

PARAGRAPHS ON AESTHETICS FROM UNPUBLISHED 1962 TEXTS

*Jackson Mac Low/Henry Flynt abridgement*

In 1961–62, I sent Jackson Mac Low a number of manuscripts including “Philosophy Proper,” “Anthology of Non-Philosophical Cultural Works,” “Noscol,” “Creep,” “My New Concept of General Acognitive Culture.” Mac Low wrote two substantial responses to this work which remained unpublished — the essay “KOH,” and a letter of December 1962. The title “KOH” was suggested to Mac Low by Dennis Johnson’s piece in *An Anthology* (1963): “let HF assume there exists a KOH such tha” [sic]. The puns on hydrofluoric acid and potassium hydroxide accorded with the polemical cast of Mac Low’s essay.

In his responses, Mac Low played to my terminology and agenda to the extent of using phrases he would not otherwise have used, such as “Serious Culture” for *the fine arts*. Evidently I did not write out my critique of Serious Culture until 1963 — what Mac Low had to go on was my sweeping rejection of claims that art embodied cognitive achievements.

“My New Concept of General Acognitive Culture” said that after “the arts” had been divested of their cognitive claims, it would be evident that they should be replaced by certain subjective moments. I later coined the terms “veramusement” and “brend.” In the 1962 formulation I used the cumbersome phrase “new general acognitive culture” — that is what Mac Low was reacting to.

The purpose of this abridgement is to consolidate Mac Low’s statements which apply broadly, not just to my texts. In some cases, phrases had to be recast as declarative sentences; that required supplying pronominal referents, or paraphrasing the referents in the case of two sentences from the letter.

March 26, 1997

. . .

All human beings are of the same species, share a common human nature, and are inextricably embedded in “social relations” — all these supposedly separate “selves” are continually and inevitably interpenetrating.

It is necessary to have a sense of community and of the essentially social nature of human beings. It is necessary to affirm the tradition running from Aristotle through Martin Buber to such a contemporary writer as Paul Goodman. The latter, in his *Utopian Essays*, defines “community” as “people using each other as resources,” and explicates the proposition that human beings (you and I) are fundamentally social animals by pointing out “that before Ego was, We were: that sociality is not ‘an “interpersonal” agreement between individuals,’ but acceptance of the fact that we are already together.” (I quote from Stoughton Lynd’s article on the book in the June 1962 *Liberation*.<sup>1</sup>)

It is likely that there is a continuum, or rather a continuous field, containing "Serious Culture," institutionalized recreation, private recreational activities — and even "work," and "the cognitive." All these activities are inseparably interinvolved in actual life.

Work is possible which is truly creative, work which frees the powers of a person, perfects them, and actualizes them: work **through** which mere potentialities in the person become living actions in the world. "Creative work," in creating its products, also creates a new person out of the old one which initiated the work, that is, work which *re*creates the person.

. . .

My opinions, "principles," etc. (I neither use nor favor usually such terms as "principle" or "righteous") are based on far more than "logic" or verbal acrobatics. (I.e. juggling with premises which are doubtful or incorrect, or concepts that are of some validity but are misapplied or overextended, to arrive at conclusions that are even more doubtful or at least equally incorrect.) There are many kinds of generalizations from my own experience, reading, etc., which are not shakeable by "logic" or verbal acrobatics.

The common usage of "cognition" applies it to all knowing, apprehending, and perceiving. Thus, both such particular perceptions as that statable by the sentence "this leaf is green" and such universal knowledge as that statable by the sentence "All matter is transformable into energy" are included within the dictionary meaning of "cognition."

As I would use the term "cognitive activity" [it] includes at least two types of activity: coming to know something, and knowing something, and possibly a third: making someone else know something.

Many works of "literary culture" and even some works of "science fiction" are obviously "cognitive" — i.e., some even state certain true beliefs in so many words.

Many literary works cause readers to hold as their own various beliefs, some of which are true. Even if one grants that coming to hold a true belief because it is stated convincingly in a literary work (with or without certain proofs or evidence) is inferior to coming to hold a true belief because it is rigorously proved in a philosophical or scientific work — nevertheless — can one say that a work which causes readers to hold true beliefs in any way is worthless? It does cause the reader to *know* something which he didn't know before — it causes him to hold as true a true belief.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, in the ordinary sense of "cognitive," some works of art have this kind of cognitive value. In ordinary words, they teach certain truths. Such truths are conveyed not only by literary works but also by certain works of visual art, which state by means of symbols true beliefs which can also be conveyed in verbal propositions.

Even if such visual works seldom cause viewers to hold true beliefs without their having been convinced also by words, it can be urged that they perform the important function of reminding viewers of certain truths. In that they reinforce

true beliefs brought about by verbal and other types of teaching, these works also have a kind of “cognitive value.”

However, this kind of “cognitive value” is not the most important one contained in works of art. Most importantly, they *present, point out*, cause us to *perceive* the various elements and relations contained in them. One comes to “know” the art objects or processes themselves. All works of Serious Culture have at least this kind of “cognitive value”: they provoke in some viewers the activity of perceiving its elements, apprehending the relations between them, and thus coming to know the object or process as a whole.

Some persons can perceive and make perceptible to others certain kinds of sensations, relations, etc., which others might never perceive if they didn’t go to the trouble to make works of art which cause such perceptions.

Thus, artists of all sorts are primarily (whatever else they are) *givers, sharers* of perceptions and experiences which they find important. Just because all people share a common human nature but have different individual contributions and biographies, there is potentially an infinite amount of giving and sharing possible.

. . .

The fact that “society” institutionalizes such activities and attaches to them undue prestige and the wrong kinds of prestige should not make people repudiate such activities, but neither should it cause people to be ashamed of those activities of their own which are not of this nature — which are “merely private,” “for fun,” “just liked,” etc. The fact is that most artists engage in *both* kinds of activity with few (if any) conscience pangs.

If there is *any* activity which has *no* cognitive value in the ordinary sense (that is, if there is any activity through which we learn absolutely nothing) even that needs no justification if it is *enjoyed* by the person doing it.

. . .

How many of us are not thoroughly enraged at the kinds of prestige and snob approval attached to many artists, art works, and artistic activities, and fed up with the entertainment and athletics industries and the celebrities thrown up by them to public notice and forced continually on our attention by the mass media!

How many of us do not at first eagerly welcome an analysis which supposedly discredits both “Serious Culture” and institutionalized entertainment/recreation in order to free us to do the things we “just like” without being ashamed of them, even though we still have to do, as “*work*,” many things we don’t like!

But: why is it necessary to “discredit” *all* Serious Culture (etc.) and *all* recreation and entertainment “in Forms provided by society” in order for people to take their private recreational activities outside the “Forms” seriously? Wouldn’t it be simpler to urge people to affirm their own recreational activities as valuable in themselves even though they are outside both “Serious Culture” and institutionalized recreation?

Most of us indulge in idiosyncratic forms of self-entertainment anyway with no fears that they may be less valuable than art and other embodied culture. Or we have no qualms about indulging in them even if they may be less valuable than art and other embodied culture.

Wouldn't it be possible for people to carry on the activities they "just like" unashamedly even if there are also real values both in *some* "Serious Cultural" activities and in *some* recreational activities in "Forms provided by society"?

What is needed is not a discrediting of all Serious Cultural activities and conventional recreational activities (even though *some* of each may merit discrediting for reasons specific to them). What is needed is a simple polemic against improper kinds of prestige, exaggerations of the value of artistic activities as against more private, self-contained ones.

### NOTES

1. As Mac Low says, the quote comes from Lynd. In full,

Community, as beautifully defined in *Utopian Essays*, means people using each other as resources. It means recognizing the ur-truth that human beings (which is to say: you and I) are fundamentally social animals; that before Ego was, We were; that sociality is not an "interpersonal" agreement between individuals, but acceptance of the fact that we are already together.

Staughton Lynd, "If Not Now, When?" in *Liberation*, June 1962, p. 19.

2. An interesting riposte to Logical Constructivism.