

St. Albert and the LSD Revelation Revolution

Alex Grey



ON JANUARY 11th, 2006, the Swiss chemist who discovered LSD, Dr. Albert Hofmann, turned 100 years old. The birthday celebration was an elegant gathering of family, friends and colleagues held in Basel, Switzerland at the Museum of Cultures. My wife Allyson and I were invited because of our association with psychedelic culture and participation in a Symposium later that week. Distinguished guests at the birthday gathering spoke in German, but even monolingual Americans could understand the reverence and enthusiasm shown in speeches praising Dr. Hofmann as a scientist and a sage. A reception followed where invited guests mingled and toasted. Allyson and I greeted many old friends and made some new ones. I was intrigued to learn that none of the members of Dr. Hofmann's large family or any of his relatives, except for his wife, had ever tried LSD. The good doctor has always steered away from advocacy, yet has come to feel that some kind of divine intervention or destiny did play a role in his discovery.

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I was especially glad to see Stanislav Grof, M.D., and H.R. Giger because they could not be in attendance at the Symposium. Stan Grof is the leading psychiatric researcher, having led over 4,000 LSD psychotherapeutic sessions, and premier cartographer of the spectrum of consciousness that LSD gives a person access to. Grof has commented that LSD is a tool for exploring the mind in the same way that the telescope gives one access to the celestial realms and the microscope gives one access to the world of the cellular, molecular and atomic. He has also included in all his research some amazing drawings and paintings by LSD patients and fine artists that help describe the various altered states of awareness. Grof has used Giger's work in many of his books, such as *Realms of the Human Unconscious* and *Beyond the Brain*. When I asked the obvious question to Giger as to whether LSD had made a difference in his own work, he would only say, "Oh no, no, it is against the law, it is forbidden!" I guess you've got to respect a man's privacy. Though I do admire artists like R. Crumb and Keith Haring who admitted they used LSD and that it was critical in

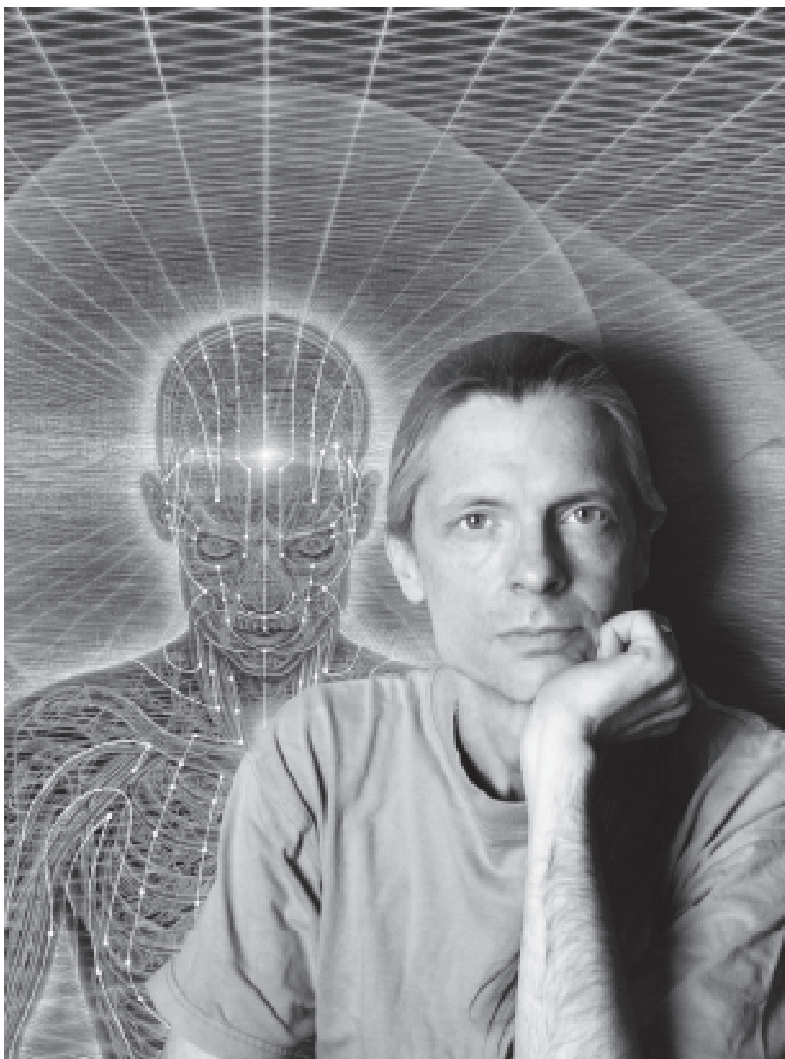
the development of their own style. That is the way Allyson and I feel regarding our own work. The next day we and some good friends visited the Giger Museum, which is an astonishing, in-depth immersion into the artist's unique visionary shadow realm. You have to be a bit determined to find Giger's castle in the small and beautifully Swiss alpine town of Gruyere. We enjoyed seeing the biggest collection of his work ever on display. The dark galleries felt filled with the demons of modern life, a festering biomechanical psychosexual orgy of predators and victims. On an upper floor Giger exhibits some of his collaborative works with several artists and then has several galleries filled with his own art collection, which includes Joe Coleman's amazing Charles Manson portrait and a few beautiful originals by Ernst Fuchs. No one leaves without getting a drink at the Giger Bar. Gaudi meets Gunter Von Hagen.

To honor Dr. Hofmann's centennial, a three-day LSD symposium was held January 14, 15, 16 in Basel, Switzerland. Leading scientific, psychiatric, pharmaceutical, legal, artistic, mystical voices spoke on the various physiological, personal,

social and spiritual impacts of LSD. Dr. Albert Hofmann spoke the first and last evening and was showered with praise and applause by over two thousand attendees (we also sang, "Happy Birthday to you"). Hofmann was swarmed with fans wherever he went, and one of the Symposium announcers said, Dr. Hofmann apologizes that he will not be able to sign everyone's book, because he explained, "I'm no longer 90."

Dr. Hofmann first synthesized the compound in 1938, while researching ergot derivatives as a chemist for Sandoz Pharmaceuticals in Basel. The substance was tested on lab animals with no interesting results, so like hundreds of similar test compounds, investigation of this drug was abandoned.

Yet, in 1943, at the horrific height of WWII and shortly after Fermi made his discovery that led to the atomic bomb, Hofmann had a "peculiar presentiment" to re-synthesize LSD. These were dark days in 1943, I imagine the smoke of the ovens of Auschwitz psychically wafting over Switzerland. Hofmann said that never before or since had he any similar "presentiment." His remix of LSD-25 in April of 1943 was when he discovered the psychological vortex of acid. He experienced overwhelming fear of dying and feelings of having left his body and later, heavenly kaleidoscopic visions. The first LSD trip, April 19, 1943, is also widely known as "Bicycle Day" because of Hofmann's wild bike ride from his lab to his home through the streets of Basel, full of perceptual distortions, not knowing whether he would ever return from his madness. The last element I painted on the portrait was a little bike riding Hofmann, and in honor of the good doctor, I was on LSD as I painted it.



In my portrait of Dr. Hofmann, the eye of transcendental spirit in the upper left hand corner of the painting releases spiralic streams of primordial rainbow spheres of potential, one of which becomes a compassionate alchemical angel, whose tears drip down to anoint or "create" the LSD molecule that the doctor holds in his hands, and a demon, here identified with Nazi power, tugs or pushes at it. LSD opens a visionary gateway to the heart, as shown by the spiral of fractally infinitizing eyes resembling the

stripey eye-spheres of the molecule, swirling into the center of the chest. On St. Albert's shoulderblade is a portrait of Paracelsus, the Alchemist of Basel, 500 years ago, who is credited with founding modern Chemistry, yet his alchemical goal was to discover the Philosopher's Stone. Alchemy was the art and science of the transmutation of the elements, like turning lead into gold and the identification of the soul of the alchemist with the chemical transformations as a metaphor of their journey to enlightenment. Modern Chemistry took the psyche and mystery out of the material weighed and measured world, reducing the world to a heap of atoms.

LSD brought psyche back front and center to the chemical material world, that is partly why I believe that LSD is the Philosopher's Stone, the discovery of which, also in the town of Basel, is the result of an alchemical process put in motion by the great Paracelsus.

I put a lot of LSD personalities and symbolism in the aura of Dr. Hofmann. Some of these people were Dr. Hofmann's friends, like Aldous Huxley, Gordon Wasson, Maria Sabina, and Richard Evans Schultes, each of whom had a special connection to psychedelics. Huxley wrote

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fearlessly about the psychedelic experience in *The Doors of Perception* and *Heaven and Hell*, which also talks about visionary states and works of art. His dying wish was to be injected with 100 mcg. of LSD and this was noted by his wife Laura to assist his transition. Gordon Wasson brought the magic psilocybin mushrooms to the world by attending the Mexican *curandera*, Maria Sabina’s sacred mushroom healing ceremony, then writing about it in *Life* magazine. Hofmann later analyzed the mushroom and distilled the previously unclassified psychedelic, psilocybin.

I put the classic folks in like Timothy Leary, Ram Das, Ralph Metzner, Grof, Ott and McKenna. I tried to put in a few lesser known psychedelic stories, like the Pittsburgh Pirate, Dock Ellis, who pitched a “no-hitter” on acid and said there were comet trails on every ball. An article originally appeared in *The Daily Mail* (London) on Sunday, August 8, 2004, with the headline, “Crick was high on LSD when he discovered the secret of life!”, explained how Francis Crick used it for creative thinking, in this way unraveling the structure of DNA, the discovery that won him the Nobel Prize. Directly under Crick is Kary Mullis, who won the Nobel Prize for Chemistry in 1993 for his invention of PCR, a method for detecting even the smallest amount of DNA in ancient materials. “Would I have invented PCR if I hadn’t taken LSD? I seriously doubt it,” he says. “I could sit on a DNA molecule and watch the polymers go by. I learnt that partly on psychedelic drugs.”

One of the best summaries of the mystical impact of acid was George Harrison’s *Rolling Stone* interview from 1987. In it he says, “For me, 1966 was the time when the whole world opened up and had a greater meaning. But that was a direct result of LSD. It was like opening the door, really, and before, you didn’t even know there was a door there. I had such an overwhelming feeling of well-being, that there was a God, and I could see him in every blade of grass. It was like gaining hundreds of years of experience within twelve hours. It changed me, and there was no way back to what I was before.”

The LSD Symposium could be a turning point in the story of this amazing molecule, as the subtitle of the conference, “From Problem Child to Wonder Drug” suggests. Thousands of people from all over the world came together to discuss the proven possibilities of LSD in psychotherapy, spirituality, the arts, for creative problem-solving in all fields, and how LSD was misused and abused by the CIA, and also by many people seeking a recreational high who catalyzed their own latent psychoses.

Yet, as has been proven in the Good Friday Experiment and in follow-up studies, psychedelics can evoke a mystical experience and bring a person closer to God. Even if only a glimpse of the infinite, a person never forgets that encounter. The hope is that such a vision of unity can help bring people to care more for themselves, each other, and our world. I believe that taken in the proper set and setting, LSD can be the right medicine for humanity’s ailing and alienated soul. God help that it find a more fair legal and spiritual status around the world in the 21st century. One of the most intensely beautiful moments from the trip to Basel came when Dr. Hofmann generously signed the back of my portrait of him, adding also the date of his birthday and the LSD formula. He wagged his finger at me and in Germanic-sounding English said, “You’ve got the eye!” He agreed to sign an edition of 50 prints to help fund scientific psychedelic research through MAPS, and to assist our cultural center in New York City, the Chapel of Sacred Mirrors (www.cosm.org). Forty-nine of the portraits have been sold, and print 1/50 will be auctioned online in October 2006. St. Albert and the LSD Revelation Revolution will be on display in the Chapel. Please come visit. •

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