

# BULLETIN

FACULTY OF FOREIGN STUDIES  
THE UNIVERSITY OF KITAKYUSHU

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No. 150

March 2020

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THE UNIVERSITY OF KITAKYUSHU

Kitakyushu, Japan

# Harold Persico Paris, Henry Miller, and the Difficulties of Creating Historical Connection Through Fan Mail

Wayne E. Arnold

## **Preamble**

This research has neither a definite conclusion nor does it reveal a concrete connection between its two main subjects: Harold Persico Paris (1925-1979) and Henry Valentine Miller (1891-1980). Instead, it attempts to weave together a narrative from a single piece of fan mail that links two men who grew up in New York City, who both spent time in France, and who then resided in California until their last days. It may seem this research has culminated in a fruitless quest for an association within a specific artistic network; nevertheless, it is an investigation that has proven rewarding in the realm of fan mail studies as well as highlighting the limits of uncovering historical association between two artists of the 20th Century. Perhaps the most particular aspect of this research is that its origins hinge around one single fan letter. Contemporary fan mail studies tend to look at larger quantities of correspondences, occasionally examining a particular historical subject. With this research, I endeavor to use fan mail to link two artists: Miller (based in Los Angeles) and Paris (based in Berkeley). The desired—but unachieved—outcome was to further expand the nexus between southern and northern Californian art scenes in the 1970s, thereby illuminating to a greater degree the extensive reaches of artist interactions.

## The Origin

The summer day of August 9, 1979 found a young Californian artist named Kevan Jenson composing a short piece of fan mail to famed author Henry Miller. Having been influenced by Miller's writing, Jenson attempted to give the 87-year-old Miller an idea of his youthful inner turmoil while also providing an introduction credential; Jenson wrote: "I might as well tell you who I am—Kevan Jenson—a painter—still studying—who knows why—in college—I was Harold Paris's last assistant and it was he who gave me your address."<sup>1</sup> Creating a subtle but distinct association with Paris, Jenson's words convey an assumption that Miller would have had knowledge of the sculptor Harold Paris, as well as the artistic environment at the University of California, Berkeley where Paris had worked for nearly twenty years, until his premature death just one month prior, on the first day of July, 1979.

I use this short introduction to draw attention to the two key figures in my research focus: the once-ostracized, sensual, and verbose Henry Miller, an author and watercolor artist, famed for *Tropic of Cancer* (1934) and *The Rosy Crucifixion Trilogy* (1949-60), juxtaposed with Harold Paris, creative sculptor, and art professor at the UC Berkeley. Jenson presumes an artistic association between northern California and southern California—effectively linking the two artists across a specific period and geographical space, as both artists overlapped in the 1960s and 1970s California art scenes. Based on Jenson's letter, this research attempts to extrapolate a correlation between this time and space. In order to organize the material in a meaningful manner, this article is structured with a threefold agenda: 1) to consider the significance of Henry Miller's fan

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<sup>1</sup> Jenson, Kevan. Letter to Henry Miller. 9 Aug. 1979. Personal Collection of Kevan Jenson.

mail; 2) to evaluate the difficulties of establishing a larger interconnection between two California-based artists; and, 3) to biographically spotlight Harold Paris, an artist who paralleled Henry Miller in a nonconformist approach to art and whose textured creations have been drastically overlooked in recent years. While relationships within the California art scene of the 1960s and 1970s are complicated, a gradual mapping of historical interrelations is possible through archival research and enquiring into the memories of the individuals who resided in California during these innovative years.<sup>2</sup>

### **Section One: Henry Miller Fan Mail**

Kevan Jenson's fan letter to Miller falls in with thousands of such confessionals written by people seeking what has been viewed as "a more personalized reader-author relationship" (Bates); not surprisingly, the number of fan letters sent to Miller during his lifetime increased with each passing year. As proof, the archives at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), hold over five meters of archival boxes containing hundreds—if not thousands—of undocumented fan letters, ranging from epistles of evangelism to stories and photographs of orgies. Very little, if any, scholarly work has focused on the extensive collection of fan mail that Miller accumulated. Yet, it was not in the archives of UCLA that I uncovered Jenson's letter.

My interest in a possible link between Miller and Paris is a direct result of digital fandom. Digital fandom can loosely be described in the following terms: "it is the use of digital technology to engage in fannish activities and practices

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<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, in 2019 we lost two important people who aided this research. Connie Wirtz (1945-2019) was Paris's graduate student and personal friend. Peter Selz (1919-2019), a legend in his own time, was Professor of Art History at the University of California, Berkeley and was founding director of the Berkeley Art Museum.

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with respect to specific cultural texts. [...] digital fandom does not constitute a distinct type of fandom such as sports, music, or media fandoms, but instead refers to fannish behavior as mediated through digital technology” (Lanier and Fowler 287). Fannish behavior can include collecting material related to a specific person; in my case, my fan activity relates to acquiring Henry Miller-related materials that appear in online auctions.<sup>3</sup> The digital world has radically altered the pursuit of collectibles—often considered the primary facet of fan activity (Tankel and Murphy 56). With this evolution of collecting, fans are able to obtain exceptionally rare materials. Specific to this project, in 2012 I purchased three fan letters addressed to Henry Miller from the auction website *eBay.com*. Among these letters was Jenson’s communication containing reference to Harold Paris.

Fan mail, consumer participation, and audience engagement have become the focus of much scholarly research in recent years. With the revolutionization of how memorabilia and the revitalization of things past can now reach new audiences, Will Straw argues that “the Internet has strengthened the cultural weight of the past, increasing its intelligibility and accessibility. On the Internet, the past is produced as a field of ever greater coherence, through the gathering together of disparate artifacts into sets or collections, and through the commentary and annotation that cluster around such agglomerations” (287). One difficulty with this historical expansion, however, is the decreasing traceability of the route online memorabilia has traversed. For instance, after acquiring the fan letters to

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<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that within the humanities, being a “fan” of one’s chosen scholarly work in conjunction with data collection has been closely linked. In a survey concerning global fan studies, Harrington and Bielby discovered that, when asked “Are you a fan of what you study?” more than 78% of humanities respondents admitted to being fans of their field of study (compared to only 25% in sports management) (189–90). I acknowledge that my fascination with data collection on Henry Miller (archival research or purchasing fan letters, for example) places me in an academic-based fan category.

Miller, I attempted to determine why the letters appeared online instead of being stored in the UCLA archives. Unfortunately, the seller had very little information, tersely replying that the letters had been purchased in an estate sale, and that possibly the material came from the Chicago area and had belonged to a person who might have been writing a book on Miller. This vague and unconfirmed information leaves an enormous gap in the decades and the geographical journey between the letter delivered to Miller by the U.S. Postal Service in 1979 and the identical service that, 33 years later, would deposit the same letter in my mailbox. Perhaps insignificant, but this highlights the fact that while the Internet does provide a wealth of information previously difficult to acquire before the digital age, the histories of some material continues to disappear.

Miller was no stranger to fan mail, and no matter how much he publicly wrote about the burden of these letters, they continued to arrive even after his death. While ruminating on his life, Miller surmised that, “fans are rather like dandruff in the hair, a pain-in-the-ass for the most part. [...]. Then there are the letters. Every kind of person imaginable has written me letters of praise, condemnation, or proposition, and the requests I’ve received have been staggering” (Miller 88). During his lifetime, multiple Miller correspondences were privately and publicly sold, so he was well aware that his letters contained a financial merit. Miller may be surprised that the letters he received from fans have also found their way to the marketplace, albeit only containing a residual exchange value of an original Miller letter. Critics have noted that in some cases fans write and either distance themselves from the icon, or “identif[y] with their heroes by expressing shared individualism and rebelliousness” (Duffett 51). Additionally, “fans often write in formulaic ways rather than out of sincere appreciation, while others flatter celebrities chiefly to prompt a reply” (Ryan and Johanningsmeier 5). Jenson’s

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letter falls into a typical formula of young artists writing to Miller, many of whom have found themselves rather disillusioned with their current life trajectory. It also might be true that Jenson was writing as much in the memory of Harold Paris as he was to Miller, as Jenson was still dealing with the shock of losing the student-teacher bond with Paris. Furthermore, references to Miller's literary work appear in almost all of his fan mail, demonstrating what one critic has noted, "that literary fans might like to think of themselves as pursuing an interest in an artist rather than a celebrity, in order to locate themselves on a slightly higher plane of cultural consumption" (Turner 21). Jenson's short letter makes mention of Miller's *Insomnia, or the Devil at Large* (1970), thereby further demonstrating the formulaic nature within fan mail to Miller.

Over the past decade, venues such as *eBay* transformed the methods of acquiring memorabilia. Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green view the role of *eBay* in "spreadable media," to borrow their title, as having the ability to alter the value of memorabilia, and the authors argue, "the terms of the exchange are not grounded in the material value of the objects, [...], but rather in the sentimental or symbolic value ascribed to them: their desirability" (89–90). The allure of certain memorabilia becomes the driving force behind the price on which the auction terminates. The collector community surrounding such things as product lines (LEGO) or individuals (Marilyn Monroe) potentially drives up the value of the item of interest. Conversely, for written letters it is the possible historical content—determined by the buyer's curiosity—that adds to the estimable market value of the object-turned-commodity.

Unexpectedly, the attention given these Miller fan letters was relatively low and I purchased all three for a mere five U.S. dollars. This lack of interest and low market value, however, is not typical for most types of Millerania. Consequently,

that the letters originated from fans rather than from Miller suggests that the use value, or the want-satisfying power of such items is considered by many to be inconsequential. Even so, such letters may provide us with both a historical and a conceptual valuation of an author's given impact on their readers. Jennifer Adams, in the article "Recovering a Trashed Communication Genre: Letters as Memory, Art, and Collectible," observes that with the increased methods of digital communication, the obsolete custom of handwritten letters has generated scholarly interest across research fields (185). In my case, the unexpected discovery of Jensen's reference to Paris perfectly illuminates Adams's reasoning that "letters contribute historical depth to the collective memories of our culture" (186), and I would add, may generate associations previously unconceived or unknown. Additionally, the name reference in Jensen's letter further emphasizes how even a minute detail might risk being overlooked or deemed inconsequential. The residual value of fan letters to a celebrity may be occasionally considered low, but the contextual historical content within any given fan mail is potentially ripe for appraisal.

A letter's physical form represents what Adams considers a continuation of the "feelings, hopes, and activities" (187) of the letter writer. Miller may have agreed, as most letters in his archive—indeed even the three letters I purchased—contain Miller's signature mark, the handwritten word "file" on the outside of the envelopes. Opened and distinctively hallmarked, it is clear that Miller at least glanced at the contents of Jensen's letter. In the early days of his growing fandom, Miller felt compelled to reply to such letters, one time lamenting, "'I get so many letters from young people [...] all striving and searching and struggling—full of despair'" (qtd. in Martin 407). In later years, after moving to Pacific Palisades, Los Angeles, with failing health and the management of his legacy, Miller preferred to



retain his peace and quiet (Hoyle 291), and, as with many other fan letters, Jenson never received a formal reply, but sketches he had sent were returned by Miller's secretary. Fan mail scholars have noted that among readers, "often the intensity of their physical and psychological interactions with the novels developed into strong feelings of personal attachment to the authors and sparked the need to write the letters" (Karr 156). In his first reply email, Jenson recalled, "I did send Henry Miller a note in 1979. I am well familiar with his work. I've read about 90% of it, most within a 6-month period in 1979."<sup>4</sup> To be clear, Jenson never received a reply from Miller; 33 years later, however, Jenson finally learned that Miller read and saved his letter. In a sense, my contact with Jenson provided a conclusion to Jenson's Paris-Miller association. Coupled with Paris's sudden death, Jenson's reading of Miller ultimately led to the penning of the fan mail.

## **Section Two: The Difficulties of Connecting Two California-based Artists**

Finding a direct nexus or association between Paris and Miller immediately became a topic of interest after reading Jenson's fan mail. The first step was to locate Jenson; in doing so, I went beyond the boundaries of what has been considered the "one-sided academic view of fandom" (Hills 4) by uncovering a fan's identity. I wanted to understand why Jenson had sent Miller the letter. In November 2012, I contacted Jenson through his website<sup>5</sup> and we quickly began corresponding about Paris and Miller. As one of Paris's last pupils at UC Berkeley, Jenson spent considerable time with him discussing art and literature. It was Paris who recommended that Jenson begin reading Miller. Eventually, Paris brought up the idea that the two of them travel down to Los Angeles

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<sup>4</sup> Jenson, Kevan. "Re: Henry Miller and Kevan Jenson." Received by Wayne E. Arnold, 5 Nov. 2012.

<sup>5</sup> Kevan Jenson's website: <http://kevanjenson.com>

and pay Miller a visit. The meeting never transpired as Paris suddenly passed away. Another key moment in this history is that shortly before his death, Paris provided Jenson with Miller's mail address.<sup>6</sup> Miller's popularity meant his Big Sur address and subsequently his Pacific Palisades address were well known among his fans—indeed, his Los Angeles address was popular enough to become the title of Pascal Vrebos's book, *444 Ocampo Drive: A Crazy Week with Henry Miller* (1983, 2003).<sup>7</sup> Roughly one month after Paris's death, Jenson composed his fan mail to Miller.

Uncovering correlating details of these two artists required determining how cognizant they may have been of each other's work. It is not clear when Paris began reading Miller's literature, or how much he read; it is clear, however, that Paris was a voracious reader. After being introduced to Miller's literature, Jenson remembers "mention[ing] to Harold that Miller was really affecting me, and he chuckled and recalled that he had been struck by Miller many years prior. I think it was heartening to him that there was some continuity across our generational gap."<sup>8</sup> To get a general idea about Paris's interest in Miller, I began tracking down individuals who knew Paris during his Berkeley days. For instance, Brian Wall, a fellow faculty member at UC Berkeley who worked for ten years in the same department as Paris, informed me that Paris had an

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<sup>6</sup> Jenson, Kevan. "Re: Henry Miller and Kevan Jenson." Received by Wayne E. Arnold, 29 Nov. 2012.

<sup>7</sup> Coincidentally, Vrebos's *444 Ocampo Drive* evolved out of a fan letter to Miller. Unlike Jenson, however, Vrebos did receive a reply and an invitation to meet Miller. A common impetus among Miller's readers encouraged Vrebos to write the famous, aging author: "In 1978, I wrote him a letter about ten lines long, just to thank him for his life's work. I did not expect him to answer it. Having a dialogue with Miller never even crossed my mind. For me, Miller remained a distant shadow—a bit mythical, a prodigious old man just two steps from the grave surrounded by books, and fussed over by a bevy of Japanese Lolitas" (12).

<sup>8</sup> Jenson, Kevan. "Re: Henry Miller and Kevan Jenson." Received by Wayne E. Arnold, 29 Nov. 2012.

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interest in erotic literature.<sup>9</sup> Various other memories have surfaced through email correspondences. Sonya Rapoport, friends with Paris and his wife Frieda, recalls that during the 1960s Paris made a passing reference to wanting to meet Miller.<sup>10</sup> In all, I contacted more than thirty friends, colleagues, professional associates, and students who were acquainted with Paris.

The vastness of the Internet quickly shows its limits when searching for more precise biographical information on an individual who died before the Internet age. Therefore, it was necessary to visit the Harold Paris material in the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institute, Washington, D. C. These archives became the biographical starting point for exploring Paris's artistic associations within the California art scene. In 2012 and 2014, I visited the Smithsonian Institute.<sup>11</sup> My specific goal was to find possible references to Henry Miller, Paris exhibits in southern California that Miller may have seen or heard about, or names of mutual acquaintances between the two men. The Paris archives are divided into microfilmed and physical materials. Within the correspondences there is one direct reference concerning Miller in a letter from a personal friend named Robert. Amid a hodgepodge of information, Robert mentions, "I read Henry Miller [...] and he fascinates me." The next sentence jumps topic to an "[art] show in the 'Palais des Beaux-Arts' of eleven artists of Los Angeles, Larry Bell, [Edward] Ruscha and company."<sup>12</sup> As with Jenson's fan

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<sup>9</sup> Wall, Brian. "Re: Harold Paris." Received by Wayne E. Arnold, 27 May 2014.

<sup>10</sup> Rapoport, Sonya. "Harold Paris." Received by Wayne E. Arnold, 27 Feb. 2014.

<sup>11</sup> Paris's archival material was donated in the 1980s to the Archives of American Art at the Smithsonian Institute. The materials are twelve linear feet and contain correspondences, brochures, and photographs.

<sup>12</sup> Robert to Harold Paris. 18 Feb. 1972. Harold Paris papers, 1946-1983. Archives of America Art, Smithsonian Institution. The Palais des Beaux-Arts, in Brussels, put on an exhibit titled "Eleven Los Angeles Artists" in connection with Robert Irwin. The exhibit ran from January 15 through February 27.

letter a few years later, the writer assumes Paris knows Miller's work and would find some correlation in the mention of Miller. This single reference to Miller appears to be the only one in the entire Paris archive collection.

Continuing to explore Miller's potential exposure to Paris's work, I searched for Paris's exhibits in the Los Angeles area. Connie Wirtz (1945-2019), a graduate student and professional friend with Paris during the 1970s, recalls that "a connection between Northern and Southern California artists was negligible. The two groups seemed to know each other but by reputation. Of course, there were individual artists who connected with each other, but not as a group."<sup>13</sup> Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, Paris had more than 20 exhibits in the Los Angeles area, including a few at UCLA, where in the 1950s Miller started depositing his personal correspondences. However, in the greater Los Angeles area, more than one Paris exhibit was greeted with little or no success. In a 1972 letter from Tressa R. Miller, the director of the Michael Smith Gallery in Los Angeles, Tressa Miller lamented to Paris concerning a recent show: "I was somewhat less than successful with your show. I'm really very disappointed as this further points out the lack of sophistication in Los Angeles. It's too bad that there aren't very many people down here who are bold enough to make up their own minds about a work of art."<sup>14</sup> Sophisticated or not, San Francisco and Los Angeles were considered the cultural hotbeds of the West Coast. "There is a good deal of cultural activity out here and a strong art movement," wrote Paris in 1961, "of course this means San Francisco and Los Angeles."<sup>15</sup> The consensus from

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<sup>13</sup> Wirtz, Connie. "Harold Paris." Received by Wayne E. Arnold, 28 May 2014.

<sup>14</sup> Miller, Tressa R. to Harold Paris. 9 Nov. 1972. Harold Paris papers, 1946-1983. Archives of America Art, Smithsonian Institution.

<sup>15</sup> Paris, Harold to Rouben Samberg. 21 Feb. 1961. Harold Paris papers, 1946-1983. Archives of America Art, Smithsonian Institution.

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people near Paris was that Los Angeles remained an unprofitable market and the limited exposure of his artwork would suggest that he was not well known in the Los Angeles art scene.

While the Paris archives in the Smithsonian afforded only one direct mention to Miller, over the course of the next few years I contacted dozens of people associated with Paris and Miller. A second visit to the Paris archives in 2014 revealed the names of several graduate students who studied under Paris. Many of these artists have moved on to successful careers. Yet, after contacting a dozen former students, it seems the topic of Henry Miller was restricted between Jenson and Paris. Turning attention to colleagues at UC Berkeley, several professors during the 1970s were associated with either Miller or Paris, but none recalled a direct link between the two men. Larry Bell taught in the art department in the early 1970s and met Miller in 1970; however, he was at a loss in distinctly recalling Paris.<sup>16</sup> During a visit to UCLA, I examined the boxes containing Miller's fan letters but failed to locate letters that provided the sought-after correlation. Peter Selz (1919-2019) was art director and historian for UC Berkeley from the 1960s to the 1980s and remained active until his death at 100 in 2019. He was personal friends with Paris and was slightly associated with Miller but knew of no link between the two men.<sup>17</sup> The variety of individuals in Berkeley during the 1960s and 1970s suggests that the environment was very cliquish, and hybridizing seemed unfavorable.

A noteworthy point was determining a viable reason as to why Paris would have wanted to meet Miller. Relatively few people I contacted, however, recalled Paris's interest in Miller. In an interview with Tressa Miller, it was her opinion

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<sup>16</sup> Bell, Larry. "Re: Harold Paris." Received by Wayne E. Arnold, 25 Oct. 2013.

<sup>17</sup> Selz, Peter. "Re: Harold Paris." Received by Wayne E. Arnold, 15 Mar. 2014.

that “Harold was always desperate for clients. [...]. Harold really did want to have representation in Los Angeles. He was at that time really known in the bay area.” After the Michael Smith Gallery in Los Angeles closed, Paris would continue to visit Los Angeles and occasionally meet Tressa who recalls Paris claiming that someone—an unknown person—wanted to introduce him to Henry Miller: “I would think, if there was a connection, it was Harold’s being touched by what Miller had to say and [Harold’s] seeking a client base. [...]. He did mention Miller, but it was in the idea that Miller was well known and that might be an entree for the promotion of [Harold’s] art.”<sup>18</sup> As will be shown in the following biographical section, at times Paris was anxious to find methods and means to draw more public attention to his artwork, and an association with the famed Henry Miller would certainly have aided this cause.

Perhaps the closest mutual artist acquaintance Miller and Paris shared was Man Ray (1890-1976), who by 1951 had moved to 2 bis Rue Ferou, Paris, his final home (see Ray 378–87). Miller became friends with Man Ray during his Paris period and continued their friendship while living in Big Sur in the 1940s. Harold Paris made the acquaintance of Man Ray during his many visits to Paris while living in Nancy, France from 1956-60. During 1958, Paris had two exhibits in Paris at the Salon de la Jeune Sculpture and Galerie Ventador and it may have been during this period that he became more acquainted with Man Ray. Connie Wirtz, when recalling whether Paris had mentioned Miller in conversations, noted, “it’s possible Harold spoke about Henry Miller, but not sufficiently so that I had any impression Miller had anything to say that moved Harold. On the other hand, Harold enjoyed the company of Man Ray during Harold’s years in Paris.

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<sup>18</sup> Miller, Tressa R. Telephone Interview. 7 June 2014.

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Apparently, they shared the same courtyard.”<sup>19</sup> Years later, Paris would recall his visits with Man Ray: “During the Fifties, when I had various opportunities, I visited with him. He was an extremely bitter man—bitter primarily because he felt a great deal of injustice. I believe one of the main reasons he wrote the autobiography [*Self Portrait* (1963)] was to straighten out some truths. Finally, a great deal of recognition came to him.”<sup>20</sup> By the 1950s, Man Ray and Miller had drifted apart and there is little to suspect that Man Ray served in any fashion to interest Paris with Miller.<sup>21</sup>

In all, outside of the two direct references, one in the Paris resources at the Archives of American Art and the other in the Kevan Jenson fan letter to Miller, there is scant tangible evidence that joins Miller to Paris. As two New Yorkers residing in California during the 1960s and 1970s, both men were in touch with a variety of artists, all of whom sought their own form of artistic expression. Gary Judd was Paris’s apprentice beginning in 1973 until his death, and afterwards served as a co-executor on Paris’s estate. Judd perhaps best summarized the extent of my research efforts when he opined: “You are in the secret life of Harold Paris territory. I have no memory of a Henry Miller connection. If those whom you have listed [...] have no memory [of a Miller connection,] then in my book, you have exhausted the core of us who were close to [Paris].”<sup>22</sup> The research conducted, however, has not been in vain. Fan mail can revitalize the past through both

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<sup>19</sup> Wirtz, Connie. “Harold Paris.” Received by Wayne E. Arnold, 28 May 2014.

<sup>20</sup> Paris, Harold. Untitled page from his memoir. N.d. Harold Paris papers, 1946-1983. Archives of America Art, Smithsonian Institution.

<sup>21</sup> Similar to Man Ray, Alan Watts (1915-1973) was a potential candidate to link Paris and Miller. Watts was popular in the Bay Area with his modernization of Buddhist ideas that were widely embraced by the beatniks. However, no archival material connects Watts with Paris, and Peter Selz recalled no special friendship or closeness between the two men. Selz, Peter. “Harold Paris and Henry Miller.” Received by Wayne E. Arnold, 20 June 2018.

<sup>22</sup> Judd, Gary. “Re: Harold Paris, UC Berkeley.” Received by Wayne E. Arnold, 3 June 2014.

the content and the physicality of the written letter. Unfortunately, as Martyn Lyons judiciously observes, “private letters always reconstitute fragments of experience. They carry no guarantee of completeness” (qtd. in Adams 187). Indeed, Jenson’s fan letter neither details the impulse behind his assumption that Miller would know Paris, nor does it illuminate to what extent Paris knew of Miller. Within the difficulties of creating a historical association between Paris and Miller, I believe I have filled some of the gaps in the fabric surrounding the history of Harold Paris, even if the intended outcome failed to materialize.

### **Section Three: A Brief Biography of Paris**

There are a handful of biographical outlines of Harold Persico Paris’s life and career. Paris left an indelible impact on the art world in the latter half of the 20th Century. Worth noting is the groundbreaking *Hosannah Suite* (1952-1971), the genre defining article “Sweet Land of Funk,” his diverse ranges of artistic expression—from painting, sculpture, ceramics, paper mâché, and room-size exhibits—all the while playing an integral role in the Berkeley art scene of the 1960s and 1970s. I have chosen to end with Paris for two reasons: first, to provide an impression of Paris the artist; second, to encourage the exploration of Paris’s life and artistic work, which, as tangible objects, represent both a cultural component of this California art period as well as a symbolic element of the man himself. As Paul Karlstrom has rightly observed, “Paris may emerge, as history sorts itself out, as one of the more interesting artists of his period” (“1986” 39).<sup>23</sup> I am in agreement with this opinion, and in the following pages I endeavor to

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<sup>23</sup> In an additional “Regional Reports” from 1988, Paul Karlstrom unwittingly pairs Miller and Paris in two sequential paragraphs. The first paragraph mentions Miller’s correspondence with Gordon Cook of San Francisco, which had just been added to the Smithsonian Institute; the next paragraph delineates additions to the Harold Paris Papers recently acquired by the institute (“1988” 37).



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provide additional information on Paris from the Archives of American Art at the Smithsonian Institute and email correspondences with those who knew Paris.

Born in Edgemere, Long Island, New York on August 16, 1925, Paris was the son of an actor in the Yiddish Theatre District on 2nd Avenue (near Yonah Schimmel's bakery) where the young Paris assisted as a make-up man (Selz, "Introduction").<sup>24</sup> In 1943, Paris joined the U.S. Army and worked as a correspondent for the *Stars and Stripes* newspaper. At the age of nineteen, he was one of the first Americans to witness the horrors of the Buchenwald Nazi concentration camp in Germany.<sup>25</sup> This experience would color much of his later work, in particular the *Hosannah Suite* (1952-1971),<sup>26</sup> and nearly every mention of Paris's biographical background contains reference to this life-altering event. Relatively self-taught, Paris was influenced by a variety of artists (Alberto Giacometti, Hieronymous Bosch, Odilon Redon, Georges Rouault), and locations (New York City, Majorca, Madrid, Munich), and peers (Peter Voulkos). That said, over the course of his multifarious career, he continually maintained a

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<sup>24</sup> The Paris household encompassed the father, Leo Paris (b. 1897), his wife Betty Paris (b. 1898), and children Nathan (b. 1922), Harold (b. 1925), and Thelma (b. 1931). In 1940, they resided at 3024 West 2nd Street, Brooklyn, New York ("Leo Paris").

<sup>25</sup> In a 1952 rough draft of his art history experience, Paris wrote the following details: 1939, one term at the High School of Music and Art, New York (he was expelled for playing hooky too often in order to focus on his art); 1940-43, attended Abraham Lincoln High School, Brooklyn (Paris later recalled that he was expelled seventeen times from high school for failing to attend—again, because he was working on his art); November 13, 1943 to May 22, 1946, enlisted in the army and covered the war crimes with *Stars and Stripes*; 1949, studied with Stanley William Hayter (1901-1988) at Atelier 17, New York City; 1951-52, studied at the New School of Social Research, New York, under the tutelage of Robert Blackburn (1920-2003) and Paul Brach (1924-2007); 1951-52, participated in a Creative Lithographic Workshop, New York, directed by Robert Blackburn. At the end of the one-page document, Paris concludes with: "As a student and an artist I have been mainly self-taught." Paris, Harold. "Art History," circa 1952; "Hooky as Profession," N.d. Harold Paris papers, 1946-1983. Archives of America Art, Smithsonian Institution.

<sup>26</sup> This lengthy project was originally called "The Eternal Judgement"; it was for this project that Paris received his first Guggenheim Fellowship in 1953 ("In The Garden").

uniqueness that brought focus on the good—and evil—within mankind.

By January 1945, Paris arrived in Paris, France with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, 2818 Model-making Detachment. In a small, damp rented studio that cost Paris a couple cartons of Camel cigarettes each month, he began work on his first important art series: “While some of the other guys were going around visiting people like Gertrude Stein, I began work on the ‘Buchenwald’ series.”<sup>27</sup> This artwork, induced by the death scenes Paris witnessed at Buchenwald, was created out of a sense of “moral outrage and compassion” (Selz and Landauer 38). Kevan Jenson recalls Paris discussing the influence of the war period and its impact on his future artwork; in Jenson’s opinion:

Harold had a tragic streak, from his exposure as a Jew to the horrors of Buchenwald. He was one of the first to document the Holocaust for *Stars and Stripes*. He told me a story of somebody rushing into a *Stars and Stripes* office and asking if anybody knew how to work a camera. He volunteered and they rushed him to Buchenwald just after liberation. There may be some hyperbole, but still Harold was there, saw the horrors, and was never free from the memory.<sup>28</sup>

The Buchenwald series was a group of sketches and engravings depicting the concentration camps and included pieces titled “Where are we going?” and “Freed.” During 1955-56, Paris was living in Germany on a Fulbright Scholarship. Ten years after the war, he still strongly associated the country with what he

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<sup>27</sup> Paris, Harold. “Aubervilliers.” N.d. Harold Paris papers, 1946-1983. Archives of America Art, Smithsonian Institution. Peter Selz has written that Paris started work on the series in New York City, after returning from the war; this date is obviously contradicted by Paris’s biographical notes (see Selz, *Beyond* 268).

<sup>28</sup> Jenson, Kevan. “Re: Henry Miller and Kevan Jenson.” Received by Wayne E. Arnold, 29 Nov. 2012.

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had witnessed there: "Returning to Germany was like an overdue debt. I figured something was still owed on behalf of Dachau, Buchenwald, and Auschwitz. It was also the best place for me to obtain the knowledge that I needed."<sup>29</sup> Now in his 30s, Paris chose to revisit the country that had so greatly impacted him a decade before, but he admits that living in Munich (in very primitive living conditions) helped advance his artistic interpretation.

In 1946, Paris returned to the United States to continue a career in art. During 1949, he enrolled in Stanley William Hayter's New York Atelier 17. It was during this period that one of Paris's prints was purchased by the Museum of Modern Art and was shown in their exhibit, "Masterpieces of the Museum's Collection." Paris recalled that, "the opening became an important family event. Momma and Poppa installed themselves on either side of my print. Since the show was hung alphabetically, I wound up before Picasso, who was followed by Redon. The biggies were all around me."<sup>30</sup> Following this early success, he was awarded two Louis Comfort Tiffany Fellowships (1949-50; 1950-51); two Guggenheim Fellowship Grants (1953-54; 1954-55); and a Fulbright Fellowship (1955-56). Initially, Paris pursued painting; it was in Europe during 1954 that he was transformed by the work of Catalan Modernist, Antoni Gaudi: "The thing that decided me to become a sculptor was Gaudi. When the boat stopped in Barcelona, I saw the Sagrada Família. I almost fell over. I stayed in Spain and stopped painting and turned to sculpture" (qtd. in Selz, "Harold" 5). For a short while he lived in Madrid, while guest lecturing at the Academia de San Fernando ("Harold Persico"). Throughout 1956-60, he and his wife Frieda were in Nancy,

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<sup>29</sup> Paris, Harold. "Thierschstrasse." N.d. Harold Paris papers, 1946-1983. Archives of America Art, Smithsonian Institution.

<sup>30</sup> Paris, Harold. "M.O.M.A." N.d. Harold Paris papers, 1946-1983. Archives of America Art, Smithsonian Institution.

France, where Paris was involved in monotonous and unrewarding work as an art teacher with the U. S. Army. It was in Nancy that Paris was able to bring about the first rendition of the *Hosannah Suite* ("In The Garden"). His transition to sculpture had been life-changing; writing a friend, Paris noted: "the move from graphics to sculpture, I feel, was a momentous one for me and am very happy in the revelation that sculpture brings me. The two mediums complement each other, and what I cannot realize in one, I can in the other."<sup>31</sup>

After Europe, Paris temporarily worked at Tulane University, New Orleans (Spring 1960) and at the Pratt Graphic Art Center, New York (Summer 1960) before moving in August to Berkeley for a one-year contract as Visiting Sculptor at UC Berkeley, a westward transition that he and Frieda found unappealing. As Paris acknowledged to a friend, the "conditions [in California] relating to the position are not favorable";<sup>32</sup> they had also "applied for a position [...] with less money [hoping] it comes through instead of California."<sup>33</sup> Not surprisingly, as both Paris and Frieda were from New York, they preferred to live closer to the Eastern coast. Once at Berkeley, however, Paris's creative life flourished in the environment, and he worked alongside many of the best artists in the region, including sculptor Peter Voulkos.

While California seemed an unsatisfactory option in 1960, by the time Paris was hired as an Assistant Professor in 1961 at UC Berkeley he was fully engaged with the San Francisco art scene. After being exposed to the art of Peter

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<sup>31</sup> Paris, Harold to Jim. 28 Dec. 1959. Harold Paris papers, 1946-1983. Archives of America Art, Smithsonian Institution.

<sup>32</sup> Paris, Harold to Ding. 23 Apr. 1960. Harold Paris papers, 1946-1983. Archives of America Art, Smithsonian Institution.

<sup>33</sup> Paris, Frieda to Pop and Dora. 23 Apr. 1960. Harold Paris papers, 1946-1983. Archives of America Art, Smithsonian Institution.

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Voulkos, Paris again changed his primary medium to ceramic. Voulkos's artwork encouraged Paris to use ceramic in unconventional methods and he made large clay structures, entitled *Walls for Mem*, artwork that again recalled the savagery of the Holocaust (Selz and Landauer 38–39). Yet, the pieces were also exemplary of the political climate of the period, and *Walls for Mem* exposed “feelings of anxiety, impatience, and aggressive, visceral sexuality, but above all, a kind of general malaise very expressive of the mood of the 1960’s,” wrote art critic Lawrence Dinnean, in 1972 (13). By the early 1970s, Paris was having difficulty finding galleries to represent his work on a permanent basis. During 1972, he ended his association with the Hansen-Fuller Gallery in San Francisco<sup>34</sup> and for a period was only represented in the United States by the Smith Anderson Gallery in Palo Alto. Internationally, Studio Marconi was representing him in Milan, Italy. Writing to Allan Frumkin at the end of the year, Paris expressed his desire to become associated with both Frumkin's Chicago and New York galleries; in the letter, Paris admitted that he was now looking to return to exhibiting in New York City, after a twelve-year hiatus.<sup>35</sup> Paris had previously vented frustration about public recognition in the article, “Sweet Land of Funk,” noting the differences between the Los Angeles and San Francisco art scenes:

In Los Angeles art is consumed voraciously—a bargain-table commodity. In San Francisco and the Bay Area artists live among a citizenry whose chief artistic concerns are opera and topless [sic]. The serious artists, galleries, and museums founder in this “Bay” of lethargy and social inertia. The artist here is aware that no one really sees his work, and no

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<sup>34</sup> Paris, Harold to Hansen-Fuller Gallery, 8 Apr. 1972. Harold Paris papers, 1946-1983. Archives of America Art, Smithsonian Institution.

<sup>35</sup> Paris, Harold to Allen Frumkin, 16 Nov. 1972. Harold Paris papers, 1946-1983. Archives of America Art, Smithsonian Institution.

one really supports his work. (Paris 98)

The art scene in San Francisco was both a boon and a scourge on Paris. Yet, he remained in his position as Professor of Sculpture at UC Berkeley and continued exploring new realms of art while also advising students in both the undergraduate and graduate programs. Peter Selz viewed Paris's dilemma as a benefit to his creative output: "like many of the artists of the past whom he admires, Harold Paris prefers to go alone. In fact, I think he has chosen to live and remain in the Bay Area because there is so little of an art scene here" ("Harold" 5). True or not, Paris's legacy remains more closely tied to San Francisco than to his native city of New York.

"Sweet Land of Funk" is Paris's most well-known written contribution to the world of California art. Funk is roughly defined by Paris as "anti-camp, anti-intellectual, anti-formal, but its statements are paradoxical, primitive and universal; its imagery is profoundly moving; and the personal formality of the structural aspects in an individual piece is tremendous" (Paris 96). Peter Selz added that funk art "is largely a matter of attitude" ("Notes" 3). Paris's article, published in the March 1967 issue of *Art in America*, garnered significant attention and was followed by an April/May 1967 exhibit at the University Art Museum at UC Berkeley.<sup>36</sup> The show was curated by Peter Selz and the impact of the exhibit was both unexpected as well as fundamentally altering to the contemporary art scene: "The term 'funk artist' first entered the American lexicon as shorthand for anyone with work in Selz's 1967 show," and "after the show, knowledge of the aesthetics associated with it quickly spread across the country" (Schuster). In

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<sup>36</sup> Paul Karlstrom, who worked closely with Peter Selz, relates that "Peter says it was at his suggestion that his best artist friend and UC Berkeley colleague, Harold Paris, had published an essay on the subject in *Art in America* a month before the show opened" (*Peter Selz* 129).

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Paris's mind, the struggling Californian artist has no alternative but to deal with their artistic environment, and, Paris posits, "in effect [the artist] says 'Funk.' But also he is free. There is less pressure to 'make it.' The casual, irreverent, insincere California atmosphere, with its absurd elements—weather, clothes, 'skinny-dipping,' hobby craft, sun-drenched mentality, Doggie Diner, perfumed toilet tissue, do-it-yourself—all this drives the artist's vision inward. This is the Land of Funk" (Paris 98). Selz's event helped propel "funk" into the mainstream and Paris received credit for coining the term, but the definition of the word is not without dispute:

The debate about the term Funk [and] its specific meaning [...] continues. Harold Paris claimed the honor of naming Funk. Artist Sonia Rapoport reports that Harold, seeking her help, called her when he was writing an article on the subject for *Art in America* and admitted that he needed a name for the new movement. She went to her dictionary and somehow arrived at the word funk; when she read him the jazz-related definition, Harold said, "That's it!" (Karlstrom, *Peter Selz* 131).

After the term was coined—or adapted—the funk expression became almost universally used in all forms of art.<sup>37</sup> Essentially, "funk arose from the bohemian underground" (Albright 81), and the artistic environment in Berkeley was

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<sup>37</sup> While the Funk exhibit may be one of Paris and Selz's most famous and artistically important events, just shortly before, in November 1966, Paris was engaged in a rather psychedelic exhibit at UCLA. According to the UCLA *Daily Bruin*, art professor Kurt von Meier arranged an exhibit for Paris's sculptures, but the sculptures failed to arrive on time. The "exhibit" went ahead anyway and was accompanied by bands such as Canned Heat and Frank Zappa's Mothers of Invention. Along with Dali-esque film clips on repeat and three bands playing at the same time, the *Daily Bruin* noted that "the combination of special effects had a strange influence on the people there. Reactions ranged from quiet contemplation to wild dancing to utter and complete amazement. Crowds were large and included a large contingent of 'hippies' along with scores of curious observers." Von Meier had intended the exhibit to "emphasize the aspect of total environment which prompts an approach to the Paris sculpture as a scene or an "installation" rather than an exhibition" (see Barnett).

bohemian in more sense than one. As Karlstrom describes it, “in many respects Peter [Selz] and Harold [Paris]—along with Pete Voulkos—were regarded as the bohemian triumvirate of the UC Berkeley art faculty. Many of their colleagues and students saw them as exemplars of the fully liberated California lifestyle, which included sexual freedom” (*Peter Selz* 135). Funk, then, was a word that seemed perfectly suited for the Berkeley environment of the late 1960s and early 1970s, and both Selz and Paris willingly defined the period through this term.

While Paris was credited with applying the term funk to the art scene surrounding him, he was not necessarily a full-fledged member of the movement. As Selz has noted, “Funk artists knew too well that a fraudulent morality is a fact of the world, and, having no illusion that they could change it, they exposed it” (“Engagement” 210). Unchanging exposure does not encompass Paris’s art, as he strove to find a deeper meaning between humans, their actions, and the world around us. Paris indicated that “it is my inherent belief that the humanistic values are the heart and soul of the creative work, and if the ‘Why’ is sufficiently clear, the ‘How’ will resolve itself of its own volition.”<sup>38</sup> Elsewhere he wrote, “the pattern of my life is one of constant seeking for the illusive, often impossible to describe, romantic, visionary, poetic, closed personal door that I see to open and reveal my most affirmative statement.”<sup>39</sup> It is no surprise then, that decades after the funk movement, Selz sought to distance Paris from an intimate association with the group: “Paris, an artist of extraordinary versatility

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<sup>38</sup> Paris, Harold. “Statement.” Circa 1955. Harold Paris papers, 1946-1983. Archives of America Art, Smithsonian Institution

<sup>39</sup> Paris, Harold. 5 July 1973. Application for *Who’s Who in America 1974-75*, unpublished section. Harold Paris papers, 1946-1983. Archives of America Art, Smithsonian Institution. Paris’s notes to be published in the “Thoughts on My Life” section of *Who’s Who in America* exceeded the word count and some sentences were excised (see *Who’s Who* 2377).



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in the use of techniques and materials, and creator of austere environments and powerful clay, bronze, and paper sculpture, could never be part of the gritty Funk atmosphere that prevailed when he arrived in California from Europe in 1960. Though as a teacher he influenced a whole generation of artists, he remained the noted outsider” (*Beyond* 9).

After suffering numerous heart attacks, by the latter part of the 1970s Paris came to believe that his remaining time would be limited. Under this premonition, he began writing snippets of his biography; the fragments contain various scenes from his artistic life. Paris determined, however, that “in the course of finding things to be included in this book, I have come to a decision in that I would not speak or write about critics, writers, poets, books that have played a role in my life.”<sup>40</sup> Except for brief discussions of Rainer Maria Rilke and Sherlock Holmes, Paris follows through on his intentions and scant information is written about literary influences. Earlier in his life, Paris was much more expressive about reading. Writing in Belle Krasne’s article, “10 Artists on the Margin,” Paris expressed a strong interest in literature:

Very often, too, writers have an influence on me. (You know. I’m a fantastic reader. I can knock off three books in a day.) As you read, you bring up a picture of what you read. A writer, though he’s dealing with words, paints pictures, and often I’m influenced by the pictures a writer paints. Of the poets. I love Lorca and much of Spender, and Rilke and Blake. I have a great love of men like Poe. And I like the contemporaries who deal in the supernatural—for instance a man I just came across,

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<sup>40</sup> Paris, Harold. Untitled page from his memoir. N.d. Harold Paris papers, 1946-1983. Archives of America Art, Smithsonian Institution. Within these autobiographical pages I had hoped to find a passing reference to Henry Miller.

John Collier. I like Henri Michaux, a French writer, a poet. Gogol, “Dead Souls.” Kafka. “The Penal Colony”—that machine! I have sketches of it! (Kranse 22)

Considering the short length Kranse’s collection of reflections by ten artists, Paris’s focus on literature instead of his artwork attests to his deep appreciation for the literary world.

The variety of output throughout Paris’s thirty years as sculptor and craftsman is astounding. He kept detailed records of his exhibits and by the late 1970s the list exceeded thirteen pages, with hundreds of exhibits worldwide. Yet, he was not a commercial success and his efforts, as artist Fletcher Benton recalls, demonstrated that Paris “was frantic about being recognized” (Benton). Constantly evolving his style, Paris could be considered “a mercurial artist, working in many mediums from bronze casting and printmaking, to ceramics, cast plastics and paper.”<sup>41</sup> Peter Selz, in an interview with Paul Karlstrom, observed that “the reason why Harold never made a name for himself to speak of is because every year he was doing something else. He was working bronze. He was working in ceramic. He was working in paper. He was working in plastic. And, [...] the creative mind of that person ran a mile a minute” (Selz, “Oral History”).<sup>42</sup> Throughout his career, Paris was continually seeking to find notoriety and fame through his diversified artistic output. The rich assortment of Paris’s work represents a world perspective that at its pinnacle is miraculous and

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<sup>41</sup> Jenson, Kevan. “Re: Henry Miller and Kevan Jenson.” Received by Wayne E. Arnold, 29 Nov. 2012.

<sup>42</sup> Selz reiterated this opinion on various occasions. In 1972, he told a *Time* reporter, “[Paris] has never been part of any movement in American art. I think that is why he was never successful in New York, where art goes in movements and trends. When most art in America is cool and removed and interested in problems of form, here is a man who is constantly retaining the emotional concept” (qtd. in Hughes 28).

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at the same time is filled with the perils of human design and evolution. In one of his many statements about his own work, Paris wrote:

It is my objective as an artist to reflect the forces for good and evil that exist in man, present and unsaid in each of us. I seek greater understanding of the world that confronts me, but I disagree with those contemporary concepts which abstract the artist from his heritage. I find it necessary to establish every kinship possible...emotional, intellectual, spiritual... between myself and the past so that I may adequately integrate it with the problems of my own age. I feel that if I can do these things to my maximum capacities, I will realize my purpose as an artist.<sup>43</sup>

Very much a man of his time, Paris was prolific in his output. His larger artwork, including entire rooms as exhibits, no longer exist. His smaller pieces, however, are scattered around the world in the hands of private collectors, museums, and art dealers. These various designs encompass “emotions of mixed media” (Tarshis) and viewing Paris’s work leaves an indelible impression of an artist striving to interpret the density of the world around him.

## Conclusion

Harold Persico Paris and Henry Valentine Miller never met, and they did not correspond. It is likely that Miller never cognitively knew of Harold Paris, although the contrary is also possible. The seven years during which I sporadically advanced this project ultimately ended with no material link between the two California-based artists. The assumption Kevan Jenson made in his fan mail (that Miller would recognize Paris’s name) has yet to be empirically determined. My

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<sup>43</sup> Paris, Harold. “Statement.” N.d. Harold Paris papers, 1946-1983. Archives of America Art, Smithsonian Institution.

hypothesis that there was a closer historical association between Miller's Los Angeles environment and Paris's Berkeley art scene has proven untenable. The hint of their affiliation appears only in the letter from Kevan Jenson. Bearing in mind that Miller was the more famous artist, and that by the 1970s Miller's health kept him mostly confined to Los Angeles and then to just his home, the likelihood is slim of Miller ever having interacted with Paris's art scene. Jenson's fan mail from 1979, however, has encouraged the exploration into the relationship fans felt with Miller as well as bringing attention to Paris's all-too-quickly fading public memory. We might conclude that the fan (Jenson) has become the link between the two artists, for it is Jenson's letter that provides the connection, even if tangential. The boundaries of fan mail studies need not be restricted to larger quantities of letters; a single fan letter can spark new and worthwhile investigations. Miller's literary status attracted both Jenson and Paris, but for different reasons. When Paris provided Jenson with Miller's address, he probably did so with the belief that Jenson might make his own historical connection with Henry Miller. More than thirty years later, I returned to Jenson the fan letter he wrote Miller; it certainly must have been a surreal moment for Jenson to again see his own letter. Its reappearance, as well as our subsequent (and rather serendipitous) 2014 meeting in New York City, recalled for Jenson a maxim he attributes to Harold Paris: "If the miraculous is not happening from time to time, you are living the wrong life."<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Jenson, Kevan. "Re: Henry Miller and Kevan Jenson." Received by Wayne E. Arnold, 1 June 2014.

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北九州市立大学

外国語学部紀要

第150号

2020年3月

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