MIND FOUNDATION

Are you experienced?

DATE PUBLISHED

20 August 2021



> *"MORE THAN ANY ART MOVEMENT OF OUR TIME, PSYCHEDELIC ART HAS A FUTURE AND POTENTIALS THAT LIE BEYOND ANYONE'S POWER TO ENVISION. […] WE ARE WITNESSING ONLY THE PRIMITIVE BEGINNINGS, BUT ALREADY THE OUTLOOK IS AWESOME".4 THE ONLY OBSTACLE SEEMED TO BE THE LAW.*

Why is it that we hardly ever hear of psychedelic art from official art history? In 2005, Tate Liverpool director Christoph Grunenberg surmised that psychedelic art was "purged" from art history, as it wouldn't fit in with the high-modernist line of development that leads from Pop to Minimal and Conceptual. Thus, this other, exuberant, popular, but less pure aesthetic was relegated to the realms of applied art, bad taste, and stylistic aberration.1 While neglect as such, of course, doesn't demonstrate a subject's importance, a short look at psychedelic art's "official" history does show some curious quirks that may help to explain its relative invisibility. For one thing, there are the drugs. The once defining ingredient of psychedelic drug use seems to have been pushed out of view so as to avoid controversy and replace countercultural rebellion with harmless nostalgia and historical design. What happened?

Psychedelic art certainly has older roots, but when *LIFE Magazine* in September 1966 devoted a main article to "LSD ART", it suddenly surfaced into the mainstream (fig. 1). The article covered a show of an artists' collective trying to "blow the mind by bombing the senses", which LIFE, somewhat surprisingly, deemed a serious new development in art.2 Other media, too, started signalling hip multimedia parties in bohemia. By early 1967, several respectable art galleries jumped on the bandwagon by presenting psychedelic drawing and painting, albeit calling it "visionary" to avoid too overt a link with the drugs that had by then become socially undesirable and even illegal in parts of the US.

Want to become a **psychedelic therapist**? Join our Augmented Psychotherapy Training program!

Fig. 1 Cover of LIFE Magazine, 9 September 1966, with a photo of artist Richard Aldcroft of the US Company (USCo) on a drugless trip (photo by Yale Joel).

The ban also hit serious LSD researchers. Understandably frustrated, two of them, Robert Masters and Jean Houston, redirected their attention to art, probably also in an attempt to rehabilitate the drugs they believed in by providing them with an aura of cultural respectability. Their colleague Stanley Krippner brought in most of the artists, who, in the course of 1967, all agreed to be artists "whose paintings or other forms of artistic expression show the effects of psychedelic experience, usually chemically induced" and whose work may have been produced "as a *result* of psychedelic experience, *during* psychedelic experience, or in an attempt to *induce* a psychedelic experience".3

Early in 1968, Masters and Houston published *Psychedelic Art* (fig. 2). It was the very first monograph that really defined the subject, although it later nevertheless came to be largely ignored. The work by some 35 contemporary artists was included, complemented by older art in which the authors recognised a "psychedelic sensibility" going back all the way to the late medieval Hieronymus Bosch and beyond, thus providing the newcomer with something of a reputable and partly drug-free pedigree.4 The book still breathes the legendary optimism of the 1960s. Masters and Houston open defensively by stating that drug use is of all ages and that none of the artists believed that drugs confer the ability to create art: "The psychedelic experience is *experience*, not injected talent or ingested inspiration, although the artist may draw inspiration from any thought or perception, whatever the situation of its occurrence".4

Fig. 2 Cover of Robert E.L. Masters and Jean Houston, Psychedelic Art, New York/London 1968.

Soon the tone becomes euphoric: "More than any art movement of our time, psychedelic art has a future and potentials that lie beyond anyone's power to envision. […] We are witnessing only the primitive beginnings, but already the outlook is awesome".4 The only obstacle seemed to be the law. If not reversed, Masters and Houston thought, "psychedelic art will either perish or, more likely, move entirely underground". A fate, they thought, wholly undeserved for "an art almost totally free of the preoccupation with neurosis, the ugly, and the sordid – with, that is, man at his sickest – that saturates so much of the artistic expression of our time".4

Psychedelic Art is also remarkable, at least among art lovers, for the rather unusual standards of quality that its authors applied. Apparently, what mattered most to them was whether a work could be said to demonstrate that the artist had gained some therapeutic benefit or mystical insight from psychedelic experience. Being all about a "journey into one's psyche", this experience starts with a sensory circus, ideally followed by a descent to levels that roughly correspond to Freud's personal and Jung's collective unconscious, before reaching the ultimate *integral* phase described by mystics since times immemorial.4

Accordingly, the best psychedelic art would express the idea that the universe is fundamentally right and harmonious, or else – or so it was implied – the artist apparently didn't dive deep enough or got stuck somewhere. Thus, also framing psychedelic art as the natural and more mature successor to surrealism and abstract expressionism, Masters and Houston proclaimed this art to be "Dionysian, ecstatic, energetic", "religious, mystical: pantheistic religion, God manifest in All, but especially in the primordial energy that makes the worlds go, powers the existential flux, […] seeking to prevail by sheer joyous momentum. Birth and rebirth, growth, and renewal. Being quivering in ecstatic oneness with itself".4 One of the artists that they had in mind here was Isaac Abrams, clearly one of their favourites, and the only name that still consistently pops up in this context (fig. 3).

Fig. 3 Isaac Abrams, Cosmic Orchid, 1967, oil on canvas, 188 x 153 cm, private collection, as reproduced in Masters and Houston, Psychedelic Art, 1968.

Psychedelic Art was quite well received on publication. Reviewers were generally pleased with this first survey of a new art form, but also thought it too early to judge its merits. Nobody lamented the apologetic references to illegal drugs or the publicity they were given.5 Nevertheless, interest vanished so quickly that an art that surfaced in 1966 and was honoured with a monograph in 1968 seemed passé, if not taboo, by 1970. Whatever the cause of the demise of psychedelic optimism, it seems that during and after 1968 both artists and art critics, gallery owners, curators, and the like, apprehended that the "psychedelic" label now compromised rather than furthered one's reputation and career.6

Legal and social pressures gave rise to self-censorship, but other possible causes should be mentioned too. For one, psychedelic art never produced a real master attracting serious attention or dragging others along into an -ism. For another, it tended to favour sensuousness at the expense of content, depth of feeling, and intelligibility. Its decorative exuberance soon proved monotonous; its exoticism as boring as the neighbours' holiday pictures. In his contribution to*Psychedelic Art*, art critic Barry Schwartz complained that most psychedelic artists seemed to come running back from their experience only to say: 'Look, look at what I have seen'.12 The net result of this attitude, he scoffed, was that psychedelic art tended towards visual doctrine, analogous to "social realism that attempts to portray the class struggle artistically".7 "The medium was most of the message," another critic, Thomas Albright, concluded in 1985.8

In fact, the famous concert posters produced in San Francisco and elsewhere cannot be said to constitute psychedelic art, at least not according to the criteria of *Psychedelic Art*. Schwartz spoke dismissively of "only the fashion of painting objects in the world in a style that is associated with psychedelic experience. It is poster art in the true sense: 'See us, we are the psychedelics'".7 As the posters' main purpose was to advertise upcoming events that were of interest to the psychedelic community, and purposefully did so in a visual language signalling "difference" to insiders and outsiders alike, it seems indeed reasonable not to speak of psychedelic art per se, but of the art of the psychedelic community.

If even that: the poster style was quickly appropriated (or "co-opted", as it was called then) by other parties. "Call it psychedelic and it will sell fast, some merchants say", Masters and Houston quoted a 1967 *Wall Street Journal* front-page headline.4 For a time, it seemed that anything could be sold by calling it "psychedelic", or "mind-blowing", and covering it in wavy colourful patterns – even Republicans (fig. 4).9 "The real revolution of the 1960s", Albright concluded, "was the transformation of practically everything – including the notion of 'revolution' itself – into a merchandisable commodity".8 Reason enough for artists to abandon a style that made psychedelia look like a trite and commercially corrupted neo-Art Nouveau fad spiced up with satiated colours and Op Art effects.

Fig. 4 Jim Trelease, Rocky is My Man in '68, design for a campaign poster from the 1968 presidential campaign, 1968, 60 x 89 cm, private collection.

And so psychedelic art quickly disappeared from view. Prompted by *Psychedelic Art*, Harvard Arnason devoted a few paragraphs to the subject on the very last page of his 1969 *History of Modern Art*, but deleted them again from subsequent revisions.10 Beyond this, Masters and Houston's book seems to have become invisible. Even the huge 34-volume *Dictionary of Art* of 1996 missed out on the only book on the subject in a rather dismissive entry.11 And in 2005, when Grunenberg tried to give this 'Art with no History', as he called it, a triumphant return with his exhibition *Summer of Love: Art of the Psychedelic Era*, this qualifier allowed him to include posters and design and push aside a focus on drugs. Indeed, Masters and Houston's book was conveniently ignored, relegated to a footnote as a source of information on Abrams.1

To his credit, Grunenberg did break decades of deafening silence. But by speaking of "art of the psychedelic era", he all too easily brushed aside much of the clash between counter- and mainstream culture, between

psychedelic art and its popular offspring. Also, apart from the obligatory light show (minus deafening rock music and crazed-out audience), exhibitions such as Grunenberg's almost by necessity focus on material left-overs, paraphernalia, memorabilia, and marketing collateral more than on sensory bombardments, attempts to "blow the mind" and many other ephemeral happenings fusing high and low, life and art, that also have been put forward as psychedelia's most important achievement.8 How to avoid the feeling of walking around in a cabinet of curiosities commemorating some cursory trend in life-style and weird design? That may be the question here.

Lack of definition also perturbed other initiatives. In 2010, for example, David Rubin organised an exhibition entitled *Psychedelic: Optical and Visionary Art since the 1960s*. It focused on all kinds of arts inciting "an expanded awareness of the interior world of perception" using optical effects and the "psychedelic aesthetic vocabulary" as a "multipurpose vernacular".12 Of the 74 artists in the book, however, maybe only 6 (including Abrams) would qualify as psychedelic artists according to Masters and Houston's criteria, whose book wasn't even mentioned in a footnote.

Nor was it mentioned by Ken Johnson in his *Are You Experienced? How Psychedelic Consciousness Transformed Modern Art* of 2011, despite almost quoting Masters and Houston by talking of an art that "seeks to represent, express, or induce" psychedelic experience.13 Johnson asked many interesting questions, but as he didn't aim for a compendium of "psychedelic art" but for a new and "psychedelic way of looking at art", he inflated the term to such an extent that it covered almost all art that critiques, doubts, reflects on, or jokes about something, or simply looks strange or "trippy" when high. In fact, for Johnson, "psychedelic" became more or less synonymous with "postmodern", that epochal shift in perspective which he attributed exclusively to the "big bang" of psychedelia.13

But Johnson, at least, didn't reduce psychedelia to a style, whether in art or design. Stylistic diversity also characterised the art in Masters and Houston's book, and indeed, in their definition, psychedelic art cannot be recognised by common external characteristics. Whatever one may think of their curious bias in art appreciation, their book did provide a clear and well-considered, useful definition of psychedelic art. "Historically, an art form derives its identity from the work created, and not from the biography of the artist", Schwartz explained, but in this case, "it is patently impossibly to produce psychedelic art without having had an experience of the consciousness that is its source".7 Without denotation, only a wide variety of connotations remains. Let's remember that, originally, the key question was not looks, but, indeed: "Are you experienced?"

References:

1. Grunenberg C. The Politics of Ecstasy. In: Summer of Love: Art of the Psychedelic Era. Liverpool (Tate Liverpool)/Frankfurt (Schirn Kunsthalle)/Vienna (Kunsthalle) 2005-2006, p. 13.
2. Psychedelic Art. Life. 1966 Sep 9;61(11):60–9.
3. Krippner S. The Psychedelic Artist. In: Psychedelic Art. New York: Grove Press; 1968. p. 164.
4. Masters REL, Houston J. Psychedelic Art. New York: Grove Press; 1968.
5. ten Berge JP. Drugs in de kunst: Van opium tot LSD, 1798-1968. 2004.
6. As it still did in 1967. In fact, at least one of the artists in*Psychedelic Art*later confessed that he didn't qualify, but just grabbed the chance to have his work published (interview with Lex de Bruijn, Amsterdam, 14 June 1995).
7. Schwartz BN. Context, Value & Direction. In: Psychedelic Art. New York: Grove Press; 1968. p. 153.
8. Albright T. Art in the San Francisco Bay area, 1945-1980: an illustrated history. Berkeley, Calif: University of California Press; 1985. 349 p.

9. Yanker G. Prop art: over 1000 contemporary political posters. New York: Darien House; distributed by New York Graphic Society, Greenwich, Conn; 1972. 256 p.
10. Arnason HH. History of Modern Art New York: Abrams; 1969.
11. Sokol DM. Psychedelic Art. In: Turner J, editor. The dictionary of art. New York: Grove; 1996. p. 681.
12. Rubin DS. Stimuli for a New Millenium. In: Psychedelic: optical and visionary art since the 1960s. San Antonio, TX; Cambridge, Mass: San Antonio Museum of Art; In association with the MIT Press; 2010. p. 28.
13. Johnson K. Are you experienced? how psychedelic consciousness transformed modern art. Munich, New York: Prestel Verlag; Prestel Publishing; 2011. 232 p.