

PCP: POP/CONCEPTUAL/PSYCHEDELIC

Berlin-based Vancouver artist Jeremy Shaw talks to Lars Bang Larsen about his practice and the politics of psychedelica.

LARS BANG LARSEN I'd like to begin by asking you a general question, because I am curious about your motivation for working with the psychedelic as one of your main subject matters. Psychedelia is rife with paradox. On the one hand it is over-identified because it lends itself to certain easy fascinations and to clichés about style and behaviour. On the other hand, it is strangely mercurial and difficult to grasp because the whole subversive 60s ethos is still with us in contemporary capitalism, but now in new, affirmative guises. On another level, once one approaches psychedelia with analytic intentions, it has a way of immersing your discursive tools and abolishing the distance they usually need to function. So for an artist it must be quite a bag of fleas, and difficult to excavate critical and artistic tropes from such a paradigm that is at the same time banal and recognizable, and complex from the point of view of both its cultural history and its philosophical construction.

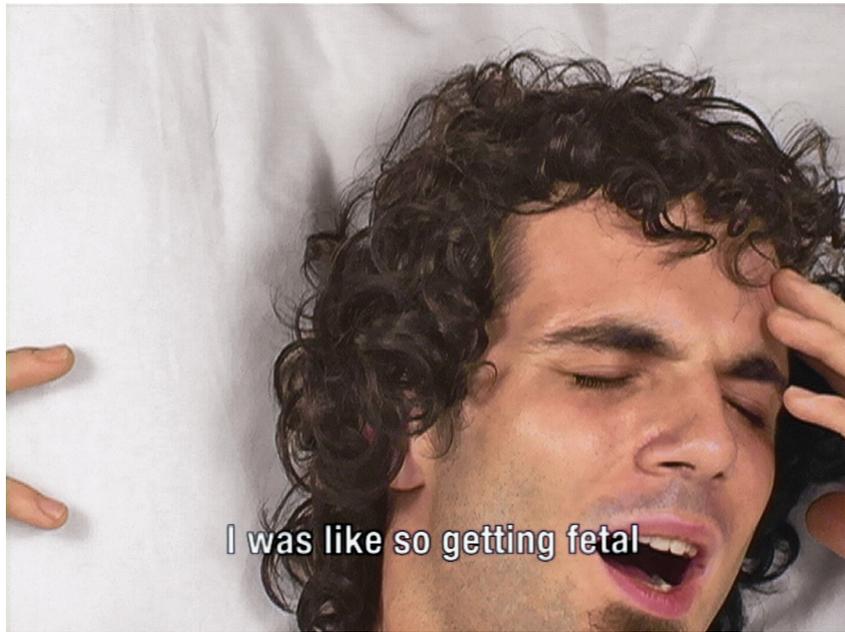
JEREMY SHAW I think that my motivation for working with the psychedelic can be traced back to being a teenager and taking LSD for the first time. I was so incredibly re-enthralled with the world after this experience that the desire of getting to the bottom of it seemingly never left me. I also watched *Pink Floyd's The Wall* (1982) and *Altered States* (1980) at a very young age, both of which, in equal parts, scared the hell out of me and made me want to explore the hallucinogenic side of things.

The paradoxes that stigmatize the psychedelic are some of its main attractions to me. I am still totally enthralled by the possibility of the psychedelic, as well as the tropes, baggage and irreverence that theoretical opinion often carries towards it. There's a huge grey area that exists when a mapping/representing/recollecting of altered states/of the psychedelic is attempted. On one side, you have advanced scientific studies

that probe to identify and represent what is happening chemically and physically during a psychedelic experience and, on the other, [you have] populist recollections (representations) that attempt to convey what was happening within the psychedelic experience itself—oddly enough, the scientific images are often very similar in aesthetic to what is generally referred to as “psychedelic.” So, you end up with a meeting of high science—generally regarded as fact—and kitsch, which is rarely given a second glance. I find this incredibly exciting as an artist, though, because, factually, neither side can claim complete confidence in their rationale, the validity of either is always in question—which, to me, puts them on a level platform for critique. I've started working with these ideas in my series *Representative Measurements of Altered States (To Aid in Further Alterations)* (2008), which posits neuroscientific imaging against the kitsch-psychedelic staple of the black-light poster. I really think there needs to be re-investigation into areas of psychedelia that have been cast to the side as kitsch—and, thus, [viewed as] irrelevant.

It is also amazing to me that a period in history (the 60s) was able to produce an aesthetic, sound and style that infiltrated so many areas of culture yet was initially sparked from the taking of illegal drugs, and that a majority of the culture adopting it probably never took them. I've always been interested in the co-option of style/aesthetics by a mainstream that didn't actively participate in the origin (i.e., skateboarding).

LBL A problem with psychedelia (and another paradox!) is the essentialism it tends to encourage in our thinking. This is, in a sense, lodged in the term itself, in that there is no other term to replace it and it doesn't distinguish between psychedelic art, drugs and media—it's the big package where it all



Jeremy Shaw, *DMT*
(*detail - Will*), 2004
8 channel video
installation, dimensions
variable



Jeremy Shaw, *DMT*
(*detail - Sara*), 2004
8 channel video
installation, dimensions
variable

comes together as a whole... I understand your counter-hegemonic explanation of the infiltrating, socio-cultural role of drugs, but I can't help myself in challenging your argument that the aesthetic, sound and style of the 60s come down to the psychedelic experience. To say that things sound or look a certain way describes things, but it doesn't explain them. What was LSD? Just another technology, like the electric amp, the offset printing press, the satellite and the pill and other technologies and media of the era. It was one that admittedly was very important to the 60s, but to reduce things to the psychedelic experience—whatever that is—only explains the “inside” of psychedelia.

In your *DMT* (2004), I think you bypass artistic reproduction of the psychedelic experience in a really interesting way that is also deadpan humorous. Seeing different people during their 15-minute trips, with the fixed lab-like camera position and the recording of their nonsensical comments verbatim, makes for an almost Brechtian effect. It's alienating the trip... To me it is a Pop, Conceptual and psychedelic work all in one, in which, as you said before, “neither side can claim complete confidence in their rationale.”

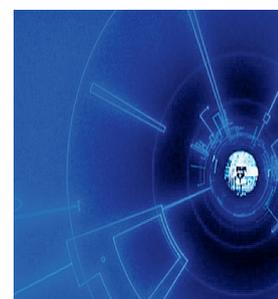
JS I definitely agree with you that there is a problem with the general use of “psychedelic” and I really only refer to the 60s' use, and subsequent all-encompassing uses of the term, in that I find it amusing that psychedelic drug use was the original catalyst for something so widespread and mainstream, albeit nebulous and often completely unrelated in the end but for the word itself. Still, the subversion at work was wonderful (and probably awful for those who held the origins dear). I take issue with the use of the word “psychedelic” to describe such a variety of recognized things, as to me something truly psychedelic should be foreign or alien to a certain degree. So, to categorize something as psychedelic because of a device that makes one recognize it as such—tremolo effect on a guitar, paisley on a miniskirt, a kaleidoscopic lens, etc.—has always seemed off to me. It's a problematic word indeed, but I'm not sure if there is any way to shake these associations... Regardless of the word itself, it is interesting to see how widely a single term can be used in general conversation to describe, however vaguely, so many facets of an era and the culture and ephemera from it. Perhaps this is due to

something about the 60s in general that embodied much more of a unified moment or awareness, at least in retrospect, than other decades? Or maybe this was such an explosive period for creation and change that a system of naming all things associated with the “psychedelic” just didn’t have time to take shape?

In *DMT*, my initial idea was to find out for myself whether such a drug could in fact do what I’d heard and read DMT [the drug Dimethyltryptamine] was capable of doing. After learning that it could, I quickly realized that there was an inability to clearly articulate in words this transcendent or “mind-blowing” experience. In presenting people’s immediate post-trip recollections as subtitles to the videos [taken of them during their trips], I wanted to illustrate this loss of elucidation skill as well as play with the idea of the notated psychedelic experience without any attempt to represent it visually: a conceptualized psychedelic. The fact that most of the subjects’ attempts to explain the experience prompted much repetition, expletives and the asking for reassurance of “Do you know what I mean?” definitely added a surprise element of deadpan. With the delivery stripped of vocal animation or intonation, you end up reading statements such as

“but it felt like I was fetal/I was like so getting fetal/I was just like “Holy shit”/Just like you feel overcome by like you’re in like almost womb-like you’re... Like I was a baby just like kicking in the womb and all that sort of shit/It was like I was flailing and all I could feel all around me was just like these thousands of like multi-colored tentacles but they were all just like loving and embracing me and just like pushing me down into this like river of muck and... What the fuck that was wicked/Holy fuck.”

It’s a piece that grew and grew in depth to me as I continued work on it, and one that’s had the most influence on my continued body of work. Something that I always found interesting about DMT was how it seemed to point to the takeover of reality television...I had no problem whatsoever finding 30 friends/acquaintances to volunteer to try the drug while being videotaped under bright lights—far less than desirable conditions for such an intense and vulnerable experience—without needing to solicit beyond word of mouth



and by no means ever finding anyone at all resistant (although this could also say something about the company I keep!)

LBL Well, it’s also the vitalism that it is so difficult to get around, isn’t it? The festival of life, the élan vital beyond categories, the promise that you could be *more* and so on. It’s very “naked life,” to be Agamben about it: biopolitics not as control but as an attempt at subversion... But, at the same time, psychedelia had a strangely functionalist side to it (taking drugs to optimize perception and so on). As you point out, the trip *has* to be alien, and stay alien, and vitalism is typically affirmative, or at least lacks self-reflexivity because it doesn’t oblige itself on ideas and concepts. Thinking and language is a by-product, something that comes afterwards. Today, this side of psychedelia is Achilles turned into the tortoise—it’s a very old man. I know that somebody like Gilles Deleuze created a discourse based on “a link between signs, events, life and vitalism,” as he put it, which went a long way towards conceptualizing this whole discussion. But,

Jeremy Shaw, *This Transition Will Never End #2* (various stills), 2008, single channel video - currently 20 minutes, dimensions variable



lia. Your video piece *This Transition Will Never End #1* (2008) shows appropriated excerpts from movies of time and dimension travel, and wormholes between realities. So you've taken trip sequences from mainstream movies and, every time the piece is being shown, you will add to it with new appropriated footage of the un-representable. Two things came to mind when I saw this piece: one was, the screensaver ruined it for a lot of this Hollywood sublime! So that's the kitsch discussion. Maybe what it says is that psychedelic art, in order to be interesting, should be underwhelming rather than overwhelming, like Michaux's mescaline-inspired stick figures or Metzger's auto-destructive art? The other thought was that, if you do as promised, you will actually have to update this piece for the rest of your life, which is a funny administrative consequence of psychedelic transgression.

JS Yes, the screensaver! I had been thinking of *This Transition Will Never End* for years without making that association, but when I finally started compiling the footage that was immediately so obvious. And, in addition to that, a lot of the contemporary screensavers now look more graphically advanced than the Hollywood vortexes! But I really love the screensaver; it's like a dazed-induced wormhole out of the mundanity of the office/workplace. When I first heard of DMT, it was referred to as the "businessman's drug" because of the fact that one could do it on their lunch break and return to work sober as if nothing had ever happened. So I like to think of the screensaver as an implementation of that quick trip out of your mind any time you stop working on the computer long enough for it to turn on; if you stare long enough at that screen, it'll show up and take you away through its wormhole. *TTWNE* is also becoming somewhat of a history of the special effects techniques used to create the swirling, vortex-like portal representations throughout cinema over the past 60-odd years thus far, albeit not in chronological order. There are early transitions like *The Time Tunnel* (1966) that use actual physical constructions of a vortex, through to the use of "split-scan" filming of animations like *2001* (1968), up through (relatively) primitive computer graphics such as *Tron* (1982) to the present where it seems as if there's some kind of plug-in or "create-a-vortex" filter in Final Cut that many of the lower budget films are using, making them end

when you look at it from the point of view of contemporary art, there is just too much creativity in the idea that "any work of art points a way through for life,"[†] as he said. This is just ready to be scooped up by the creative industries.

But I think there is a lot to be got from those forms of psychedelic art—or quasi-psychedelia—that took on absence, resistance and subjectivity in a more structural way. Henri Michaux, Gustav Metzger or the Boyle Family for example, whose works were all a kind of vitalism rooted in mortalism, to put it like that. Adrian Piper also did LSD paintings very early on, something which is interesting to consider in relation to her later practice. Or the profound pain of being "the other" that Sun Ra re-enacts in *Space is the Place* (1974). It wasn't just for the hell of it that he battled the devil across many dimensions; it was the last way out for his socio-historical being. These, to me, are practices that reconfigured some possibilities for response.

Of course, representation and its limits is one of the big topics in psychede-

[†] Deleuze quotes from 'On Philosophy', in Gilles Deleuze: Negotiations. Columbia University Press, New York 1990, p. 143.

up looking very similar. It's a ubiquitous representational cliché of the transition into another reality, state, time, etc.; the spiraling, tunnelling, circular zooming image recurs in seemingly all genres, of course most commonly in science fiction. It almost feels unavoidable, yet 100 percent recognizable in its representation of a notion or experience that remains visually un-documentable. So again, rife with paradox...

And, yes, an un-hip gesture to appoint myself as archivist of this.

As far as contemporary strategies with psychedelic art go, I do think that work that reduces or removes much of the representational "psychedelic" can be more potent: conceptualized psychedelic proposals that engage in a way of "mind-manifesting" rather than clichés of total bombardment. What I'm thinking of has yet another twist as these type of works don't adhere to the visual stimuli of a "psychedelic" work, nor do they instigate a phenomenological psychedelic reaction in the viewer; they're more proposals and/or comments on the way *into* the psychedelic realm. I think of Malevich's *Black Square on White* (1915) as a very early psychedelic proposition: that of the void, which to me can be taken for everything or nothing (although underwhelming would hardly be the word for it). I see it as existing for both camps: those who claim it's the end and those who say it's the beginning. It was this piece that was the starting point for my *Anti-Psych* exhibition. Working with a resistance to the genre's visual tropes, I instead presented ephemera related to the psychedelic "experience;" using the vessel of administration, or object of enhancement, responsible for inciting these visual clichés, and so rendering them useless. This was an attempt to reconsider psychedelic art, but also a memorial gesture to the passing of an era, and a comment on a new school of drug use and experience in contemporary culture that makes the once deviant or threatening prospect of the psychedelic experience seem naïve in retrospect. So, where the artists you mention were reacting or resisting in an abstract experiential, phenomenological way, I was very interested in a static conceptualization of the precursors to this.

Anti-Psych (Total Black Light) (2005) smashes the most bedroom-friendly psychedelic enhancer, the black-light bulb, in blunt reference to the death of an idea and the loss of the psychedelic experience as the drug of choice in contemporary youth

culture to harder—what I refer to as anti-psychedelic—amphetamine-based drugs. This death creates a new vessel for the crystal meth user who smokes the drug by heating it up on shards of broken light bulbs. With *13 Folds (For Psychedelic Revival)* (2005), I sucked the bright, multi-colours out of the ubiquitous 60s style tie-dyed flag, leaving it black and white, folded it 13 times in the US Military style for fallen soldiers, and embalmed it in a memorial mantelpiece-friendly frame. And in *10,000 Hits of Black Acid* (2005), I silk-screened solid black over an unsoaked sheet of perforated LSD blotter paper, creating a Malevich-like void where a world of possibility was meant to reside. The void, although a psychedelic concept to me, is a very different beast than the smiley faces or other logos that often adorn the quarter-inch squares of acid; one that requires acceptance of the psychedelic as complete sensory deprivation as opposed to overload.

LBL I think *TTWNE* points to a couple of very important issues, firstly that psychedelic art and culture was primarily an arsenal of effects. It was never about principles or origins, or about producing appearances or illusions, but about producing effects—optical and sound effects, as well as hallucinatory ones, of course. Psychedelia is the art of events-effects...also effects of the deep past or the infinite future, which brings us to sci-fi. Dropping out doesn't have to be a pastoral fantasy about retiring to the country to grow cabbage in a commune, even if that also may be worthwhile—personally I'm warming to the idea. Dropping out can also be a sidestepping of the present, meaning a speculation about a different concept of time and what we do not yet know. This aspect of futurity is very important for psychedelia as a critical art form—a criticality that isn't moralistic but is at the same time excessive and speculative and has a dimension of madness too.

The discussion of effects also points to the contrast between phenomenological-type psychedelic works that refer to a supposed fullness "behind" or "before" the representation, and the idea of another temporality—an *Aion*—where it isn't that simple to divide things up in pre or post. (This wasn't exactly what Gene Youngblood meant when he was talking about the 'paleo-cybernetic' in his 1970 *Expanded Cinema*, but maybe we could paraphrase him in this direction). In any case, this seems to me to also be a stake in what you call your anti-psych show.



Jeremy Shaw, *Anti-Psych (Total Black Light)*, 2005, broken black-light bulb, socket, cord, dimensions variable



Jeremy Shaw, *13 Folds (For Psychedelic Revival)*, 2005, black and white tie-dyed canvas flag in sycamore and cherry memorial flag case, 60 × 30 × 8cm

JS Indeed. It's only been since *DMT* that I began equating psychedelia with sci-fi, as before, due to a lot of these cultural stigmas we've discussed, it did seem like a hold-over from a previous time rather than a continuing dialogue with various planes of time. The experiences I witnessed myself and via other people's recollections on *DMT* changed that, as a recurring theme of the trips was a strong sense of what could be referred to as an "archaic-future," as well as an almost unanimous feeling of not being in the present. This then made me re-evaluate much of the idea of psychedelic and transcendent activities in general in terms of a time-travel scenario.

But exactly as you say, it's not about "dropping out" to the utopian community or ideals of yesteryear, but it's an acknowledged engagement and dialogue with this proposition of time-slippage that reveals something still beyond concise human definition. We can't predict, nor very precisely describe, what a psychedelic experience brings, and this is probably the most confounding aspect of it all. Therefore, commenting on this via speculative artistic measures is still highly unresolved territory, as is commenting via scientific or academic means. This is again why I feel populist *Day-Glo*, fractal, kaleidoscopic and, of course, vortex-like representations of the psychedelic should be considered critically, as, even in their seemingly redundant clichés, they're pointing to a level of comprehension that requires further investigation, and, as a whole, we've yet to truly move beyond. We should be discussing Terrence McKenna, the journals of Neuroscience and Chemistry, Alex Gray and *The Matrix* all in the same critical breath; and in keeping with your proposal, they're definitely excessive, often speculative, and somewhat (or totally) mad. ♦

• *Lars Bang Larsen has published a book about the artist Sture Johannesson (Sternberg Press 2002), and contributes to Afterall, Frieze and Artforum. He has co-curated Pyramids of Mars (2000), The Invisible Insurrection of a Million Minds (2005) and Populism (2005), and is currently finishing a Ph.d. at the University of Copenhagen on the critical and artistic potentials of 1960s psychedelia in a global context. He is based in Barcelona and Copenhagen.*