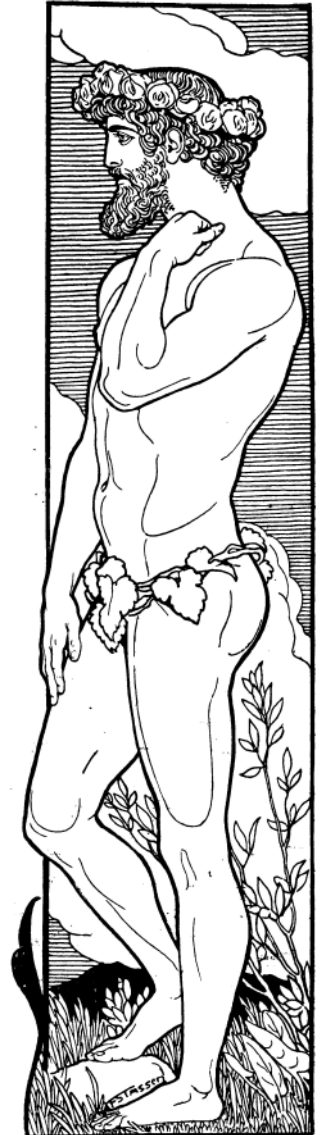


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The Newsletter of the *Naturist Action Committee* and the *Naturist Education Foundation*

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NAC, NEF, and GNI: A Shared History

By Bill Schroer, Chair NAC / Board Member NEF

This past week I was invited, as representative for the Naturist Action Committee and the Naturist Education Foundation (NAC/NEF), to participate as guest speaker and workshop presenter at Naked Camp 2024, the annual GNI (Gay Naturist International) Gathering that attracts gay men from around the country and internationally.

The Naturist Action Committee and Naturist Education Foundations are non-profit corporations created to advocate for and educate (respectively) our society on the positive aspects and value of naturism as a philosophy of living. As such, I always value the invitation to speak or present to groups regarding our work and the current naturist environment in the US as we see it.

GNI is a major financial contributor to NAC/NEF and so I was pleased and honored to be invited to provide workshops and updates on topics of interest to the gay naturist community. This was my fourth year being invited to this annual event which has been held since 1992 at the Pocono Eagle Resort in Pennsylvania, a beautiful 350 acre resort nestled in the foothills of the Pocono mountains. I've always enjoyed the opportunity to engage with members of GNI about the many interests and concerns that naturists (both gay and straight) share.

As part of my preparation for this year's event I wondered how far back NAC/NEF had been attending the GNI events and how we came to be part of their annual celebration. I learned that, in fact, NAC/NEF and GNI have a shared history that is both unique and rooted in the foundations of modern naturism.

Lee Baxandall, renowned naturist activist, was an early advocate of naturism as a diverse and inclusive movement. As much of Baxandall's work was with the "Free Beach" initiatives of the 60's he recognized both the practical value and philosophical importance of an inclusive movement. From a practical standpoint he saw that gay and lesbian nudists were often on the forefront of challenging the prohibitions or ordinances against nudity on the beach. "Gays on the nude beach have often led because of more experience at defying intimidation on behalf of values too central to abandon" he wrote. He went on in his writing to note that many of the nude beaches existing at the time were initiated by gay nudists "...gays had staked out remote stretches (of beach) which were then shared by heterosexual couples and singles."

As Baxandall expanded his work and the growth of interest in naturism and nude

beaches continued to increase he founded the Naturist Society, and and later was supportive of the formation of the Naturist Action Committee and the Naturist Education Foundation. Each entity was created for a separate purpose. The Naturist Society, a private for-profit organization published a magazine (now "N" magazine). NAC was to provide political advocacy and support for legislative efforts on nudist's behalf. NEF was

to focus on educating American society regarding the positive benefits of naturism. Subsequent to the formation of the Naturist Society, Baxandall in 1983 asked Murray Kaufman, a gay naturist organizer, if he would be willing to create a nationwide special interest group of gay and lesbian naturists.

"Gays on the nude beach have often led because of more experience at defying intimidation on behalf of values too central to abandon."

Part of Baxandall's motivation in promoting the creation of this group was to emphasize his commitment to inclusiveness in naturism and to counter the homophobia that existed in much of the traditional nudist resort communities (and around much of the rest of America). "We never considered in 1980 founding a TNS (Naturist Society) which might subtly or crudely discriminate against, discourage, or humiliate the nudist having the same gender sexual preference."

With Baxandall's encouragement Murray Kaufman's efforts with the Gay/Lesbian Naturists (GLN) Special Interest Group were singularly successful. However, due to a lack of lesbian involvement, in 1992 the GLN sig became the Gay Naturists International sig, and by 1993 the group had independently incorporated as the "Gay Naturists International" (GNI). That organization and NAC/NEF have continued to maintain the alliance that was started from their shared history, largely through NAC's attendance at the annual GNI Gathering.



As I prepared my notes for the workshops and presentation I was to give I was reminded that while we have a shared history, GNI (and most of the gay naturist community) has moved forward separate from the hetero nudist community. While not inherently problematic, the threats against naturism I see today, from reactionary legislation against simple nudity to book banning to administrative prohibitions against nudity for no particular reason suggest all naturists are under threat. The gay/straight naturist silos I see are not helpful given these headwinds. We naturists are too small a group to be separated by subsets of gender, sexual preference, geography or any other artificial distinction. In the workshops I conducted and in my speech to the assembly at the GNI Gathering

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I found many more shared values than differences. I was very encouraged by the sense of community at the Gathering and the level of concurrence on the many issues facing naturists today.

As I concluded my talk I emphasized our need to be proactive, to “come out” as naturists and to work together to advance and protect the rights of naturists. None of our rights as nudists are “assured”. We must be even more vigilant and work in concert with each other in today’s hostile naturist environment. While we may not agree on every issue, the value of gay/straight naturists working together for the larger goal cannot be underestimated. For, as Benjamin Franklin reminded the colonies, “We must, indeed, all hang together, or, most assuredly, we will all hang separately.”

The NAC/NEF-GNI shared history is a foundation which has the potential for building a larger and more connected future. That future may further inform naturist efforts against the conservative cloud on our horizon. I invite the leadership of naturist organizations to not only recognize/respect the values of all naturist partners but reach out to connect, engage and, together, build a presence of naturism in America that is positive, transformative and necessary for us not only to survive, but to thrive.



THERE’S MAGIC IN THOSE HATS

The theme of year’s NAC and NEF hosted happy hour at the GNI 2024 Gathering was “Magic Hats”. Among an abundance of men attired in very innovative hats, these gentlemen quenched their thirst with “Magic Hat” beer while showing off their avant-garde headgear.

Lee Baxandall's Notes on Camp

By Sigmund Snider

"Notes on Camp" is a 1964 essay written by Susan Sontag, in which she describes the concept of "camp" as a "sensibility that revels in artifice, stylization, theatricalization, irony, playfulness, and exaggeration rather than content." Sontag's essay has had an enduring impact on art, fashion, and popular culture.

A decade before Susan Sontag's work, writer Christopher Isherwood wrote about the camp in his 1954 novel, *The World in the Evening*. Isherwood describes camp as a sensibility that "sees everything in quotation marks." For Isherwood, camp is an aesthetic style and a way of evaluating one's surroundings.

Naturist leader Lee Baxandall offered his interpretations of camp in the Spring 1965 edition of *Studies on the Left*, an academic journal founded in 1959 that focused on leftist theory and politics.

In his article "Camp and Community," Baxandall defines the concept:

Camp describes Tiffany colored-glass lamps, sentimental old postcards, Mae West movies, the Steve Reeves epics, much of Art Nouveau, dancing the Monkey and Frug, following one or another comic strip, some kinds of sports enthusiasm, elaborate plastic-napkin holders, some fur coats of inelegant pile, and much besides.

Baxandall suggests that the concept of camp is a "genuine pleasure in the banal," and concedes that "one is surrounded by the banal, the trivial, the degrading," and that "few jobs are available that can evolve a man's emotions and lend him dignity." Given this unfortunate reality, Baxandall concludes that "camp essays a solution" by finding "positive value in gratuitously stylized relics of American taste, in archetypical debasements of personality."

Baxandall proposes that the alienated intelligent American is "delivered into a world that offends sensibility," and so he must "wryly adjust." Camp provides a way of "improvising meaning out of hard-sell and banality" and returning to a "humanist basis" of living.

Baxandall's *Studies on the Left* piece may provide some early insight into his interest in naturism as both a social movement and a means of "improvising meaning out of banality." Given his interest in Action Theater and Happenings – forms of theater that tended to be more like performance art and served as a means of removing the viewer and participant from their assumed realities in order to inspire a renewed sensitivity to an environment or topic – one could argue that Baxandall might view naturism as a form of camp. Given that the naturist gatherings (a few in the southeast were referred to as "happenings") were nude events that featured anything from pudding tosses to naked accordion players to members of naturist groups devoted to highly specialized interests such as the flea ukulele, it is undeniable that there is an element of

absurdity, irony, and playfulness in the variety of social nudity promoted by Baxandall. This is not to suggest that naturism is an unserious movement – far from it – but that it challenges its practitioners to recontextualize their environments and experiences and open themselves to new interpretations of the mundane or familiar.

Examining Baxandall's early writings, one is left to conclude that this was by design. While the traditional nudists spent decades stoically advocating for a nudism that was accompanied by specific physical, emotional, and cultural benefits and arguing that a weekend at a nudist park could solve everything from vitamin deficiencies to the problem of teen pregnancies, Baxandall's naturism possessed a sense of humor and an embrace of the absurdity of doing "normal" activities in the nude. His naturism was not presented as a cure for the world's superficial ills but as a transformative experience that held the potential to broaden our society's ever-narrowing perspectives.

If Baxandall recognized and nurtured an element of camp in the naturist movement, it was not because he identified the movement as akin to "elaborate plastic napkin holders." Instead, he recognized the more profound implications of an embrace of the absurd and colorful. Like Action Theater and the Happenings of the 1960s, camp represented to Baxandall a means of seeing beyond the apparent, of shaking up one's established understandings of the world around them, an intellectual reorientation or reset, allowing for a willingness to approach subversive or uncommon concepts with objectivity and intellectual curiosity. There might be an element of absurdity to social nudity, and the many activities naturists do

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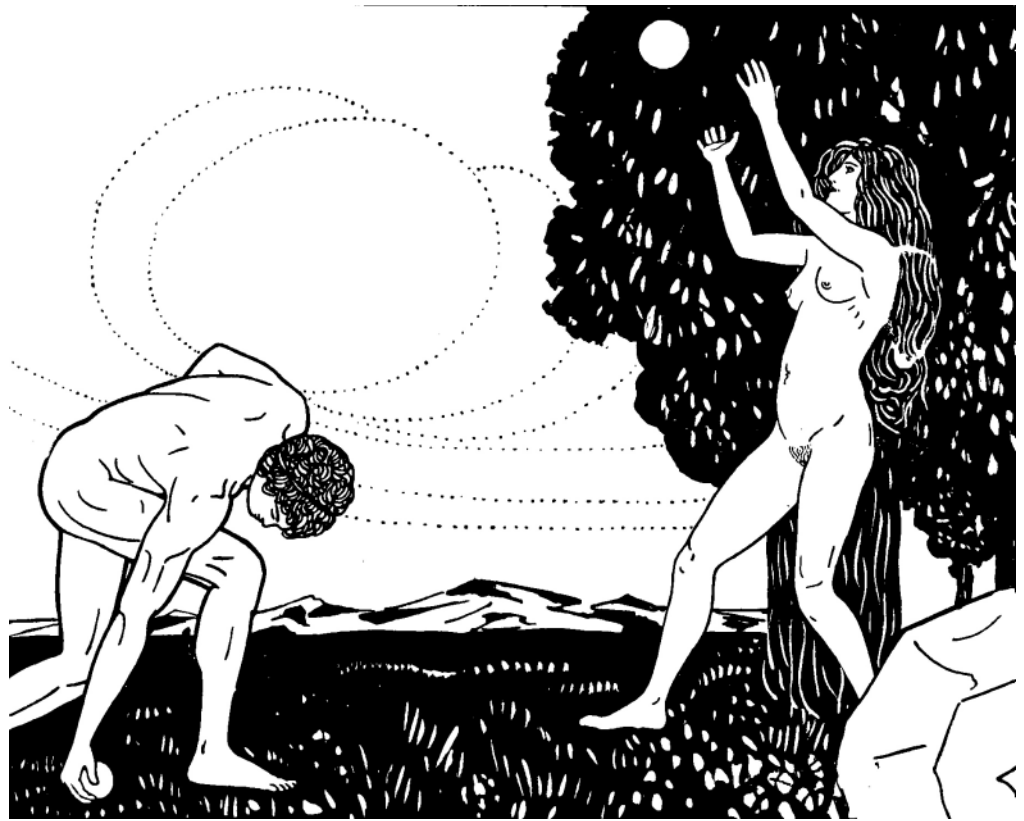


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while nude, but that absurdity represents its fundamental power - an opening of the mind.

Lee Baxandall was a revolutionary figure in the North American naturist movement. Examining his pre-naturist writings, which are decidedly political and activist and challenge prevailing societal attitudes, is helpful in fully appreciating his motivations and influences. His 1964 "Camp and Community" essay in *Studies on the Left* hints at some of the concepts he would later incorporate in his naturism work and also treats us to Baxandall's characteristically skillful and amusing use of words and phrases.

"Fur coats of inelegant pile."



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