



These letters have been assembled from the archive of the Scottish arts center, Beauty's Delight, which was active from 1973–92. Written by its first director, Joe McGinn, the correspondence casts some light on the earliest activities that took place around the center and on the thinking behind its foundation. The majority of the letters were written to Arno Valk in Rotterdam, carbon copies of which are preserved in the archive. Certain references have been annotated here by the editor.

Cover image: Arlo Stark-Hanson, *Black Rainbow*, watercolor on paper, 2005. Reproduced with kind permission for a modest fee

March 21, 1973

The Bear sent me a letter. I wasn't sure he would get it together enough to do that, or that he would take time writing to a stranger, but he said "you are a far away freak and you need the nourishment ..."

Since his release from prison he's been working on a vision that was born in Watts during an Acid Test. They found a derelict auto repair garage and turned up with some 30 gallon buckets to mix Kool-Aid. Owsley had brought some glass ampules of his pure acid brew and dropped them in when everything was ready. "50 micrograms per Dixie cup," he reckoned, "6 cups = one good trip." But the math was out and it was actually 300 micrograms per cup. Too late! Bear says he could SEE the sound pouring from the speakers in waves, flowing across the room. "I knew then," he says, "that acid was a pathway to another place. It gave me access to the mental powers known to the Rosicrucians and alchemists. Now I'm not an electrical engineer or a chemist, I'm an artist."

Later in the same letter he declares, "What psychedelics are showing me is more real, perhaps, than my everyday life, which is under the sway of a restricted consciousness ..." I can dig what he's saying. It reminds me of Ronnie Laing's mantras on acid and DMT in Kingsley Hall. Nora and I stayed there for about a week with our room under invasion every night from new believers, all dressed like men of course ...

April 7, 1973

You asked me about black and white psychedelia. I immediately thought of the black and white ball that Truman Capote organized in New York, but somehow I confused it with another event where all the guests turned up dressed as skyscrapers.\* Nora shamed me, though, when I mentioned this to her. She reminded me of the time when Charlie Mingus met Tim Leary and asked him to talk him through the benefits of acid (as if Mingus needed that—I mean, what was *Oh Yeah* if not a psychedelic primer buried in bass notes). But anyway, Leary told him, and as Charlie hung out a considerable amount with that Millbrook gang I'm sure he got the gist, but still he told Leary: "You've got nothing for Harlem, man. Nothing for the

workers, the people who go to their jobs, the people who get up at six.”  
Now THAT’s a genuine critique of your black & white psychedelia ...

\* McGinn is almost certainly thinking of the 1931 Beaux Arts Ball, where more than a dozen New York architects came dressed as their buildings, including A. Stewart Walker (Fuller Building), Leonard Schultze (Waldorf-Astoria), Ely Jacques Kahn (Squibb Building), William Van Alen (Chrysler Building), Ralph Walker (1 Wall Street), D.E. Ward (Metropolitan Tower), Joseph H. Freedlander (Museum of New York). Interestingly, Kahn’s Squibb building was home to the pharmaceutical company, Squibb & Sons who played a small but fascinating role in the history of cannabis in America. In the 1930s the herb was under siege as a “killer drug,” despite its use in medicine at that time. As the *Psychedelic’s Encyclopedia* states:

“‘At that time,’ comments Larry Sloman in his *Reefer Madness*, ‘cannabis was going for 38 cents a pound on the licit market.’ The year before, some 20 firms using hempseed oil in products such as soap, paint and linoleum had imported more than 30,000 tons of seeds, which became contraband under the new law because they could be used to grow plants. The only exception allowed was for sterilized seed for the birdseed industry, then producing four million pounds annually. Industry lobbyists maintained that birds deprived of Cannabis seeds would not sing. The Narcotics Bureau hinted originally that special provisions would be made for medical usage but did not follow through. At the time, 28 medicinal Cannabis preparations were made available for sale by companies such as Parke-Davis, Squibb, and Lilly. Packages of marijuana cigarettes were even being sold as a cure for asthma. The new law put all of these products out of existence, and in 1941 the drug was dropped from the *American Pharmacopoeia*—after about a century of widespread use.”

April 12, 1973

A bad trip. Witch pictures and birdmash. Pigs, bullfrogs, and, naturally, figs. My mind, capsized. Hold tight: dipping beneath the waves, pearls for eyes on the ocean floor, tilling a trench while the fish swim by and the watchdogs bark.

No. To hell with language—all the metaphors and mutation. Actually, I just sat sweating, falling towards earth. I’m afraid to go to sleep, I can’t trust my brain anymore. The protestant in me wants to scrub words clean. The catholic in me wants to spray the world with tryptamines, like a crazy cat waiving its boundaries for a mouse wielding a brick.

April 14, 1973 [handwritten postcard]

Ignore that last one. Scraping together what's left of my brain now ...

April 27, 1973

Richard Brautigan came through to give a reading at the weekend, and he was shocked.\* The weather was gray and low, with freezing rain that was more like sleet. The city was a wasteland of black buildings and boarded-up windows. Rainbows and tie-dyes are a hard sell in northern towns. Darkness rules. It's not about the mind painting the world in day-glo as much as the mind paring down the mechanics of perception, revealing the skeletal framework that usurps the artificial boundaries we set up.

This morning I read about a phenomenon that seems to touch on this situation: negative hallucination. From what I can find it seems there's a mental state in which a person is unable to see the object within their field of vision. There's a modest amount of literature on the subject, with several studies examining changes in electrical activity from the brain —“evoked potentials” —as the hallucination becomes active. I'm going to write to Ronnie Laing to see if he can tell me more about this. It's the other extreme of the hallucinatory spectrum. (I wonder if it goes further; can we hallucinate our own non-existence?)\*\*

\* Richard Brautigan (1935–1984). The archetypal 1960s counter-culture novelist, Brautigan admired the Diggers and wrote the celebrated poem, “All Watched Over by Machines of Loving Grace” in 1967, which begins: “I like to think (and / the sooner the better!) / of a cybernetic meadow / where mammals and computers / live together in mutually / programming harmony / like pure water / touching clear sky.” From 1966–67, he was poet-in-residence at the California Institute of Technology. Having published best selling works such as *Trout Fishing in America* (1967) and *Revenge of the Lawn* (1971), he found his popularity dipping precariously as the Sixties ebbed away. He remained popular, however, in Europe and Japan, and continued to publish until his suicide in 1984. An apocryphal story has it that he left a suicide note which read: “Messy, isn't it?”

\*\* McGinn would have been interested to hear of Cotard's Syndrome —a condition in which people believe they are missing body parts, are bloodless, that their bodies are rotting, or that they have lost their

souls or are dead. A certain Miss Purse found a case study in which a woman “was complaining that she was dead, smelled like rotting flesh, and wanted to be taken to a morgue so that she could be with dead people.” Purse also mentions a second female patient who “said she couldn’t think because she had no thoughts. She had no thoughts because she had no brain. She couldn’t talk because she had no words. She couldn’t eat because she produced no saliva in her mouth.”

May 4, 1973

Dwelling on your question of non-color, I’m transcribing for you the following passage from Melville’s *Moby-Dick*,\* as it seems to me he tries to get to the heart of the issue when considering the whale:

Is it that by its indefiniteness it shadows forth the heartless voids and immensities of the universe, and thus stabs us from behind with the thought of annihilation, when beholding the white depths of the milky way? Or is it, that as in essence whiteness is not so much a color as the visible absence of color; and at the same time the concrete of all colors; is it for these reasons that there is such a dumb blankness, full of meaning, in a wide landscape of snows—a colorless, all-color of atheism from which we shrink? And when we consider that other theory of the natural philosophers, that all other earthly hues—every stately or lovely emblazoning—the sweet tinges of sunset skies and woods; yea, and the gilded velvets of butterflies, and the butterfly cheeks of young girls; all these are but subtle deceits, not actually inherent in substances, but only laid on from without; so that all deified Nature absolutely paints like the harlot, whose allurements cover nothing but the charnel-house within; and when we proceed further, and consider that the mystical cosmetic which produces every one of her hues, the great principle of light, for ever remains white or colorless in itself, and if operating without medium upon matter, would touch all objects, even tulips and roses, with its own blank tinge—pondering all this, the palsied universe lies before us a leper; and like wilful travellers in Lapland, who refuse to wear colored and coloring glasses upon their eyes, so the wretched infidel gazes himself blind at the monumental white shroud that wraps all the prospect around him. And of all these things the Albino whale was the symbol.

I’ve got blisters on my fingers!

\* *Moby-Dick*; or, *The Whale* was first published by Herman Melville in 1851, who dedicated the book to his friend Nathaniel Hawthorne. The edition of 3,000 never sold out, and Melville made a grand total of \$556.37. Among the novel's many felicities is the following description of the harpooner Queequeg's coffin, which doubled as his sea-chest. His spare time was spent carving his own full body tattoos onto its lid: "And this tattooing had been the work of a departed prophet and seer of his island, who, by those hieroglyphic marks, had written out on his body a complete theory of the heavens and the earth, and a mystical treatise on the art of attaining truth; so that Queequeg in his own proper person was a riddle to unfold, but whose mysteries not even himself could read. And these mysteries were therefore destined in the end to moulder away with the living parchment whereon they were inscribed, and so be unsolved to the last."

May 21, 1973

Pigpen is dead.\* I didn't hear until yesterday, when I got a letter from Owsley. He passed in March, like a mad hare. Can't write more but thought I should let you know.

\* One of Joe McGinn's musical heroes, Ronald C. "Pigpen" McKernan (1945–1973) was a founding member of the Grateful Dead, having played previously in the Zodiacs, Mother McCree's Uptown Jug Champions, and the Warlocks. McKernan eschewed psychedelics in favour of alcohol and died at the age of 28 from biliary cirrhosis. He was introduced to music by his father, a blues DJ known as "cool breeze." Contrary to his Hell's Angel image, McKernan was a regular chess player on tour and a gentle soul. Responding to a demand for band biographies in 1967 he noted:

"Can't think what to write, but there's an ant hobbling around on this table. Absquatulate with the funds, will ya? Had any prune-tang lately? There's a broken helicopter outside the door, looking bum-tripped after having fallen down on Happy Land St. and belonging to the people who work in the hangar next door. Poot, still at a loss. I like fun and making people happy. Sue just loves my blue bow."

October 3, 1973

Sorry I have been remiss in writing. There has been so much going on here that I barely have a moment to myself. I'll give you just one example. The performance artist Leila Qdah was here in August and she presented two of her most famous pieces—the one where she is locked in a glass box with a knife and a rat and fights for her survival, and the other where

she wraps a boa constrictor around her neck and recites the account of Ragnarok from *Gylfaginning* (do you know it?—amazing stuff, chap. 51). So, she kills the rat—all's well so far—and the floor is ringed with ice cubes to prevent the snake escaping during the recitation. Apparently snakes won't cross ice, but no one told the boa constrictor who slid down Leila's body while she was convulsed by visions of a Nordic apocalypse ...

For two months we searched the building and found no trace of it (Leila reluctantly left the morning after her performance). Then yesterday, our technician rushed into a programming meeting and announced that the boa constrictor was in a heating pipe in the attic. It was very weak but seemed to have survived on a regular diet of small Scottish mice. We took it to the zoo at once, but they give it a week at most in this weather.

November 4, 1973

The bonfires are growing higher and higher here, with all manner of Guy Fawkes characters dragged down the streets for burning. Fireworks are howling across the skies, and sensible cats and dogs are hiding under kitchen tables everywhere. Meanwhile I'm still labouring over your questions. The closer we get to the opening of the centre, the more I consider what we might achieve. A recent article in the *Morning Times* described me as a "psychedelic visionary" and said:

**Joe McGinn will steer the city's first art center—an experimental project that is partly an aesthetic adventure and partly a divine spiritual enterprise under the aegis of the Asian guru, Sri Praphai. "The centre has the potential to create a space in the city where new ideas can come into being and be tested immediately," says McGinn. "We're not simply about entertainment in Beauty's Delight, we want to alter mental states on every level, to enable alternative cultural models." With a new vegetarian cafe and a book shop to boot, everything is looking groovy on Scotland's main thoroughfare ...**

If a tab can shift perception so radically and alter our mental grasp of the world around us, then I believe dropping a psychotropic centre into the middle of a city can shift that urban culture to a wholly other point on the



spectrum. It's like freezing rain spattering in a puddle: the overlapping circles ripple across the entire pane of water, and the previous order is overwhelmed. Drugs themselves are only a fraction of the possible impact. They trigger an immediate revolution in the senses and alter our understanding of the physical world, but they have limited effect in the long term, and in my experience they soon begin to repeat the same lesson as the drug establishes a well-trodden path through the neurons.

Art, on the other hand, is a slow-release mechanism linked directly into the bloodstream of a culture. Unlike the one or two key drugs we could name, art has infinite diversity, mutating constantly across forms, genres and styles. It's viral. As McLuhan realized, art infects publishing, broadcasting, film, music, and electronic media (even computers in their primitive states). And an arts centre? It's a neutron bomb with a box office.

P.S. The boa constrictor—who was christened (if that's the right word) Loki by the staff—died in the zoo last night. It was the cold snap that finished him off. Frost in the morning, frost all day, and frost last thing at night. The power cuts didn't help either.

November 6, 1973

I think I got carried away in my last letter about art. Too much, and too hopeful, just another utopia. I had a dream: I saw dark pilgrims landing at Plymouth Rock under gray thunder-laden skies. They set to work—interring Geronimo, willing Mickey and Manson into being, splitting atoms and pioneering their way to the moon.

We all want a utopia, from More to Malcolm X. When I was in the States in '68, I drove across the continent in homage to all those wild rovers from Whitman to Kerouac. And I stopped at Utopia in Clermont County on the banks of the Ohio where Charles Fourier set up his most famous community.\* More than a dozen families lived there for two years before being swamped by debts and carried off by the river itself in full spate. By the time I was passing through, more than a century later, there was nothing but a road sign—all that history had been smeared into mud. Amidst the nothing I spotted some mushrooms. Thinking back to those

spores last night reminded me of a story about John Cage. A lady in Philadelphia had written to him asking what he thought of Buddha dying after eating a mushroom. Cage later recalled that he thought to himself: "Mushrooms grow most vigorously in the fall, the period of destruction, and the function of many of them is to bring about the final decay of rotting material. In fact, as I read somewhere, the world would be an impassible heap of old rubbish were it not for mushrooms and their capacity to get rid of it." And so he wrote back to the lady saying: "The function of mushrooms is to rid the world of old rubbish. The Buddha died a natural death."

I'd better go. I can see kids dragging the gibbous remains of a burnt guy down the street. And I still have to sweep the gallery floor before tonight's opening.

Yours,

Joe

\* Nathaniel Hawthorne mocks Fourier in his novel *The Blithedale Romance*, saying: "When, as a consequence of human improvement," said I, "the globe shall arrive at its final perfection, the great ocean is to be converted into a particular kind of lemonade, such as was fashionable at Paris in Fourier's time. He calls it *limonade a cedre*. It is positively a fact! Just imagine the city docks filled, every day, with a flood tide of this delectable beverage!" In contrast, Hakim Bey defends him: "To quote Fourier out of context is to betray him. To say for example that he believed the ocean would turn to lemonade in the future, when humanity comes to live in Harmonial Association, is to make him a figure of fun ... In Fourier's system of Harmony all creative activity including industry, craft, agriculture, etc. will arise from liberated passion—this is the famous theory of 'attractive labor.' Fourier sexualizes work itself—the life of the Phalanstery is a continual orgy of intense feeling, intellection, & activity, a society of lovers & wild enthusiasts. When the social life of Earth is harmonized, our planet will re-join the universe of Passion & undergo vast transformations, affecting human form, weather, animals, & plants, even the oceans."