between things inspired him a lot.*

I think his paintings are more infinitely subtle and sophisticated than his films; there's a whole world of difference there. He was always very embarrassed about art; he never really liked being thought of as an artist. Generally speaking, he had nothing but insults and sarcasm for most art and most artists. He preferred to think of himself as an anthropologist, and not acknowledge himself as an artist; but he

obviously excelled at it. Nevertheless, he always spoke of the work that he did produce as “excreta.”

*Excreta, like excrement?*

Yes. He’s written about it.

*It’s always hard to answer questions like this but what would you see as his most important contribution, if you had to think of it in those terms?*

I think he was a truly inspired student of alchemy. He understood it perfectly and seemed to practice it to some extent. All the books and charts and things that he would make show that he had a really clear grasp of magick and alchemy and occultism to the point where he was probably as fully informed about it as anybody could be. When it comes to art, I think those paintings that were synchronized to Dizzy Gillespie’s music as well as the series of non-objective paintings that he submitted to the Guggenheim Museum were remarkable.

*What were the non-objective paintings like?*

Have you seen that book *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Paintings 1890–1985* that the Los Angeles Museum of Art put out about four or five years ago?

*No. Actually, could you describe them a bit?*

They were mostly circles and rectangles, like the ones I spoke about before, and he did eight of them, all on one sheet of paper; each one was a little gem in itself and could easily stand alone. They represented moments in a film that he was contemplating making.

*So he kind of did drawings as notes for paintings and paintings as notes for films and...*

Yes. He was always interested in the 3-D stereoscopic phenomenon, a sort of old-fashioned thing, but very much in keeping with Harry’s personality, and he got to understand it pretty well; he knew the theory

behind it and did a series of paintings that were three-dimensional in the stereographic sense of the word. In other words, you put them in a stereoscope and see them as three-dimensional. So he did a series of those which he sent to the Guggenheim Museum in New York, hoping to get the director to finance a three-dimensional non-objective film. He sent her these stereoscopic paintings and he also sent a stereoscope for her to see them.

*What year did he do that?*

About 1952, I’d guess.

*So he was in San Francisco then?*

Right.

*Did you guys hang out together in San Francisco?*

Yes. He’d come over to my studio or I’d go to his whenever possible. We’d go to the movies, or to eat at restaurants together, or go to other friends’ houses and listen to music.

*What were you working on then?*

During that period, I was doing some film work which involved painting on long scrolls of paper. And Harry would come and work on those brain drawings, or sometimes he would make a painting with anything that was around just to get into the creative mode and do something. I’ve got a collection of things that he did while visiting. We were a group of people interested in the same sort of things and Harry was one of the figures in that group.

*Who else was there?*

Well, there was another filmmaker named Hy Hirsh, but he was a little older than myself. He and Harry always had an argument about everything imaginable, about different kinds of music, different kinds of art. Hy was a professional photographer who had a job at



Harry Smith, ca. 1970. (Photograph by John Palmer.)

the Legion of Honor in San Francisco. He was their staff photographer. His job was to photograph the paintings and art objects for their files. He was very generous to Harry and myself with his knowledge about photography, and he had equipment he was willing to loan. He took some very good pictures of Harry at Bop City, posed in front of a couple of gigantic murals that he did there. I think he painted them in lieu of rent. I think Jimbo owned the building. I've never known him to pay rent, or to pay for anything, actually.

*I think nobody has.*

He had a different attitude about money, different from anybody else that I've ever known.

*Who else was there?*

There was an attractive young Australian woman named Patricia Marx, who was sort of a protégée of his. For a while she also started to make some films there. There were a lot of musicians, artists...

*In what way, as you suggested before, did you see him as practicing alchemy?*

I remember him living in this room in the Bronx. He had a huge magic circle painted on the floor, and of course, the only way to get into the room was to step right into the magic circle, because he had it painted right in front of the door. But he didn't want you to step in the magic circle, so you had to leap over it onto the bed which was nearby; it was the only place you could land. Anyway, he claimed he used the magic circle to invoke some kind of magical presence or force and he claimed that it worked: some fleshy object appeared in the circle. I suspect it did. He knew a lot about Aleister Crowley and studied everything Crowley had written, and he had a complete set of Crowley's publication, *The Equinox*.

*To me his work is, in a way, alchemy, and maybe a good title for the book could be "A Modern Alchemist."*

Could be. He definitely saw himself that way. I can't help it but when I think of Harry, I think of Rumpelstiltskin; he also managed to turn straw into gold in his own way. I think he was trying to do that and would extract his extreme price for doing so.

*In what way?*

When the first born was tricked into giving up the prize by someone getting his name, he got so angry that he pounded the floor with his foot till a hole opened up and he fell in and was never heard from again. I mean, Harry used to have some anger like that too; he was very self-destructive; he'd tear his own clothes, tear his own work, pull the fire-alarm lever. Joanne Ziprin told me a story: when she worked for Harry, doing a film called *Wizard of Oz*, or actually, I think the real name was *The Tin Woodsman's Dream* or *The Approach to Emerald City*, she was doing a very elaborate drawing and they got into a fight about one aspect of the drawing he didn't like and he got so worked up about it, he tore it into a thousand pieces and Joanne left. But she had to come back because she forgot something and Harry was on the floor, picking up the pieces and putting them back together.