



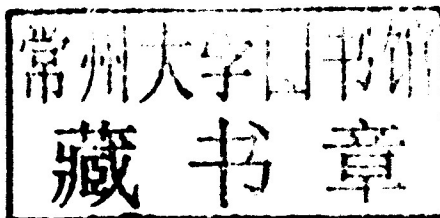
ARE YOU EXPERIENCED?

— HOW —
PSYCHEDELIC
CONSCIOUSNESS
TRANSFORMED MODERN
ART

KEN
JOHNSON

Are You Experienced?

.....
*How Psychedelic Consciousness
Transformed Modern Art*



Ken Johnson

PRESTEL

Munich London New York

To Claire and Noah

In memoriam: Gayle Johnson, 1953 – 1995

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FRONTISPIECE: Jim Isermann, *Untitled*, 2008. Acrylic on canvas over panel, 48 x 48 in. (122 x 122 cm).

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PRESTEL VERLAG

Neumarkter Strasse 28

81673 Munich

Tel. +49 (0)89-4136-0

Fax +49 (0)89-4136-2335

www.prestel.de

PRESTEL PUBLISHING LTD.

4 Bloomsbury Place

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Tel. +44 (0)20 7323-5004

Fax +44 (0)20 7636-8004

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EDITORIAL ASSISTANCE: Ryan Newbanks

PICTURE RESEARCH: Ed Lessard

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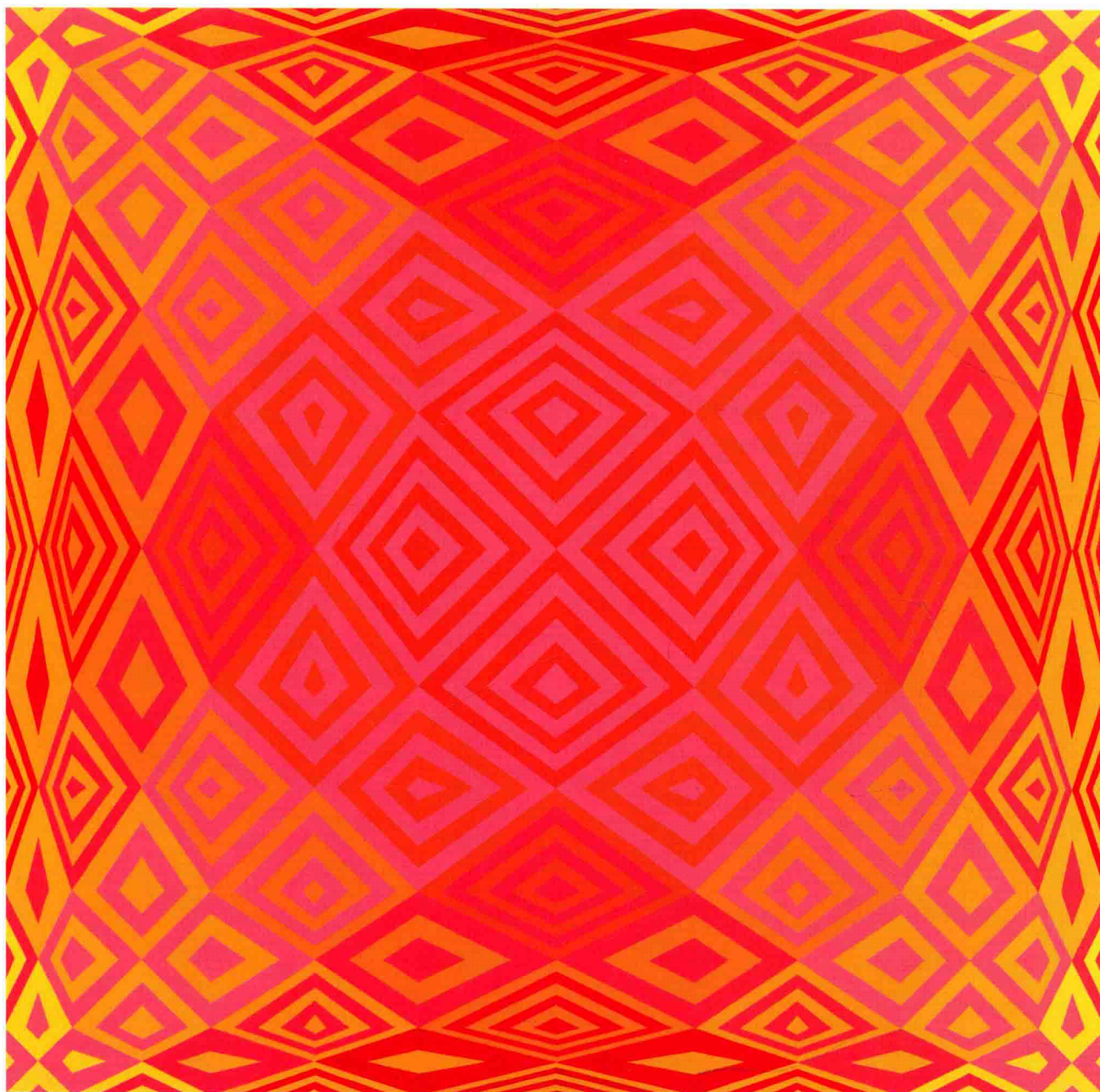
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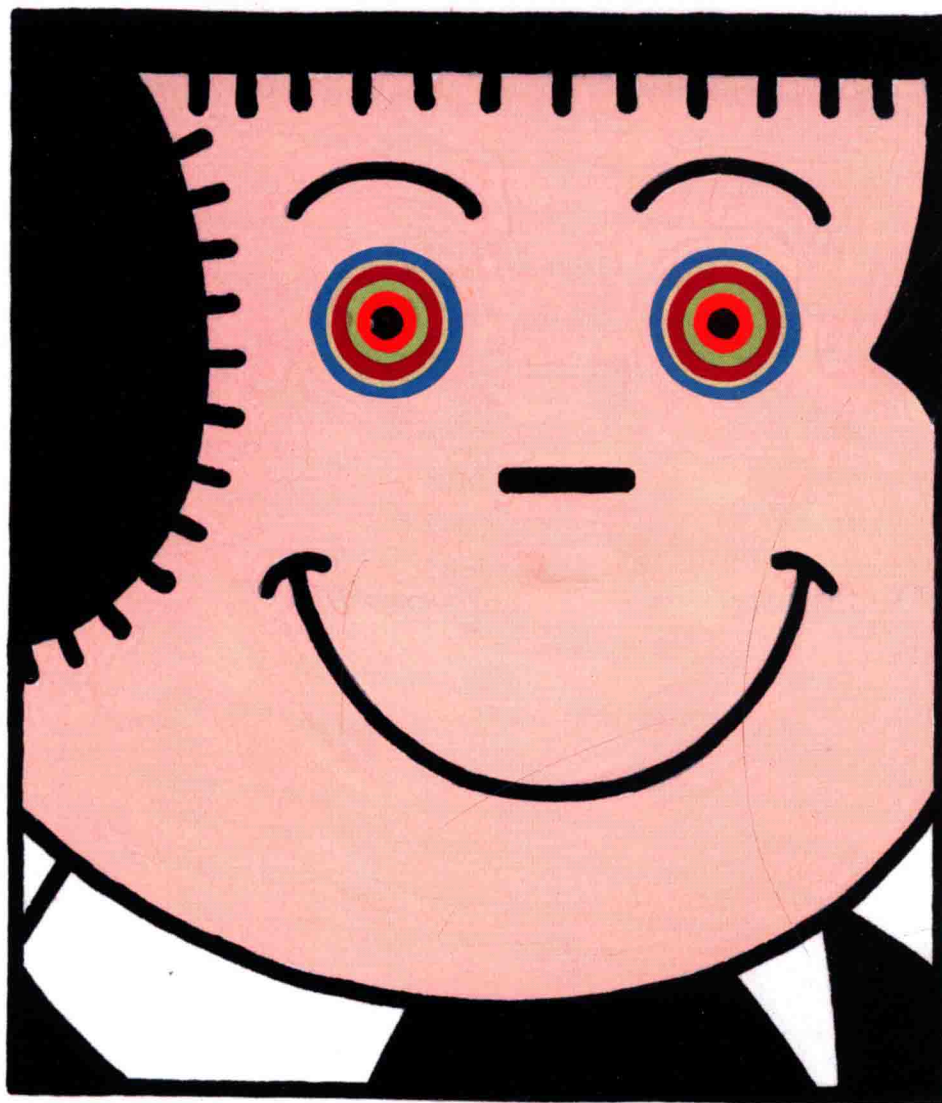
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IF NANCY WAS AN ACID FREAK.

Joe Brainard
If Nancy Was an Acid Freak, 1972
Mixed media
7 ³/₄ x 6 in. (19.7 x 15.2 cm)
Mandeville Special Collections
Library, University of California,
San Diego

Introduction

MANY YEARS AGO, I used to puzzle over certain kinds of art that seemed boring to me – Minimalist sculpture and other styles that offered little by way of conventional aesthetic or imaginative excitement. At first I assumed it was just a matter of taste; I had the wrong palate. Then I began to think, what state of mind would I have to be in to enjoy those types of art? What if, for example, I were stoned?

All kinds of things look better and more interesting to the stoned observer, but many works of art produced in the 1960s seemed to require not just a new sort of taste but a heightened, Zen-like state of attentiveness, a kind of receptivity to subtleties of space and time and forms and materials that could readily be achieved by ingesting a psychotropic drug.

Sometime in the 1990s, I began to wonder if it was only a coincidence that boring and extremely abstruse kinds of conceptual art emerged so abundantly at a time when consciousness-altering drugs were suddenly all the rage. It occurred to me that artists, who tend to be avocationally interested in non-normative states of consciousness, probably took mind-altering drugs in greater quantities than the general population. Could it be that psychedelics – including the mildly hallucinogenic marijuana – actually had an influence on some of the art that was being produced in the '60s and early '70s? I mean not just obviously psychedelic art – the vividly colored, hallucinatory paintings of Peter Saul, for example – but even art that seemed entirely lacking in trippy effects.

I thought it would be interesting to interview artists who emerged in the 1960s and ask them about their experiences with drugs. For this book, I talked with a lot of artists, casually and in formal interviews. My research assistant Patricia Milder interviewed a number of younger artists, too. Many of the individuals we spoke with fondly recalled their tripping days. Reflecting on her time as an art student, the painter Deborah Kass told me, "I felt it was my moral duty as an artist to do acid." (She did plenty, she said.) There were some whose memories of doing drugs were not so pleasant, and others who, despite having enjoyed psychedelic experience, didn't think it affected what they produced as artists. Some never did drugs at all, and others still do them for spiritual or recreational purposes. Readers are advised, therefore, not to assume that any artist discussed or represented in this book has even used drugs at all or would agree that drug-induced experience has affected their art.

While I think it would be a worthy project for a sociologist or historian to find out who did what, when, and where, to provide some empirical grounding for speculations about the influence of drugs on art, I am neither equipped for nor inclined to do that job. What interested me was not necessarily the influence of drugs on particular individuals but the influence of psychedelic culture in general on artists – the impact of a popular culture arising outside the world of fine art that was inspired by the music of Bob Dylan, the Beatles, the Grateful Dead, and the Jefferson Airplane; by acid rock posters and underground comics; by movies like *Yellow Submarine* and *Easy Rider* and television shows such as *Laugh-In* and *The Smothers Brothers*. Pop-psychedelic culture, I thought, pushed the limits of collective imagination in the '60s in unprecedented ways. Antiwar and liberation politics, the more extreme elements of which were also animated by psychedelics, added to the mentally combusive mix. I concluded that the best way to test my hypothesis would be to examine the art itself. In so doing, I would look not just for stylistic features but for a psychedelic mindset and ethos underlying many different forms of art.

Peter Saul
Vietnam, 1966
Oil on canvas

79 x 67 in. (200.6 x 170.2 cm)



That art changed in a big way in the 1960s is inarguable: No longer was art something just to appreciate for its aesthetic qualities. Traditional connoisseurship was out; consciousness-altering experience was in. Boundaries between conventional media such as painting and sculpture became fluid and porous. Hierarchical distinctions between high and low culture were rendered irrelevant. Weird new forms proliferated. Shamanism, Eastern religions, video, and film entered the picture, and viewers entered into the space and time of art – literally, in installation art and figuratively, as perspective, illusionism, storytelling, poetic metaphor, and visionary images returned to painting – filling the void left in the wake of formal modernist abstraction.

I had a personal stake in this investigation. My formative teenage years coincided exactly with the time of peak excitement as well as panic and paranoia about psychedelic drugs. I inhaled and tripped, but, more importantly, my sensibility was shaped by the folklore of psychedelia. Call me an old hippie; I'd be honored.

There have been a few substantial museum exhibitions relating to the topic, but they have had narrower goals than the one I had in mind.¹ My aim was not to track or comment on one type of art among others; it was to reveal psychedelic consciousness as the collective psychic origin from which art, in almost all its various stylistic manifestations (the kinds that have received critical recognition, anyway), has emanated since the late '60s, from Minimalism and Conceptualism to the latest efforts in installation and video, from Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* to Richard Serra's warped, spiraling mazes of inches-thick Cor-Ten steel.

Would that mean that all contemporary art is psychedelic? In a way, it would – in something like the way all contemporary art is postmodern. The reader might then object: Aren't you simply substituting one vacuous term for another? What difference does it make?

I think of the terms *postmodern* and *psychedelic* as heuristic devices: lenses through which we may discover a pattern we'd otherwise have missed, an under-

lying, comprehensive mythology that makes sense of the polyglot babble of contemporary art. But while *postmodern* implies that we're talking about something that comes after the scattered remnants of modernism, *psychedelic* has a beginning, a big bang that has continued to resonate for decades throughout Western culture. Partly for convenience, partly for, I think, good historical reasons, and partly because it means something to me personally, I date that moment to 1965, the year of the Ken Kesey–Grateful Dead Acid Tests, the year Owsley Stanley III starting producing LSD in millions of doses and young people all over America started tripping. This was something new: the sudden introduction to a modern, industrialized society and subsequent mass consumption of large quantities of a drug that radically alters consciousness. How can that not have had something to do with the surge of unfettered creative imagination that happened in art of the 1960s and thereafter?

The question is not whether one term is truer than the other to the facts of art history. It is, rather, as William James might have put it, what is the relative cash value of one versus the other? If we think of art as a product of psychedelic consciousness instead of labeling it “postmodern,” what is revealed that might otherwise remain obscure, vague, or hidden? What heretofore undreamed-of connections might surface? “You may never have taken LSD,” wrote Nick Bromell in *Tomorrow Never Knows: Rock and Psychedelics in the 1960s*, “but America has. And what Aldous Huxley wrote of the individual tripper – ‘the man who comes back through the Door in the Wall will never be quite the same as the man who went out’ – is true of American culture as a whole.”² So if we look at the psychedelic in art, perhaps we will understand something more about the world we live in now.

This book is not a history or an exposé. It is about an idea and about how that idea might change the way we think about art of the past fifty years. What I want to present is not a compendium of “psychedelic art” but a way of looking at art today – a psychedelic way.



Through a Psychedelic Lens

IT'S 1965 IN NEW YORK. You've entered an art gallery where you've found nothing but a grid of one-foot-square metal plates lying on the floor like a checkered rug. Someone walks on it – that's allowed – so you, too, step onto the dull metal surface. This is novel: sculpture you can walk on. But it's kind of boring, too. Now imagine yourself in an unusually open and receptive state of mind. Imagine you've smoked a joint before venturing out to see what's in the galleries.

Under the influence, maybe something strange and magical happens. You begin to tune in to the subtleties of the situation. Art, you realize, is not just something attractive to look at. It doesn't have to be in a frame or on a pedestal. It is in your space, under your feet, and you are in its space. It envelops you. It is not just the plates and their arrangement that constitute the art. Everything is part of it, including the air you breathe, the light that makes the world visible, the beating of your heart, vagaries of your inner thoughts. There is no reference to anything beyond this moment, this space. Nothing is pictured or otherwise represented. So perhaps you learn what the Zen masters teach: to be here now, untroubled by nattering ideas, worries, fantasies that make you always want to be someplace else.

And yet...nested in the square white room – what the critic Brian O'Doherty called the White Cube – the grid of squares brings to mind other grids outside the gallery: the grid of Manhattan streets, the grids of skyscraper windows.

Richard Serra
Sequence, 2006
Weatherproof steel
67 ft. x 42 ft. x 12 ft. 9 in.
(20.42 x 12.80 x 3.87 m)