

legitimate, and how they should be managed. For Dobkin de Rios and Rumrill, ayahuasca must be used ritually. They cite approvingly the Brazilian government's approach of allowing it to religious groups that are 'properly registered with and recognized by the state' (p. 145). Beyond that, ayahuasca should be incorporated into a 'medical/spiritual model', where 'a cost-benefit analysis carefully evaluates the ingestion of the plant with health and mental health risks' (p. 147).

The very diversity of voices and perspectives in *The Internationalization of Ayahuasca* present its opposition to this vision of government control, institutionalization and medicalization. Although the goal of the Santo Daime and UDV leaders has been to integrate ayahuasca religions thoroughly into the mainstream, the danger in their success is that governments are in the position of deciding what counts as a genuine religion. In the final chapter, Sandberg argues that courts must *not* judge the validity of religions themselves, but rather assess if government interference with freedom (to take ayahuasca) is warranted on grounds such as public order, or public health. Further, although the ayahuasca churches have been

fundamental to the globalization of their sacrament, submitting to institutionalization in order to be able to practice one's belief constitutes a 'limitation on the right to the expression of religious freedom' (Boiteux, p. 273).

The differences in these books, in the end, point to how a biological, taken up as spiritual equipment, challenges standard categories of drugs and religion, a result that perhaps says less about ayahuasca than the contemporary anthropological world.

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To Every Age Its Art, to Art its Freedom
Vienna Secession (1897)

It is one of the foundational tenets of contemporary studies of media and visual culture that the art of every age reflects its values, ideals, socio-technical practices and politics. One might say, taking the mantras of modernist art movements seriously, that art is not merely representative but in fact constitutive, of contemporary forms of attention, distraction and experience. Political theorist, Jacques Rancière, has gone so far as to argue that politics and aesthetics must be thought together, in that both involve the

Psychedelic vision

Christoph Grunenberg and Jonathan Harris
Summer of Love: Psychedelic Art, Social Crisis and Counterculture in the 1960s. Liverpool University Press and Tate Liverpool, Liverpool, 2006.
US\$34.41, ISBN: 978-0853239291

Ken Johnson
Are You Experienced?: How Psychedelic Consciousness Transformed Modern Art. Prestel Publishing, New York, 2011. US\$33.81,
ISBN: 978-3791344980

David Rubin
Psychedelic: Optical and Visionary Art since the 1960s. MIT Press and San Antonio Museum of Art, Cambridge, MA, 2010. US\$24.90,
ISBN: 978-0262014045

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organization of sense. If we choose to believe these ideas, then which aesthetic discourse we privilege in the writing of history can only be understood as a political contest over the forms of sense, and even experience, we culturally value in the present. What is labelled 'art' and how it is labelled will reveal something about our contemporary forms of governmentality (Rancière, 2006).

Therefore, it should be of interest to those studying the history of science and science studies, to note the sudden resurgent popularity of 'psychedelic' as a term defining the aesthetics of art and culture since the 1960s replacing, or at least displacing, other discourses including computation, cybernetics, communication and the digital. What has happened to make this once seemingly marginal and threatening state the darling of curators, academics and journalists? More importantly, what is at stake in redefining our contemporary states of attention and distraction in these terms? This review argues that this psychedelic 'turn' in art criticism refracts a broader reconfiguration of the observer as simultaneously networked through a homogenous species biology that creates uniform nervous experiences while simultaneously operating in a personalized space of choice and drug consumption.

Three recently published books shed light on how this psychedelic discourse is being deployed and its place in contemporary culture: Christopher Grunenberg and Jonathan Harris's essay collection *Summer of Love: Psychedelic Art, Social Crisis and Counter-culture in the 1960's*, Ken Johnson's *Are You Experienced: How Psychedelic Consciousness Transformed Modern Art* and David Rubin's edited volume *Psychedelic: Optical and Visionary Art Since the 1960s*. Although different in tenor and objective, all three books reveal a historical transformation in attitudes to psychedelia and a contemporary desire to rescript forms of viewing and experiencing culture in the last half century in terms of drug use, personal experience, phenomenology and often biology.

If 'psychedelic' is the language of an attempt to grasp something more ephemeral – perhaps what Benjamin (1979 [1931]) labelled the 'optical unconscious' of the present – this effort speaks through a discourse of historical rupture and epistemic transformation. The psychedelic is labelled a 'sensibility', a type of 'responsiveness' (Rubin, 2010, pp. 16–18), an 'awakening' and a 'paradigm' (Johnson, 2011, pp. 217–218). This language designates not so much of an actual practice of drug use as an effort to delineate a historically specific form of sense making that cannot be separated from an amorphous drug culture of the late 1960s and early 1970s.

What then marks this 'sensibility'? Neon colours? Wavering forms? The effort of art to induce perceptual confusion? None of these features – colour, form or perceptual manipulation – can be said to have held true throughout the history of artistic practice. Surrealism, constructivism, Bauhaus, to name classic reference points, all had their colour theories, psychological theories and commitments to transforming subjectivity. However, two features do appear to define the psychedelic in art and culture for all three texts: first, an absence of depth psychology and of any discourses of consciousness and unconsciousness. Second, there appears to be a subtle valorization of non-digital arts and practices, particularly in the exhibition catalogues. It is drug use, not computer code, programming or the non-conscious manipulations of the media that figure as the central practice defining our contemporary forms of attention, distraction and interaction for these authors.

This is not to say that psychedelic practices are antagonistic to digital media, but only to demarcate an insistence from within the texts asserting the greater import of intuitive and unpredictable aspects of contemporary perception and cognition rather than the computational and algorithmic elements. In all three books, languages of psychiatry and sensation replace those of control and programmability in the discourse on art and politics. These accounts are invested in biology and the human body as shaping media and as sites of experience.

The first book, *Summer of Love*, is the widest ranging and most academic of the three books. It uses the language of the psychedelic as an x-ray with which to reveal the changing nature of politics and aesthetics since 1968. Comprising a series of genuinely interesting and rigorous essays, the book makes a serious effort to account for the conditions producing this genre of art and to expand the kinds of mediums involved including performance and music. Little defines the psychedelic throughout the collection with the exception of an agreement by authors as to its non-movement orientation, and its identification with 'idealism and hope' – an idealism and hope that the authors largely assume are lacking in the present. We are living in the 'Winter of Discontent', the editors argue, and imply that reviewing the events of the *Summer of Love* may awaken us from this malaise (Grunenberg and Harris, 2005, p. 16).

Therefore, one of the recurring themes in this collection is the perseverance, and perhaps political necessity, of returning psychedelic concepts to the present. In an opening essay, art historian Stuart Laing asserts that in the 1960s there existed a

disjuncture between 'straight' and 'psychedelic' culture. Psychedelic culture served 'the idea that a culture and society could be reformed and transformed by psychic liberation and creative play'. He presents this consciousness as a type of resistance to hegemonic culture, operating by turning the very central tenets of post-industrial capital – consumption, individuation and distraction – into a communal ethos and optic for criticism. The opportunity of such activism dissipated with the end of liberal governments in both Britain and the United States, and the rise of conservative parties in the wake of global conflicts, oil embargoes and labour strife. Laing intimates that, if we could only remember the playful capacity to transform our perceptual fields and psychic spaces, perhaps we could produce new forms of time and experience in the present. The corollary of this argument is that the late 1960s were moments of opportunity when the nascent forces of neoliberalism and globalization had not yet consolidated into the familiar forms of the present.

The emerging questions are: What identifies psychedelic practice within the late 1960s? and What is at stake in historically returning to the 1960s as a site of emancipation and political opportunity? As Barbara Kienscherf's essay demonstrates, utopia and psychedelic practices have long been entangled in the search for colour music. Since the eighteenth century, there has been a desire for merging music and vision. This desire must be understood as political in seeking to revise the vision-dominated hierarchy of the senses in order to produce a more equal perceptual, and by derivation, social field, reminding us that this impulse still animates our nightclubs, and music videos might, she hopes, reawaken the radical potentials of equating vision and aurality (Grunenberg and Harris, 2005, pp. 179–201).

This flattening of the subject and de-hierarchizing of perception are what mark the psychedelic and put it at odds with other forms of social protest in *Summer of Love*. As Andrew Wilson in his analysis of the London psychedelic scene in the 1960s argues convincingly, 'the events of 1968 exposed the split between those voyagers of inner space who believed that imagination was enough and activists who understood that social and political struggle entailed a return to more orthodox, even Marxian, forms of analysis, conflict, and action' (Grunenberg and Harris, 2005, p. 17). This disjuncture or tension between structure, analysis and personalized experience characterizes, Wilson argues, the political crisis of the late 1960s and continues to resonate today. By contrast, in Nanette Aldred's analysis, performances in music and art of the psychedelic movement focus

on schizophrenic splits that sunder subjectivities, offering symptoms of a situation in which personal liberation came at the cost of connection unless the 'body can find a way to operate in social space' (Grunenberg and Harris, 2005, p. 118). Drugs and methods of performance were techniques to engage in this dialectic between the personal and the social.

The art historian, Brandon Joseph, in his essay on Warhol's *Exploding Plastic Inevitable* suggests a faint messianic promise in psychedelic artwork. He argues that the tactics and attitudes of the 1960s in the turn to individualized approaches and self-management pioneered new tactics for politics. For Joseph, the semantic turn in the discourse of the *avant-garde* to that of counter-culture and underground reflects a turn, such as William S. Burrough's mole hills, inward into the logic of their contemporary technological and social systems. In this model of political life, drug-induced (or drug-like) reflexivity rather than dialectical confrontation serves as the only tactic to reveal the operations of hegemonic powers. For Joseph, there is a faint possibility in this encounter between the logistics of government, corporate aesthetics and the play of art for an 'adventure' for those who were ready to go 'travelling'. Joseph writes that Warhol's work was an experiment in pushing the nature of contemporary attention to its extreme that might produce adventurous results serving as a beacon to the only critical strategy left to the present (Grunenberg and Harris, 2005, p. 258).

Summer of Love therefore insists that changes in technology and society have made it so that contests over power no longer occur at the level of representation and language, but rather at the level of this nervous network (literally and figuratively). However, these authors tend to insist on the importance of separating the psychedelic drug culture from other practices and institutions of the time – the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), political movements, to name a few. The culture of the psychedelic may have been a product of its time, but recuperating this state (assumed to be lost) will inform our contemporary politics for the better by way of a reflexive and self-referential loop into our own minds. Exploring psychedelic art and culture, the editors of *Summer of Love* insist and make visible a historical turn to a society ruled by sense and not by reason.

The future of politics, as imagined in *Summer of Love*, must by deduction occur at the level of reconciling nervous systems, attention fields, individual experience and psychiatric manipulations with structural concerns and inequalities such as race, class and gender. However, the answer, unfortunately merely

implied in many of these texts, is to abandon the structural in favour of self-referential drug-induced artistic practices.

The turn from the computational and systemic to the personal and biological is perhaps nowhere more evident than in Ken Johnson's *Are You Experienced?* This is a journalistic account of the author's observation that psychedelic experiences and drug culture have transformed modern art since 1965. Traversing virtually all of contemporary art, Johnson has little trouble collapsing art ranging from minimalism and conceptual art to pop art and beyond (Michael Snow, Cindy Sherman, Barbara Kruger, Robert Smithson and Takashi Murakami all figure prominently in the book). The psychedelic appears here to apply to any effort to transform perception. The narrative of the text relies on personal accounts of artists using drugs, particularly LSD, to make this case – although actual drug use is not the sole criterion for inclusion. While briefly touching on digital media, Johnson privileges painting, sculpture and cinematic works of art. Historically, this appears reductive. But it works well as a form to provide the necessary stills and storylines to counterpose with the text. The text is also highly engagingly written.

Johnson's narratives of drug use are creatively juxtaposed with images and artworks that never actually correlate with the biographies being recounted. This forces the reader to make her own (perhaps psychedelic) connections between the visible and the textual. This tactic of course appears to confirm that the art piece in question was produced while on drugs, when, in fact, often one is reading text relating to a different artist's biography.

However, this leaves the reader asking some questions: What terms of difference exist in the realm of the drugged experience, particularly as Johnson brings in feminists and critical race theorists/artists? Where does medium specificity sit in this account? How homogeneous is history or, for that matter, 'drug culture'? Johnson is silent on these issues, for what he privileges is 'experience' – individual experience as the measure of art. This privileged subjectivity, however, is quite clearly not one of psychoanalytic subjects. Psychedelic, for him, is 'intuitively ... and perceptually engaging'. It is affective, but very often 'not emotional', or unrelated to creating sentiments that enter language, representation or consciousness (Johnson, 2011, p. 31).

Accompanying this flat but affective and egoless subject is the seeming disappearance of the social, replaced by a concept of 'drug culture'. As though to assert the centrality of the individual, not social, nature of perception, Johnson focuses on the critic's

perception of the piece as psychedelic, rather than the political economy of distribution and production or the broader field of reception. For example, in discussing African American conceptual artist Adrian Piper's use of LSD, Johnson is careful to cite the artists' mention of dropping acid. He then commences to assume that dropping acid must therefore be counter-hegemonic and racist, because it transforms perspective and challenges state authority (Johnson, 2011, p. 22). That Piper's work is hardly psychedelic in its aesthetics or critical reception has little weight in this account, or do the differences between different forms of political and social activism within the period.

Contemporary perception in this account is affective, behavioural, non-conscious, self-referential and deeply embodied. The act of dropping acid is taken as a signifier and determinant of the experience. Johnson focuses on spectatorship, collapsing the artist biography and the critic's observation. This spectatorship makes consumption (in this case of drugs) the site of value in art.

On the one hand, this history of art from the perspective of drug culture is original. On the other hand, the scope and exploration of what comprises drug culture in its multiplicity is limited. The work of art appears here as merely a direct conduit to an aesthetically standardized drugged cultural unconscious rather than an encounter with forms of thought or aesthetics that are open to translation and, ultimately, to encountering the impossibility of accessing another human being's life. The possibility of an encounter with art truly creates an experience not through the homogeneity of egoless dissolution but through recognizing the inaccessibility and illegibility of an image produced not by one's self is impossible in this text.

The book *Psychedelic: Optical and Visionary Art since the 1960s* offers a further extension of this focus on the individual and affective as the measure of contemporary aesthetics. It is an exhibition catalogue of a show held at the San Antonio Museum of Art in 2010, which offered a wide variety of art works stretching across 50 years. The show clearly takes inspiration from the 1965 MOMA exhibition *The Responsive Eye* that centred on op art and makes a strong argument that the psychedelic is a privileged form of perception for the digital age. Interestingly enough, digital media only appear in passing. It is painting that serves as the bearer of this condition (Rubin, 2010, p. 24).

This return (perhaps of the repressed) to painting echoes Clement Greenberg's original discussions of

abstract expressionism in his essays from 1959 and 1960, 'The Case for Abstract Art' and 'Modernist Painting'. The introductory essay to *Psychedelic* argues, 'Over those three decades ... visual splendor was produced as an end in itself, as a content intensifier, and as a conceptual or symbolic signifier for aspects of technology, sexuality, and spirituality. More and more, a psychedelic sensibility emerged as a multipurpose vernacular, a move perhaps toward a universal language that may be understood regardless of ethnic or geographic background and seems appropriately suited to our current digital age' (Rubin, 2010, p. 28). Remarkable in this statement is the transformation of optical purity, seemingly central to abstract expressionism, and the transcultural discourse of universal language regularly assigned to computation, mathematics and communication theories, to a practice aligned with highly individual actions, subjectivity, affect and popular sentiments. This is no longer art for its own sake, but rather art in service to the consumption of older forms of identity and subjectivity ('ethnic' and 'geographic' background) into a 'universal language' of intensified sensations. Art, the exhibit indicates, now functions to circulate sense as identity, perhaps overcoming questions of translation and language.

Therefore, central to the exhibits' thrust is the popularization, perhaps individuation, of art. One of the essays goes so far as to argue that this revision of humankind and experience is the search 'for a revitalization of what may suddenly appear on the surface of reality and revive a sense of feeling alive, productive and happy against all odds'. This turn to 'happiness' as a defining element of the aesthetic experience of the psychedelic appears to traverse both Johnson's work and this art catalogue. It appears that if other forms of perception – digital, computational, abstract – prompt alienation or self-awareness and cut us off from one another, this new privileged form of perceptual manipulation will be about pleasure. Happiness bridges those differences of territory and subjectivity. There are no Brechtian alienation effects in these texts, and bad acid trips do not figure prominently in the exhibits (in contrast to H.R. Giger's work, for example) (Rubin, 2010, p. 47).

The choice of works strongly affirms this curatorial desire to demonstrate the 'universal' and 'happy' nature of psychedelic art. Beautifully reproduced, Little binds the chosen works together apart from the strong concentration on painting and the Southwestern influence, and an emphasis on fluorescent colour. While there is no explanatory text about the works to assist the uninformed reader or clarify curatorial

decisions, the organization of the catalogue vacillates between figurative pieces understood as depicting the mental travel space of a trip through comic form and illustration, and geometric works whose prime organization appears to be manipulating concepts from Gestalt psychology and calling on op-art tactics. This vacillation between the figurative and abstract demonstrates that in psychedelic vision the modernist separations between abstraction and materiality or organicism and functionalism do not hold, seemingly smoothed over now in an optic of 'happiness', a universal language of positive affect.

What both *Are You Experienced?* and *Psychedelic* expose is a paradox that characterizes our contemporary discourses of attention between a normative and homogenizing move to valorize physiological understandings of human psychology while simultaneously affirming the potency and uniqueness of personalization and individual experience as forms of artistic practice and critical engagement.

These are, of course, not truly opposed but rather co-constituted logics that mediate between the belief in a biological human species whose capacity for psychedelic experiences is uniform and universal and a more contemporary concept of nervous systems and bodies as infinitely extendable, enhanceable and transformable. The observer here can be said to be simultaneously networked and highly isolated through this seeming logic of 'experience'. It is, in fact, this tension between nervous populations and personalized nervous systems that appears to drive the ongoing interest in 'psychedelic' experience, drugs and art in our present.

Thus, these three books all affirm the faith that contemporary forms of life and politics are fundamentally linked to the technical manipulation of the sensorium best expressed through the practices of drug culture. Whether this awakens us to our condition in the present or alerts us to new tactics is unclear. We may ask whether the relegation of the psychedelic to a historically identifiable aesthetic and a curated art object makes the phenomena no longer the site of experimentation, but rather exposes a historical turn where politics and sense have become affective, self-referential and psychiatric.

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