

Henry in 1961 (photo by George Maciunas, MoMA collection)

RH: I met Henry in the mid-1970s and began visiting him regularly at his apartment in New York just to talk. As he became more relaxed and forthcoming, I asked if I could record some of our conversations. He agreed and this is nearly all of our first session.

RH: It's fascinating talking to you, even more than reading your writing, because despite all your skepticism, you are still incredibly disciplined. Your skepticism doesn't seem to undermine your own projects.

HF: You're talking about skepticism as a trait of personality. I don't have that. My skepticism is a way to uncover contradictions in a system, paradoxes that are supposed to

pull the plug on what people believe. The role that I play is: "you make the rules, you tell me what the rules are, and I will show you that what you have built falls down flat."

When I submitted an early version of "The Flaws Underlying Beliefs" to a philosophy journal, they wrote back: "This is an ingenious note but you haven't defined 'truth' and 'statement'." I didn't even bother to reply to them, because I just decided they were so well-defended against the insight that there was no point. When they tell me I have to define words like 'statement' and 'truth,' are they suggesting that I'm the creator of the English language? Or are they telling me that they don't speak English? If he was going to write anything back, it should have been that I failed to define the word "the." Why wasn't he making an issue of that? I'm getting the words "the" and "truth" out of the same dictionary. If they can't understand that, the only thing I can do is point to my results: Concept Art, for example; my intentions regarding Concept Art as an extension of mathematics.

But I'm certainly not immune to my own findings. What actually happened was, the work that I was doing in '61, '62 was eating into my life skills, to the point where I couldn't even go out to get a sandwich for lunch, and that was an authentic consequence of my philosophy. I realized that my position was simply not viable in terms of being able to live in society. I was ready for a change and at the same time I felt a need to explore radicalism for various reasons. Well, there was one sincere reason: I had already become an extreme revolutionary even before I tried to make any kind of affiliation with the official left because of my disillusionment with the academic world. I mean the discovery that while I was doing things that I knew were important even by their standards, I was just out on the street. Even to this day, twenty years later, there are no channels. If you are smart enough to solve problems that those high and mighty people say they want solved, then they will make sure that you will not have any way of telling anybody about it. So I had already decided it was necessary to completely reorganize society just in order to make it possible for me to do what I wanted.

***RH:** To walk through walls?*

HF: Well, that's another thing. That's another reason for wanting to reorganize society. But I mean just to let me sit in my garret and write. Society wasn't doing that. So I was in favor of what is now called the guaranteed income. I was in favor of that from the time I was age 20 as a personal necessity, not out of humanitarianism, because if there wasn't something like that I was going to starve to death. I felt that my life had come to a dead end and there was a revolutionary tradition that I had independently reached some sort of agreement with, in ways that affected me very personally. And therefore it was a useful thing to do, to get involved with communism. So in 1963 I sold out. I moved to New York to join the Workers World Party. That's what I mean by selling out!

***RH:** Were you in college then?*

HF: No, I was in college from 1957 to 1960 but I continued to live in Cambridge and talk to some of my old instructors for another couple of years.

RH: *It's interesting that you refer to it as "selling out." Most people wouldn't call joining a communist party "selling out" and it seems hypocritical in light of your rejection of rules based on assumptions about things that aren't present.*

HF: Yes. Absolutely. But you could say the same about my writing massive treatises on economics or doing all this scholarly work on physics. I wrote this whole thing about the problem of hypocrisy in my life and the fact that these skills were very self-consciously acquired, and could only be acquired as I developed motives to acquire them.

But I was serious about the left. The reason was that I surmised that this was in some sense the 20th century's Revolution, in the same sense that the French and American revolutions were The Revolutions of the 18th century. That's one of the reasons I wasn't too interested in anarchism, because it just struck me as being like a pose which certain individuals chose to adopt but which was something like a cog that was not connected to the rest of the machinery.

There is a central European radical tradition that runs from Marx to Luxemburg and Trotsky which I have always found more plausible and interesting than the anarchist tradition. It took me a lot longer to start reading the anarchist literature seriously. Jackson Mac Low - you know who he is - he's a big anarchist. That comes very near to being his main interest in life. So I moved to New York and started fooling around with orthodox mainstream Soviet, Chinese political thinking.

RH: *How did you get plugged in to the New York...*

HF: Left?

RH: *No, the avant-garde scene.*

HF: Through Tony Conrad.

RH: *Was he at Harvard?*

HF: Yes. He was in my class. He's my oldest friend, whom I still see today. I think it was the summer of 1959 that he went to San Francisco and met all of those people: Dennis Johnson,¹ Terry Riley, La Monte Young, all of them. Tony told me about them and then I started making these little excursions down to New York to meet La Monte in person. That was in December '59.

But you see, Christian Wolf was also at Harvard. Before I arrived he had already started bringing [John] Cage and all those people and had developed a little group of people around him. There was also a guy in our class named [William] Wilder who was very into Stockhausen, even though he didn't compose like that himself. When La Monte first appeared on the scene, suddenly this split developed between the aristocratic Ivy League

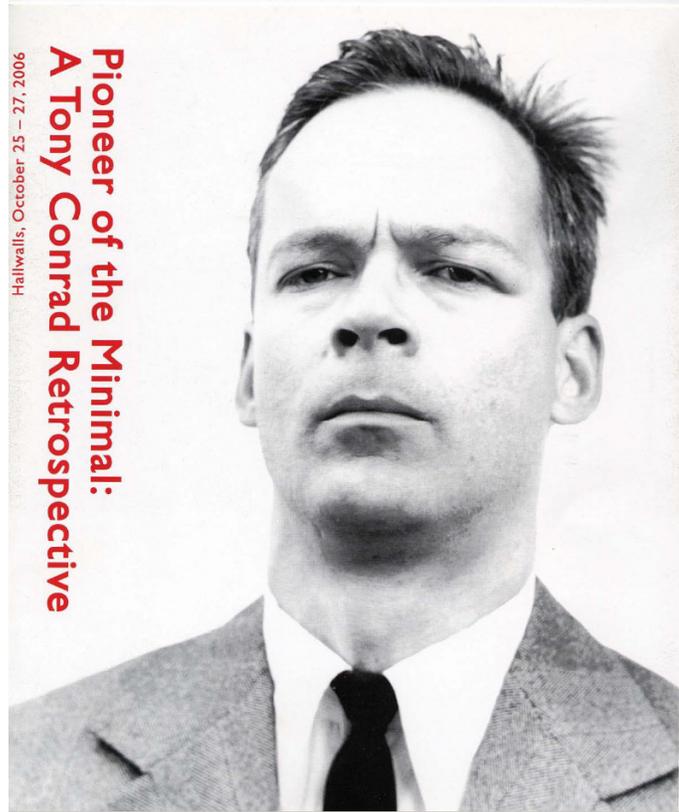
¹ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dennis_Johnson_\(composer\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dennis_Johnson_(composer))

avant garde, represented by people like Wilder and Wolf and Cage, and what they called the "jazz musicians." When Tony got this La Monte Young composition from California and showed it to Wilder, he looked at it and said "I was afraid of what was going to happen when those jazz musicians found out about Cage."

RH: How did you get from the kind of philosophical-mathematical work you were doing to the "craft" avant-garde involved with music and visual art?

HF: At Harvard I was a math major but I was also a musician. I studied music all my life. I was given a violin at an early age and studied music composition in high school. When I got to Harvard I thought the latest thing in music was Bartok and Schoenberg, but this guy Wilder edited a little magazine that had articles by Cage and Wolf and [Morton] Feldman, and he also had a lot of Stockhausen scores and I started imitating them as a composer. That came before everything else that I told you. I was a math major with a minor in physics but I was also composing and I destroyed all that stuff. I mean I was doing pieces that were somewhat like the pieces Xenakis did later. The difference is that he kept his while I burnt mine. They were no longer important to me.

Oh, and George Maciunas: I met him in June or July of '61. George was a lifelong very strong supporter of the Soviet regime. Very consciously so. Nam June Paik and Dick Higgins were basically satellite figures around George. He was the one who brought them together, made them into a movement and promoted them collectively. He was the one who had the idea that they had something in common so he developed a rationalization for them. Fluxus is what he's best known for. Fluxus is Maciunas. This is *Flash Art's* memorial issue for George Maciunas [October-November 1978]. At some point you may want to read this essay about my work with him but not right now. I have nothing to do with Fluxus. That's all explained in the *Flash Art* essay. There was a big joke that Maciunas was actually spying on modern art and sending back plans and diagrams so somewhere in a secret factory in the Urals Russia could catch up with America in modern art just like they had in space, computers and physics.



Catalog cover, Tony Conrad retrospective at HallWalls (Buffalo, NY), 2006



Jack Smith (left) and Henry (right) picketing MoMA, 1963

RH: *Whose rumor was that?*

HF: I think La Monte started that. It wasn't a complete rumor. The only misunderstanding was that some people thought the Soviet government was asking him to do that. George was doing that, but not at the government's request.

RH: *You mean he would send reports to Russia about Fluxus?*

HF: Yes, to say this is what you must catch up with.

RH: *He would write to the Ministry of Culture?*

HF: Absolutely.

RH: *But you don't regard yourself as a Fluxite.*

HF: No. It's explained in the *Flash Art* article. I think the article even says that when I had a couple of pieces published in *V TRE* [Fluxus' irregularly published newspaper] they were printed sideways to indicate my disassociation with the editorial policy of the newspaper.

RH: *Let me ask you a broad question: What do you want?*

HF: I was just getting to something I actually wanted to say. It's interesting to me although I don't know how many other people would be interested: about my affiliation with the left, given this background of what would seem to be totally solipsistic and ego-centered philosophy. I'm flexible enough that I'm interested in anything that has a claim of getting results. There are some results that I'm not interested in, like making a lot of money. Well, I can't really say that because the reason I'm alive now is because I'm wealthy, because I have done very well as an investor, so I can't even honestly say that I'm not interested in that. I'm damned interested in that!

RH: *Do you regard investing as your work?*

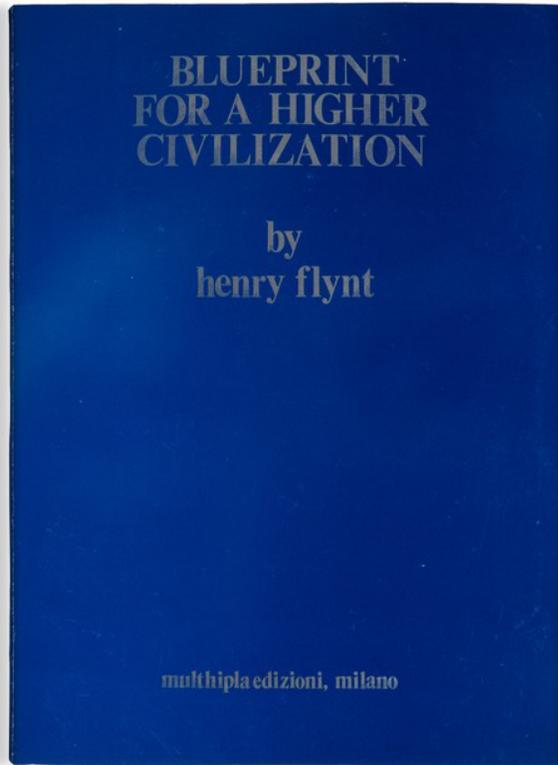
HF: That is my remunerative occupation, yes. But remember that I'm a Marxist economist, among other things, so playing the stock market doesn't interest me so much. I'm much more interested in developing a portfolio which is already discounted so I can keep a steady income stream rolling in. But going back to my affiliation with the left, I have for very personal reasons decided that the question of reorganizing society and abolishing commercialism was important and here were all these socialists with theories that addressed that, and I was willing to listen to them because if something claims to get powerful results, I will listen to it even though I feel that I've already refuted it philosophically. But in addition, I had a great emotional attraction to and respect for people like Trotsky. It's impossible to find figures like that today.

What I'm getting ready to tell you is that I went through this whole period and I can see now that the point of it was to immerse myself in this stuff and come out of it with *my* theory of revolution, not theirs. And you know it took a long time but I've got it now. I can give you models for revolution which are far closer to my philosophy than Marxism is. There's a science fiction book called *Agent of Chaos* by Norman Spinrad. If you want to understand a little about me, it would be useful to read it. It's about a group called the Brotherhood of Assassins, which has a political philosophy based on concepts of entropy and chaos, the idea of instead of merely replacing one establishment with another, that you should sabotage every political faction at random. When I got the book, I wrote down all the theoretical propositions on society and theology and politics and I analysed them independently of the novel and decided that the whole thing was just absolute bloody hogwash. It's really just a joke. But for fictional purposes Spinrad creates a character named Gregor Markowitz, who was the Brotherhood's patristic theoretician, a sort of a humorous analog of Marx, whose Theory of Social Entropy is quoted in the way

that Russians quote Marx. But I took it seriously enough to spend an awful lot of time on it.

I have this idea that western civilization has made three contributions which I think are admirable. To me that is a remarkable statement, because at first blush it's hard to find very much that is admirable about western civilization. But I think we have done three things that have not been done in India or China. The first is the idea that mythology is bad. I don't think that any other civilization has said that. Instead the skeptical tradition of Descarte, Hume and Kant has prevailed. I keep forgetting the third contribution - I'll have to look it up in my notes - but the second one is the vocation of the professional revolutionary. I think that is unique to western civilization and I have a great deal of respect for that.

The whole consciousness of European societies is profoundly workerist. They have a mystique of the Common Man as the worker who has his own political interests antagonistic to the ruling class. We don't have that conception in the United States, and I've come to believe that people like Trotsky and Luxemburg were played for fools by that mystique. Things don't really work that way but they assumed that they do. After 15 years of mulling this over, I'm convinced this was one of their big miscalculations. But I have enough respect for these people that I spent an enormous amount of time on them even though presumably I had dismissed them intellectually in a couple of sentences. I don't know if you want to turn the microphone off but I want to pull some more manuscripts out. There's something in the "Philosophical Aspects of Walking through Walls"² which answers your question:



Cover of *Blueprint for a Higher Civilization*
Milano: Multhipla Edizioni, 1975

² The following "afterthoughts" are from "Philosophical Reflections" (1996) on Henry's website (<http://henryflynt.org/philosophy/reflect.html>): "It is with immense gratification that I can say that 'Philosophical Aspects of Walking Through Walls'... has long since ceased to be an emblem of my program. The work of the last fifteen years labelled 'meta-technology' and 'person-world analysis' is vastly superior in exhibiting the direction. 'Philosophical Aspects of Walking Through Walls' is of lesser quality than my other early writings - I would say now, because it doesn't know where to position meta-technology. For the level of dissolution it wants, walking through a wall would be a trivial, unrepresentative feat. What I called for in conjunction with 'Walking Through

"From a different tradition, the critique of scientific fact and of measurable time which is suggested in Lukács' 'Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat' might be of value if it were developed. (Lukács also implied that scientific truth would disappear in a communist society - that is, a society without necessary labor, in which the right to subsistence was unconditional. He implied that scientific quantification and facticity are closely connected with the work discipline required by the capitalist mode of production and that like the price system they constitute a false objectivity which we accept because the socioeconomic institutions deprive us of subsistence if we fail to submit to them. Quite aside from the historical unlikelihood of a communist society, this suggestion might be pursued as a thought experiment to obtain a more detailed characterization of the hypothetical post-scientific outlook.)"³

That is the link between what I'm doing and the kind of ultra-radical Marxism that has been rejected by all the official Marxists. It says we need a pure communist society so we can abolish reality.³ Does that sound strange to you?

RH: *You're crediting that to contemporary Soviet ideology?*

HF: No no no! I'm saying it's the opposite extreme.

RH: *But you're arguing for a fully communist society so we can abolish reality.*

HF: Maybe I shouldn't have used the word "reality" there. I was being polemical and it could lead to misunderstandings. We need a pure communist society so that a current layer of delusions, a sediment of philosophical delusions, can be eliminated.

RH: *Are you still active in communist organizations?*

HF: I was in this wretched little organization for a few years and then I left. My attitude now is that I'm a full-time professional revolutionary. The reason why the only visible results are written documents is because I see no basis for doing anything else. I mean I'm not going to go out like some of the people in the New School and work with a labor union because they think you accumulate brownie points in heaven for having been inside of a union hall. That's the workerism I was talking about. I'm not terribly interested in Marxism. I was. I went through a big period of it. but I don't believe in that anymore. There's nothing to do. It's hard to figure out how to put together any kind of revolutionary movement that would not be just an obvious shuck.

Walls' was not abstruse results or pinpoint techniques, but the total dissolution of the inherited world at the level of everyday life. Whatever one thinks of personhood theory or the research on higher civilization (or my invocation of Lukács), the demand in question cannot even be given a content without such mediations."

³ *Blueprint for a Higher Civilization* (Milano: Multhipla Edizioni, 1975), page 19.

Another thing that I talk about in "Philosophical Aspects of Walking through Walls" is the character damage to ordinary people, which is something I'm deeply concerned about. If people are in the kind of shape where they just want to disco all night and get blown away on coke or punk bands... Sometimes people have said to me we need some sort of great theoretical genius to hand down all the answers from the top of the mountain. Of course the obvious problem with that is that if people have that kind of dependency relationship then it's inevitable that they are going to be suckers for the next demagogue that comes along. The question is how to de-infantilize people, to give them enough background to arrive at a pre-revolutionary situation. I mean we are not in a pre-revolutionary situation. We are in a NON-pre-revolutionary situation. My friend John Alten is deeply concerned with that, with programs of political action. He thinks that there could be a viable commune movement to plant the seeds for revolution. He thinks the commune movement of the 60s failed because of inadequate theory. I actually criticize his trust that there could be a viable commune movement. I'm very skeptical of that. I think one reason he thinks that revolution has to take place through the formation of communes is that character has to be remolded first before one can go out and address larger problems. I don't know if that's true but I'm willing to listen because it so obviously addresses an obvious difficulty in the situation.

The Genius' Liberation Project was supposed to be the point at which I finally emerged from all this Marxism into a revolutionary program which was consistent with my philosophy. It was the idea that a few people would go into a loft and would start functioning in accordance with some of the suggestions I have tried to make for an alternative reality - I'm using that phrase for the purposes of this conversation where I can't really pick precise terms. Of course that phrase has been so devalued, but that's another problem. The idea is to have people begin functioning together with a different set of epistemological rules. This project had among its other consequences the disappearance of the natural language and other things which are an integral part of my philosophical/political program. If this had worked, the idea was that in the process of doing all these things they would move into a lifeworld that was so gratifying that it would begin to suck other people in and also give a tremendous power to manipulate the surrounding society.

***RH:** Wouldn't there be a risk that they would end up just being so skew to the surrounding society that they wouldn't be able to influence it?*

HF: Actually it never got anywhere near to getting off the ground. I don't know what would happen. I really don't. The incredible thing is how unprepared people are for something like that and I may be unprepared for it, too. Just like my relationship with Christer [Hennix]. We have become extremely close colleagues but the nature of our personal relationship is such that even we, who share a horror of everyday life and what we might call normal attitudes, and who feel that one should be occupying oneself with great and noble things - the only way we have of communicating these kinds of experiences emotionally to nonintellectuals is with sound environments or something like that.

RH: Did you meet Christer recently?

HF: Oh no. He found out about me when I gave a private concert of hillbilly music at La Monte's loft in 1969. He was at that. We began to talk to each other as he began to study logic, coming out of his masters degree in linguistics. But what I wanted to say is that I could not go into a commune situation even with Christer because he has his mind filled with all this pedantic knowledge, what I sometimes refer to in a sneering way in my essays as "stable positive truth." That is his god. It is so deep in his personality that the idea of spending 24 hours a day in the same room with him is just out of the question, even though we are extremely close in other ways. I'm mentioning that because the idea of getting together 5 or 10 people to do this was so out of the question. I think it would be a tremendous thing but we aren't even remotely in the preconditions for it.



Catherine Christer Hennix

RH: It's sort of like your Perception-Dissociator Model.⁴

HF: Now that you bring it up, there's a parallel because you have a community in which people are relating to each other in nonstandard channels, that's true. But the Perception Dissociator was a ritualized thing for people to go into, go through and come back out of. They would experience it as an alien thing that was done to them even though they are the thing which is alienated. It is deliberately alienating them from themselves. Whereas in the Genius' Liberation Project the idea was to bring out the best in people. It ought to be de-alienating. If it wasn't, something would be terribly wrong. I can send you the Genius' Liberation Project. And something that I wrote about dismembering my Marxist experience called "Cliocide: the Case for Seceding from History."⁵ The whole point of that was to refute the notion that history is morality. Which is one of the deepest ideas in Marxism, that morality is derived from the grand sweep and march of history. I reject that completely, saying history is just going off the edge of a precipice, as far as I'm concerned, and I have no intention of going along with it. I must make rules for myself which do not acquiesce to insanity.

⁴ "Exhibit of a Working Model of a Perception-Dissociator": Chapter 13 in *Blueprint for a Higher Civilization* (pages 131-151).

⁵ <http://www.henryflynt.org/overviews/selectedunpublished.html>

RH: *Could you say a bit more about your Marxist investment strategy, which you touched on earlier? Maybe that's not engaging with history in any deep way but you're certainly betting on time values.*

HF: When I was an active communist, I happened to get a little job in the research department of Bache & Company [a stock brokerage]. And as it turned out there was a guy who was really high up there who was below me in the party. And my assignment was to indoctrinate him



Henry at Zentrum für Kunst und Medien Karlsruhe, 2013

as a communist, yet at the same time he was a senior institutional analyst for the petroleum industry. And I was essentially just a typist. There was another guy named Michael Hudson at the New School. He had read Marx although I wouldn't call him a Marxist. He was a very interesting thinker about international finance who could draw on Marxism to analyze the current financial scene. I wanted to get those two guys together and write a pop book called "The Marxist-Leninist Strategy for Making a Killing in the Market."

RH: *I can see the three of you going on "Wall Street Week" on PBS to promote the book!*

HF: But that's another thing that never came off. So instead of answering your question, if you give me a contract, I'll write the book. But it would take a helluva lot of money to make me want to bother with it now.

END

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