



JOHN HULTBERG, PROVINCETOWN, 1958

## Crying at the Lock: *the Journals of John Hultberg*

SELECTION BY CHRISTOPHER BUSA

John Hultberg's distinguished career spans four decades and nearly 200 exhibitions in the U.S. and abroad. Born in 1922 in Berkeley, CA, of Swedish parents, he attended Fresno State College where he earned a degree in literature. After serving as lieutenant with the Navy in the Pacific, he entered the California School of Fine Arts in San Francisco, where he studied painting with Clyfford Still, Mark Rothko, and Richard Diebenkorn. He moved to New York in 1948, enrolling at the Art Students League with Morris Kantor and Will Barnet. He absorbed the urban landscape, worked as a guard at the Metropolitan Museum, and associated with Franz Kline, Willem de Kooning, and Robert Rauschenberg—all influences in the development of his signature style, which he calls Hultbergian, but which others have called, variously, apocalyptic, surreal, sci-fi, melodramatic, visionary, or romantic. In 1954 Hultberg moved to Paris where he was to join other expatriate American artists, including Lawrence Calcagno, Joan Mitchell, Norman Bluhm, Paul Jenkins, and Sam Francis. He traveled and exhibited in Europe and met Martha Jackson, who invited him to join her new gallery in New York, beginning a long and successful association. Hultberg also began keeping a journal, continuing for almost 30 years and creating a vivid portrait of the art world from the inside looking out. This summer Hultberg has a mini-retrospective at the Staller Center for the Arts at Stony Brook, State University of New York, and an exhibition of prints and graphics at the Portland Museum in Maine.

1955

Martha tells me, "Paint small, and use light paint, nobody wants those dark things of yours," then the next day says "Get all your big dark paintings together, that's what Michel Tapie wants to show of yours."

Martha reprimands me for letting my children call me by my first name. But I am not a daddy and will not pretend. M. probably dis-

likes this bohemian permissiveness as much as I dislike the middle-class pompousness she still respects in spite of her break from it with her art career. But she, like so many others, sees only the tip of the Hultberg.

At Riker's someone had pointed across Eighth Street, telling us that Alger Hiss lived there. I said, "Is he a painter?" with Bill Sebring adding, to laughs, "No, John, it would be better to say 'What gallery is he with!'" Someone else said the rules of being a liberal were very simple: the bigots are allowed to kill us but we cannot kill them. Kermit Lansner, the book critic of *Newsweek* said he objected to Norman Mailer's calling Eisenhower "an old woman." After all, the office of President deserved automatic respect. A middle-aged woman piped up, asking why being called an old woman should be an insult.

I tried to buy a *New York Times* this morning but there were none left. "Thought it was the *Daily News* that was on strike," I told the kiosk vendor. "Aw," he growled, "when they can't get the *News* they'll read anything!"

Leonardo advised artists to find recognizable shapes in accidental wall-stains, etc. This is often quoted by abstract expressionists as a *raison d'être* for their painting, but they avoid all recognizable connotations in these stains. I want to explore this neglected searching for semi-recognizable forms in the accidents of these stains.

This pain seems so tangible to me it's almost a three-dimensional object. I have yet to sculpt this great thing.

1956

When the avant-garde agrees, the artists die. When they disagree, they live.

Windows from the inside and outside; looking in, I see tangled objects which must be deciphered, with a lonely figure. (We painters are voyeurs.) Looking out from that window is just as bad, just as dark: a desolation of irrational rubbish stretching to the horizon and even be-

yond, into the sky. Sometimes from this fascinating-boring junk-heap one sees disembodied eyes returning one's unhappy gaze. I have never forgotten this image, which changed my painting for better or worse, have held onto it in moments of doubt until its unbearable unhappiness became as cathartic as a Bartok string quartet.

1958

I went to Provincetown for the first time in May or June with Steve Joye, the director of the Martha Jackson Gallery in New York, to open a branch of that gallery in a room near the entrance of the movie theater near Town Hall. My paintings were shown, as well as work of some of the gallery artists, Karel Appel, William Scott, Antoni Tapies, Sam Francis, Paul Jenkins, Norman Carton, Louise Nevelson, Joan Mitchell, Grace Hartigan, John von Wicht, Barbara Hepworth, Germain Richier, Claire Falkenstein, Frank Lobdell, Bob Thompson, etc, in group shows. Other galleries in town that summer were Tirca Karlis, the HCE, and the Sun Gallery, a small store painted red, orange, and yellow that showed the work of Red Grooms, Marcia Marcus, and Jay Milder, light-hearted humorous things I liked. A little magazine was started called *Provincetown Review*, its editors Bill Ward, Danny Banko, John and Joyce Elbert, its mentor Norman Mailer. I contributed six drawings to one issue, as did Henry Hensche, Tony Vevers, and other artists of the town. I lived in a tiny house on Bradford Street, where I installed a sleeping loft and used an easel made from a screendoor frame. The younger artists, John Grillo, Jean Cohen, Mary Frank, Mario Garcia, Bill Barrell, Gandy Brody, Norman Cantor, Sidney Gordin, Stephen Pace, Dody Muller, Al Leslie, Michael Goldberg, Budd Hopkins, Marcia Marcus, were very companionable and often in each other's company. Martha Jackson arrived later in the summer along

with the French art critic and gallery advisor Michel Tapié de Celeyran, of the Toulouse-Lautrec family, spreading the word of his ridiculed Art Autre movement and giving a lecture in the large Town Hall, his slides projected by the *Baltimore Sun* art critic Kenneth Sawyer. A cheerful and active summer. I produced quite a lot of work, exhibiting and selling some of it. But I felt Martha's makeshift gallery was not a fashionable success among the cognoscenti of that brash time when abstract expressionism was about to be replaced by the jokes of pop art.

Fritz Bultman, who lives in the house on the hill above my little studio and living shack on Bradford Street (he got me the place), has organized a group to talk about art and literature in his place: Stanley Kunitz, Jack Tworokov, Irving Sandler, Tony Vevers, and myself. Tony arrived belligerent, scoffing when Sandler, after hearing Kunitz use the word "engage," asked what it meant. Tony denounced the whole "seminar" as precious and a waste of time. Since then our little club has not met.

One of my famous weeping dreams surfaced last night, so consoling, those healing tears that flow on and on, wetting my dry soul.

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## 1960

During my project to walk the coast of Manhattan on its very edge I saw several 10-year-old boys pulling themselves out of the East River after swimming from Brooklyn. As I passed Harlem I saw several black boys hurling themselves from the East River Drive's median to the sidewalk through the dense speeding car stream, egged on by companions.

We who wanted to humiliate death by ignoring its obscene cat-calls, now are forced to call it sacred because of our impending martyrdoms.

Nobody can reach Bill de Kooning in his Tenth Street studio since he disconnected his phone. Martha sends him telegrams, wanting to buy some paintings from him, but everything has to be done through Elaine, his wife and business manager. Someone said that after holing up like this for weeks he bursts out like an uncaged beast to find drink and women.

When they call me an alcoholic don't they mean that I cannot hold with decorum the large amount of liquor I consume as well as the small amount they drink, these social drinkers who would be miserable if deprived of their two glasses a night?

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## 1966

Asked how he liked kindergarten, my son said it didn't leave him enough time in the mornings to think.

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## 1968

Now at the age of 46 I discover I have had 46 one-man shows in the last 25 years. Facts like this used to intoxicate me. Now I feel nothing.

My three-year-old son asked me when I seemed upset about something: "Why don't you cry? That's what I do." Another time he asked me, "If God is good, why did He invent volcanoes?"

Thomas Hardy remains my favorite poet. A hard-earned, intense shorthand, bitter in the mouth, sweet in the belly. If I could paint with these monochromes, these distillations!

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## 1969

Twelve days without drinking.

The great elm tree next to our house is slowly dying: it is too near the swamp and its roots are too wet. No one should put it out of its misery. It must die its own death.

Birds crash against the house constantly. They are exhausted and confused from migrating north. A hummingbird tries to get into a closed window.

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## 1970

I tell myself though the millions of brain cells I killed are irreplaceable, yet the strenuous thinking I am forcing upon myself in my sobriety will stimulate billions of others still in reserve.

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## 1972

Dream: I am having a one-man show in a bad gallery in Manhattan, above a newspaper office. Very few people are at my opening, except Sy B., my ex-close friend. I complain to him that S. Pace, another ex-friend, is not there, and remark that all my friends have left me now that Martha is dead. I have a bottle of whiskey that I offer to my few guests but nobody wants it except myself and the newspaper staff, who are not interested in art. After the opening I depart alone with my almost-empty bottle, full of self-pity. I have \$6.50 in my pocket. I start walking from California, into the country, and notice a street named after a painter I know.

My real enemies are those friends who call me "too intense."

I've cut down on the wine drastically. I shake and cannot paint. Idea to make this journal more readable: emphasize the alcoholic battle. Confessions of a Lush. But it won't succeed unless I'm redeemed. There could be a happy ending.

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## 1973

Today I took that beautiful little lost wax bronze that Mary Frank had made of a nude woman with a lion's head and long hair reclining on her stomach that I had bought from her for \$250 in Provincetown in 1958—I took it to Virginia Zabriski's at her gallery to sell it. Virginia was busy with a client and was obviously annoyed that I was there, looking so scrungy and so thirsty, and offered me \$100, which I took.

About hard-edge painting: I would rather have a hard center and soft edges.

1974

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I want alcohol to assume the burden of only about half my past sins.

1975

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A born printmaker will turn around and look at the prints his shoes make on a sidewalk after walking through a puddle.

1976

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The horn-honker who drowns your Mozart on the radio is himself listening to the same station on his car radio. The supercriminal who keeps raising your food prices is the patron who keeps you alive as an artist.

When I kill time I always torture it a little first!

1977

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Alcohol distills into a poignant art form the basic human paradox that one is often punished for what one enjoys intensely.

1978

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Impossible for me when I'm outside the alcoholic consciousness to remember the plangent poignancies of a drunk's tendernesses and passions, just as it was impossible for me when drinking to conceive of the bracing pleasures of total sobriety.

I won't be unified in a productive sobriety until I learn to admit that alcohol at one time was indeed a friend to me, helping to give me bravery as a struggling artist. Once addicted to this courage, how could I understand what true fortitude was? To curse what held me together in my cowardice is to lack the awareness of what made me a coward in the first place.

My rare moments of euphoric carelessness seem to be triggered by a kind of synesthesia—a mixing up of one sense with another, as when a meaningless decoration I am staring at becomes sacred because I am listening to exalted music.

The alcoholic artist works in a tradition of alcoholic artists of the past. That is the way they altered their senses. There was a respectable legal tradition of booze. The fact that some artists were not involved in this does not interest the drunk.

The courage to mention rope in the hanged man's widow's house is the essence of AA therapy.

1979

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Kicking the drink is the only bravery I've ever shown in my whole life.

Paint used against itself can spawn masterpieces.

1980

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My outrage when I see sex being used as a weapon has nothing to do with my respect for

this unsettling and ever comforting state of war. Sexual gluttony charms us all in one way or another. Equanimity and tolerance have no life at all in the furnace of sexual rights and demands. Anyone in the grip of a total obsession is noble.

The thing that finally made me give up alcohol was a realization that I was losing my esthetic judgment skills.

In 1957 I showed R. Rauschenberg some of my photo collages that were in Martha Jackson's painting rack. Only after this did he do his own photograph assemblages. In Rudi Blesh's book *Collage* my photomontage is dated 1952. When people see these things of mine they usually murmur "Rauschenberg." So many of my half-aborted ideas turn up in other artists' work, even though I disdain the mass fad Zeitgeist they suckle at.

Once painters have established the abstract inevitability of an unforgettable design in a picture then they can go to almost any length to add verisimilitude from the observed world without breaking the mood of the thing-in-itself that any work of art must be.

Only hicks are interested in the avant-garde at this time.

To be a true painter is always to inhabit a paradise that may have its bad moments but which is always there, ready to absorb any amount of hellishness.

Don't know your enemy too well or you may be converted to his cause.

New York Jewish male painters and sculptors have a certain drunken competence I envy.

Painters who can't judge a book by its covers don't get very far.

"God probably looks like an oblong blur." I believe I read this somewhere in Aldous Huxley. When I quoted this to Mark Rothko, he was astounded.

1981

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Because you praise pansexuality's raptures you are called homosexual by those holding with difficulty onto heterosexuality.

1982

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August 24, Monhegan Island, Maine. Collect *New Yorkers* and book reviews; paint fireplace; repair kitchen ceiling; write out second violin fantasy for Toby Mostel; throw out old medications; take plastics to dock to dump; paint stairs and kitchen; whitewash basement and hatchway; stamp my name in all books; clean out ashes's chute; give Jeff Dolan a painting of mine, and play and book to Xerox; roll up and wire old *New York Times* after clipping photos for collages; title, sign, and roll recent paintings done this summer; sign all painted boards and pack; put new fireback in fireplace; cut the fallen tree on trail 12; put all books and papers in boxes; take batteries out of large radio pack; take gesso tubs to Richard Farrell next door for winter storage; wash all brushes, pack them with paint to go. ■