

mind blowing

1. Conceptual artists are mystics rather than rationalists.
They leap to conclusions that logic cannot reach.

– Sol LeWitt, *Sentences on Conceptual Art* (1969)

That's when everything just exploded
and I felt like I was in the...
just in the middle of something
really really like intense and but not,
not of the world

– Barington (Bazz) Mathé in Jeremy Shaw, *DMT* (2004)

In relating the project of conceptual art to a psychedelic experience, might it be productive to recover some uncertainty around both terms? The question provides an entry point into considering Jeremy Shaw's 2004 video installation *DMT*. Shaw's project engages with both designations – the psychedelic and the conceptual – and considers their proximity and mutual inflection in art making. If we consider the usual associations of these terms (on the one hand, the informational overload, Technicolor swirls, and the imperceptible slippage of word, ornament and figure repeated in so many images of psychedelic reverie; and on the other hand, the de-materialization, erasure or cancellation of visual and bodily stimuli through the rational efficiency of straight documents and typed text common to so many works of conceptual art), they remain in opposition. However, this opposition is not so easily sustained when attending to the notion of mysticism, which emerges in LeWitt's sentence as integral to the critique of reason and underlies the perceptual leaps affected in psychedelia.¹ At stake here is the problem of the mind and its control.

At its inception, *DMT* was a product of Jeremy Shaw's curiosity about the ultimate high. Much of Shaw's work aims to register his social experience as an emblem of a generation born after 'the death of the author' and in search of altered states (a notion of multiple realities sought to mitigate the inheritance of split subjectivity). In February of 2001, the artist determined to test rumours of a synthetic drug, whose effects were said to be an intensified version of an LSD trip, a powerful high that lasts only fifteen minutes. A cursory Google search yields testimonies about the drug's 'mind-blowing' hallucinatory effects. Originally synthesized in 1931 and demonstrated as a hallucinogenic in 1956, Dimethyltryptamine (DMT), is a chemical that occurs naturally in American plant extracts such as ayahuasca, hoasca, or yagé (the latter, a favorite of Allen Ginsberg and (less so for) William S. Burroughs, and exoticized by both in *The Yage Letters*). Recent research in the Psychiatry Department of the University of New Mexico, undertaken between 1990 and 1995 and published in 2001 by Rick Strassman, M.D. under the title *The Spirit Molecule: A Doctor's Revolutionary Research into the Biology of Near-Death*

*and Mystical Experiences*², emphasizes the natural occurrence of DMT in the human body; to be precise, small levels occur in the pineal gland. These levels rise significantly when a person gives birth or dies and, of course, when synthetic *DMT* is smoked or administered intravenously. Hence there is a strong correlation between accounts of near-death and testimonies of the DMT high.

In *DMT*, the 15-minute high merges with a Warholian 15 minutes of fame for Shaw and his friends. On repeated occasions, the artist has expressed a fascination with the contemporary attitude towards reality wherein mediation is a measure of the real rather than its compromise. The increased suturing of reality to the videographic record (so aptly inscribed in or perhaps even precipitated by the term “Reality TV”) removes the notion of the Real from its associations with the unspoken and unrepresented. Shaw first, then his friends submitted to their fifteen minutes of near death as much to be televised as to get high. It could be said, therefore, that getting televised is the ultimate high and *DMT* becomes a kind of allegory of this intoxication.

And yet, at the heart of *DMT* is an experience, which is emphatically *not* represented. Though the hallucinations act as an invisible bind for the eight travelers, they remain a mystery to the viewers and to each other. There is gulf between the image of psychedelic reverie and the austere visual stimulus on offer produced by these four choices: a clinical setting for the shoot, the cropping and containment of each variably stirring body by a video camera/screen, the dispersal of the eight video screens around a dark, octagonal, Dr. Evil enclosure and the presence of subtitles that, as in a foreign movie, emphasize that the viewers of *DMT* are altogether ‘in another country.’ The existence of a world beyond this elaborately constructed panopticon is physically asserted as one restless traveler (Aurel) slides right out of the video frame, pointing to the paradigmatic status of the body as an entity that invites but defies control.

Beyond the visual austerity of the installation, it is the subtitles in Shaw’s *DMT* which draw the clearest formal connection to the conventions of conceptual art, wherein text demystifies image, or draws attention to semantic operations. In its formal resolution *DMT* partly echoes conceptual works like Martha Rosler’s *The Bowery in two inadequate descriptive systems* of 1974-1975, wherein a series of photo-documents of New York’s downtrodden Bowery district are juxtaposed with text listing the myriad of words and phrases that describe drunkenness. But, while Rosler’s oblique portrait of the Bowery may be seen to point to social factors that are hidden from representation, to posit poverty and substance abuse in the neighbourhood as systemic or the product of invisible, ideological forces, Shaw’s two inadequate descriptive systems (video and subtitles) do not summon this order of social critique. Shaw’s own oblique portrait of a powerful high posits the psychedelic (perhaps even mystical yearnings) as a kind of x-factor systemically discredited or hidden in contemporary art. In readily submitting to an immersive, mind-blowing experience, Shaw and his friends register a widespread curiosity about the psychedelic as a kind of latter-day sublime. In choosing to take up the aesthetic of conceptual art, however, Shaw trades on the distancing effects of this critical tradition, introducing a double consciousness into his work of art. The gesture is less an

ironic doubling of mysticism as conceptual critique than it is an attempt to reconfigure the notion of the psychedelic through the analytical apparatus offered by conceptual art.

The term psychedelic is a product of a conversation between Aldous Huxley (of *Doors of Perception* fame) and a certain Dr. Humphry Osmond, a British psychiatrist who did some of the first medical tests with LSD and Mescaline during and after the Second World War at the Wayburn Hospital in Saskatchewan.³ The word literally means “mind-manifesting” and spelled an attempt to reserve judgment on the experience of hallucinogenic drugs, to remove this from all-too-easy associations with psychosis, particularly schizophrenia. At its very inception, therefore, the term psychedelic signals a kind of willful uncertainty about the mind. Situated within a growing emphasis on the mind as frontier to be mapped, measured or turned into a chemical formula, the value of “manifesting” the mind remains in question.

The genealogy of the term ‘conceptual art’ is equally fraught. It has been attributed to the Fluxus artist Harry Flynt, to Edward Kienholz (both in 1963), Joseph Kosuth (1966-67) and most decisively to Sol LeWitt, who wrote his *Paragraphs on Conceptual Art* in 1967, followed by the *Sentences* in 1969. What remains clear, is that the linguistic definition of the work of art, was constantly at issue in the works designated as conceptual. Language was often deployed to render the manifestation of the work of art uncertain, further unsettling the notion of authorship. In this respect, Lawrence Weiner’s contractual statement remains paradigmatic:

With relation to the various manners of use:

1. *The artist may construct the piece*
2. *The piece may be fabricated*
3. *The piece need not be built*

*Each being equal and consistent with the intent of the artist the decision as to condition rests with the receiver upon the occasion of receivership.*⁴

Jeremy Shaw’s *DMT* has conceptual roots in so far as the work relies on multiple manifestations (video, text, and an architectural container). All these factors only point to an object (the trip) without actually being able to figure the experience. Further, in submitting to an experiment with DMT alongside his friends, Shaw begins to unravel the notion of singular authorship. Although he has previously executed works as diagrams, participating in the conceptual tradition of artwork as recipe or proposition, it should be noted that *DMT* remains distinct from the instructional logic of conceptual art in so far as it involves the artist’s full immersion in a psychedelic experiment.

The historical relationship between the development of psychedelic imagery and conceptual art is posited in clear terms by Mike Kelley. “Shall We Kill Daddy?” his essay on Douglas Huebler (another proverbial father of conceptual art) contains the following observation:

Much of the pleasure I got from early Conceptual artworks was from seeing them as a critique of, a parody of, dominant modes of the

presentation of "knowledge." I think this was accentuated by the fact that, in the late Sixties, Conceptual artworks existed within a milieu where they would have been considered alongside psychedelic counter culture graphics. Psychedelic graphics set up a mode of visual address that was distinct from dominant cultural modes, whereas Conceptual Art did a pathetic version of them.⁵

Of these two parallel strands of critique leveled at reason as a kind of administration of the mind, it is the psychedelic, which remains the more illusive in terms of critical potential. Psychedelic writing, imagery and music have traditionally been wrapped up in the realm of affect – a space where rational, articulate speech and intelligible imagery dissolve into sensibilities, emotions, hallucinations and intuitions.

Attempts to figure the psychedelic experience graphically and to accentuate it musically blossomed in the late sixties and early seventies, but the degree to which the social unrest of that period was eclipsed, expressed or exploded within these audiovisual fantasies has only begun to be addressed. A searching attempt to formulate a theory of psychedelia may be found in the writing of Lars Bang Larsen, who has profiled the psychedelic graphics of Swedish artist Sture Johannesson, and Diedrich Diederichsen, who finds a model of ‘psychedelic critique’ in Michelangelo Antonioni’s 1970 film *Zabriskie Point* – particularly the final scene where foodstuffs, books, appliances, and eventually an entire manufactured oasis in Death Valley explode in painterly slow motion and in tune with Pink Floyd’s “Careful with that Axe, Eugene.”⁶ Diederichsen casts this “utopia of incoherence” as a continually compromised though fruitful attempt to move “beyond the code” of consumer society. To be sure, by putting the Hollywood machine to use in the service of a psychedelic reverie, Antonioni assumes a critical position that remains immersed in the very technocratic apparatus which constitutes the object of his critique. However mind-blowing the last scenes of *Zabriskie Point* may be, they partly obey the logic of the Hollywood disaster.⁷

Far from explosive, the (pathetic) textual austerity of much conceptual art operates as a critique of the status of art and the artwork via the production of what Adrian Piper termed “Meta-Art” or “the activity of making explicit the thought process, procedures, and presuppositions of making whatever art we make.”⁸ Epitomized by Sol LeWitt’s *Paragraphs* and *Sentences*, conceptual propositions rely on critical distance and self-reflexivity, epitomized in LeWitt’s conclusion: “These sentences comment on art, but are not art.” But, while the aims of many conceptual artists were to situate notions of art within the matrix of broader social and political developments, the meta- or anti-aesthetic claims of much conceptual art fell short of their promises. Although originally influenced by an avant-garde history of art as the critique of representation, works of conceptual art acquired an increasingly standardized look, turning what Benjamin Buchloh aptly termed, *the aesthetics of administration*, into another administered aesthetics.

Thus, as far apart as they are aesthetically, conceptual and psychedelic art share two somewhat contradictory qualities: they aim to manifest the mind and they tend to produce visual clichés (one austere, the other explosive). Just as there is a structural bond between conceptual art and the administrative reason that it critiques, the persistent imaging of psychedelic experience via the explosion may be bonded to the historical moment (a “pathetic version” of Hiroshima, Hanoi, Baghdad and New York). In attempting to wrestle with these two clichés, Shaw’s austere reported trials with *DMT* may be seen as part of a protracted project to reconfigure the notion of the mind-blowing or sublime in art. His experiments inscribe these mystical yearnings into conceptual frames of analysis and distance, ranging from blue-prints of home-made bombs solicited from his friends younger brothers to an abruptly spliced video-loop showing a teenage boy ethereally lit by the explosion of a fire-cracker. His most recent project wherein a group experiment with a psychedelic drug finds form in straight documentary and rigid architecture. *DMT* is therefore yet another attempt to deconstruct the notion of explosion, or more precisely, to articulate the point where the mind and an explosion meet. It may be said further that what is sought here is a liminal state perhaps best described by the tattooed inscription “unexploded” on the artist’s left forearm. This mark of embodiment points precisely to the body as the ultimate psychedelic agent, the place where the mind is made manifest without slipping into clichés, including the psychedelic trope of a full-blown explosion of everything.

In refusing to represent hallucinations and in textually mitigating the seeming breakdowns of the body and mind under the influence of *DMT*, Shaw’s project uses the psychedelic experience to put conceptual frames to a test. The subtitled sentences in *DMT* ‘comment on, but are not’ a mind blowing high, raising the question of mystical experience as an element which is ambiguously admitted into the realm of (conceptual) art. These first recollections of a psychedelic experience, uttered and recorded minutes after the effects of the drug have worn off, perform an operation that is similar to the linguistic evasions of conceptual art, yet remain deprived of much of conceptualism’s rational linguistic structure. As such, the subtitles of *DMT* replace the rational propositions that conceptual art uses to delineate or bracket the realm of art as idea, with language as the debris of blown minds.

Shaw’s project may be seen as quite literally psychedelic: an attempt to manifest the mind, but one that does not reproduce the clichés of psychedelic imagery. No explosions are seen. Nor does the work produce a mind/body split, but offers up the body as dialectical parallel to verbal communication. In *DMT*, the text (as cipher of mental activity) does not rationalize or resolve the view of bodies that exist somewhere between ecstasy, sleep and death. Despite the promise of its videographic and architectural containers, there is little logic on offer within these ‘frames within frames’. The eight streams of inarticulate text rather extend the illogic of inarticulate bodies. In thus positing a model of the mind as a (chemically effected) muscle, *DMT* begins to fold, one into another, allegory and experience, the experiment and its control, immersion and critical distance, the critique of psychedelic images and psychedelic critique.

If Jeremy Shaw juxtaposes conceptual strategies and the psychedelic experience as a means of considering the question of mysticism in art, this is not to cast these terms in an ironic light, but to open them up to scrutiny. Shaw's work may be seen to participate in the strengthening embrace of affect, beauty and emotion in contemporary art. Yet he is equally aware that, if this earnest address is over-determined by the recent pronouncements of the Death of Irony⁹ we run the risk of disengaging from the yet to be explored histories of romance and mysticism *within* conceptual critique. This waning of dialectical thought is under way and the contemporary moment may be remembered as one when the legacy of intellectual rigor, critical distance and its attendant anti-aesthetics underwent a sustained challenge along terms that tended to oversimplify the workings of Irony. In contrast to this lame future, what I sense in Jeremy Shaw's work is the desire to erect on Irony's grave a kind of synthetic flowerbed where affect and its analysis are cultivated in equal measure.

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NOTES

¹ We may also consider Bruce Nauman's neon sign: *The true artist helps the world by revealing mystic truth* (1967).

² See Rick Strassman, M.D. *The Spirit Molecule: A Doctor's Revolutionary Research into the Biology of Near-Death and Mystical Experiences* (Rochester, Vermont: Park Street Press, 2001).

³ Huxley originally proposed "phanerothyme" which relates more closely to the spirit or soul. See Martin A. Lee and Bruce Shlain, "Psychedelic Pioneers," in *Acid Dreams, The Complete Social History of LSD: The CIA, the Sixties and Beyond* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1985). This information taken from the online publication at <http://www.druglibrary.org/schaffer/lsd/dreams2.htm>

⁴ This statement was issued on the occasion of the exhibition "January 5-31, 1969", organized by Seth Siegelaub, quoted in Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, "Conceptual Art 1962-1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions," in *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, eds. Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson. (Boston, MA: The MIT Press, 2000), p. 528.

⁵ See Mike Kelley, "Shall We Kill Daddy?" (1997) in *Origin and Destination: Alighiero E. Boetti and Douglas Huebler*, Anne Pont Egnie and Marianne Van Leeuw. (Bruxelles: Soci et e des Expositions du Palais des Beaux-Arts de Bruxelles, 1999), pp.158-173.

⁶ See Lars Bang-Larsen, *Sture Johannesson*. (Helsinki: NIFCA, Nordic Institute for Contemporary Art; New York: Lukas & Sternberg, 2002). Also see Diedrich Diederichsen, "Psychedelic Critique: Michelangelo Antonioni's film *Zabriskie Point* Revisited" in *Contemporary Utopia- Musdienu utopija*, (exhibition catalogue). Trans. Hugh Rorrison. (Riga, Latvia: Latvian Centre of Contemporary Art, 2001), pp.16-21.

⁷ Vancouver artist Mina Totino's cycle of paintings (reproduced in black and white in this essay) *Study after Michelangelo Antonioni's "Zabriskie Point"* meditates on psychedelic imagery. Her studies of this exceedingly ambiguous conclusion to one of the most painterly exercises in cinema elicits associations between of the end of the

utopian claims of avant-garde cinema, its antecedent in the 'death of painting' and the persistent foiling of critique in the Hollywood ending.

⁸ Adrian Piper, "In Support of Meta-Art" in *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, eds. Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson. (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: The MIT Press, 2000), p. 298.

⁹ Graydon Carter in *Vanity Fair* and Roger Rosenblatt in *Time* were both quick to announce the 'death of irony' following the terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001. In an article which appeared in the September 24, 2001 issue of *Time* entitled "The Age of Irony Comes to an End" Rosenblatt offered the following satisfied reduction: "One good thing could come from this horror: it could spell the end of the age of irony. For some 30 years — roughly as long as the Twin Towers were upright — the good folks in charge of America's intellectual life have insisted that nothing was to be believed in or taken seriously. Nothing was real. With a giggle and a smirk, our chattering classes — our columnists and pop culture makers — declared that detachment and personal whimsy were the necessary tools for an oh-so-cool life." Rosenblatt's rhetoric is emblematic of a rarely debated conclusion that total immersion in an American brand of global market expansion both back and fronted by an expanding military constitutes the only reality.