

ART

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High Minded: A Withstanding Relationship Between Drugs and Art

Rather than just getting high, contemporary artists are using drugs to explore the possibility of escape from today's socio-political woes.



– Jeremy Shaw, "Quickeners", 2014. Video, 36min. Image: Film stills, Courtesy of the artist and KÖNIG GALERIE.

We're all under the influence of something. Caffeine, cigarettes and alcohol are the most common vices—people cling their cappuccinos in the morning, the cigarette smoke of others caresses the air, while some wait patiently for that first drink of the day. And of course there are harder substances, downers and everything in between. If you live in a major city, chances are you've seen it all, even if you don't partake. Humans have been getting high since time immemorial: fossilised evidence of hallucinogenic cactuses from Peru date back to 8600 BC, while it is believed that the Sumerians, in today's southern Iraq, were using opium as early as 5000 BC. In terms of alcohol, it would seem that people have been drinking it since at least 7000 BC. During a 2004 archaeological dig in China's Henan Province, fragments of pottery dating from this period were found covered in booze residue. You name it, by now humanity has probably ingested it, and artists have been among some of the most notorious participants.



– Mat Collishaw, "THIS IS NOT AN EXIT", 2015. Image: Peter Mallet, Courtesy of the artist and Blain Southern.

Take for instance the avant-garde in early- twentieth-century Paris, especially the Surrealists and their passion for psychedelics (Salvador Dali famously once remarked, "I don't use drugs. I am drugs"). Elsewhere, the Abstract Expressionists struggled with alcoholism (Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko), Andy Warhol abused amphetamine-based diet pills, and Jean-Michel Basquiat died of a heroin overdose. And let's not forget the writers: Allen Ginsberg loved LSD and weed; Hunter S. Thompson took anything he could get his hands on; Philip K. Dick used speed; Robert Louis Stevenson indulged in cocaine binges (once writing 60,000 words in six days); Jean-Paul Sartre reported having a nervous breakdown after taking mescaline, when he began to see little crabs following him everywhere; and William S. Burroughs was addicted to opiates, infamously shooting his wife in a William Tell game gone wrong.

What makes artists' relationship with drugs unique is that they often communicate those experiences through art, some even integrating drug taking into their practice. One example is Marina Abramovic. In "Rhythm 2" (1974), she took medication for catatonia, which resulted in her complete loss of body control, followed an hour later by a dose of drugs commonly used to treat schizophrenia: "I could not accept that a performance would have to stop because you lost consciousness," she told curator Klaus Biesenbach in 2016, "I wanted to extend the possibility [...] in which the performance continues even if the performer is unconscious. I didn't accept the body's limits."



– "Desert Now". Installation view Steve Turner, 2016. Image courtesy of the artists and Steve Turner.

Other artists have taken a different approach. In "Cocaine Buffet" (1994), Rob Pruitt presented a sixteen-foot line of cocaine on an equally long mirror, inviting viewers to snort the art while symbolically gazing into their own reflection, Narcissus-style. And in Taiwan, Su Hui-Yu's performance "Stilnox Strolling" (2010) at Taipei's Museum of Contemporary Art, drew criticism for giving the audience sleeping pills (later revealed as placebos) and asking them to describe the side effects.

Despite art's longstanding infatuation with narcotics, many artists today continue to engage with drugs as a subject. So why are we not coming down? 74 years after Swiss chemist Albert Hoffman became the first person to trip on acid, the clinical interest in hallucinogens has resurged. Studies by the University of Sussex and Imperial College London published earlier this year suggest that consuming LSD results in a heightened state of consciousness and increased connectivity across the brain, and therefore may be useful in treating depression. In Silicon Valley, some tech and startup entrepreneurs have become advocates of 'micro-dosing', the practice of regularly taking small quantities of LSD, claiming it improves productivity, creativity and focus. And in Peru, the trend of Westerners seeking out ayahuasca ceremonies has given rise to an industry in itself.



– "Desert Now". Installation view Steve Turner, 2016. Image courtesy of the artists and Steve Turner.

At this year's Venice Biennale, the Arsenale exhibition, titled "Viva Arte Viva" and curated by Christine Marcel, had an entire section devoted to shamanism, including Brazilian artist Ernesto Neto's "Um Sagrado Lugar (A Sacred Place)". The installation featured a crocheted tent-like structure resembling those used by the Huni Kuin, an indigenous Brazilian community who socialise such dwellings and use them to perform spiritual ceremonies involving ayahuasca. Viewers could enter Neto's version and rest inside upon fabric cushions. Marcel included this work in response to today's politically, socially and environmentally fraught world, stating that "the need for care and spirituality is greater than ever". And she's right. With millennials being the first generation to earn less than their parents, the far right resurgent in the US and Europe, Trump's continued provocation of North Korea and eleven million Syrians displaced by civil war, we're in a state of global crisis.

So how do we escape? Today's contemporary artists are exploring transcendence as a means of finding new realities. Notably, Berlin-based Canadian artist Jeremy Shaw has been making a series of videos examining this concept. Among these is "Quickeners" (2014), which depicts a fictional community 500 years in the future that veers from the immortal Quantum Human species that has developed. Here, Shaw reworks black-and-white archival footage from a gathering of Pentecostal Christian snake handlers in order to consider the "coexistence of parallel realities based on different systems of belief," as one character says. As Shaw told Mary Scherpe in a 2010 interview, altered states are one of his main influences. "[A] large part of my work is inspired by [...] music, drugs, dance, religion or the tank functioning as a medium and the transitional moment between one state of consciousness and another." This is evident in "Quickeners", in which a parallel is made between drug taking and spiritual ritual, emphasising the human propensity to believe in realms beyond rational reality – after all, reality can be a tough pill to swallow (pun intended).



– "Desert Now". Installation view Steve Turner, 2016. Image courtesy of the artists and Steve Turner.

The fetishisation of drug taking has also been promoted by the likes of German artists Julius von Bismarck, Julian Charrière and Felix Kiessling. Their 2016 exhibition "Desert Now" at LA's Stever Turner enshrined a LSD tab and an Adderall pill under a plastic pyramid after their twelve-day "journey" through the American Southwest. Arguably, drug taking is the new religion, perhaps this is merely another symptom of late capitalism's cult of the individual, perpetually searching for happiness, self-gratifying and self-absorbed but never satiated. After all, we are spiked with the insidious intoxication of ideology regardless of whether or not we agree to it.

Mat Collishaw's tromp l'oeil oil paintings of cocaine wraps follow suit. His hyper-realistic depictions of folded magazines marked with white powder residues draw our attention to the binge culture and solipsism of the 21st century. Collishaw depicts these works as "illusions that cunningly conceal their emptiness. Like the drugs they depict, they are delusions which disguise the abyss." It is doubtful whether post-cocaine emptiness can be permanently filled by the LSD euphoria purported by some young artists, but when the chips (and economy) are down, what have we got to lose? One retort, of course, is our sanity – but if the times we live in are as irrational as they seem, then perhaps the risks are minimal.



– Mat Collishaw, "THIS IS NOT AN EXIT", 2015. Image: Peter Mallet, Courtesy of the artist and Blain Southern.

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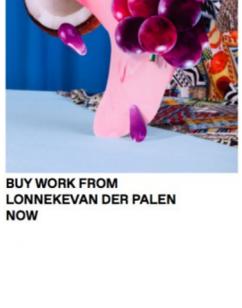
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