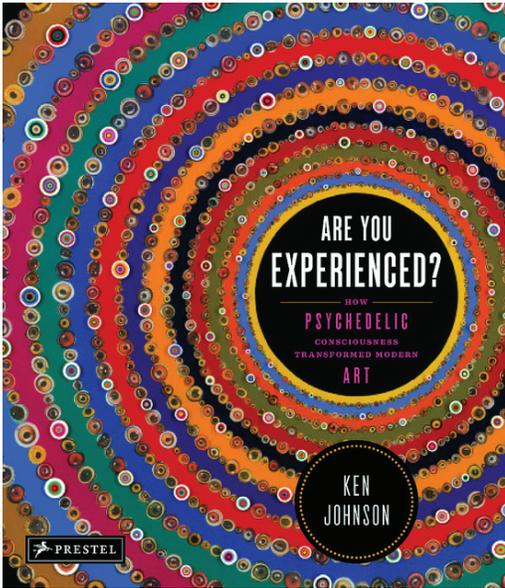


High Art: Ken Johnson On How 1960s Drug Culture Transformed Fine Art

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By Carolina A. Miranda



Put the words “psychedelic” and “art” in the same sentence and chances are most people will conjure images of groovy rock posters and fluorescent mushrooms. But a new book by art critic Ken Johnson, who writes for the New York Times, aims to broaden the scope of what constitutes psychedelic visual culture.

In "Are You Experienced: How Psychedelic Consciousness Transformed Modern Art" (out on Wednesday from Prestel), Johnson argues that the drug culture of the '60s didn't just imbue the last half century's worth of art with trippy patterns, but fundamentally shifted the way in which several generations of artists have presented ideas to their audiences. All of a sudden, art wasn't just about line and color, he reports, it was about revealing alternate realities and helping the viewer achieve new states of consciousness.

Even works that, on the surface, might seem well out of the realm of the psychedelic receive a thorough examination -- such as Ed Ruscha's photographs of vintage gas stations or John Baldessari's wry paintings of text. Of the latter's totally meta art school humor, Johnson asks: "Am I right to catch a whiff of weed about it?" To be clear: he isn't charting who does and doesn't do drugs, but who might be channeling aspects of drug culture in their work.

Engagingly written (Johnson is frank about his own drug use) and chock full of images, "Are You Experienced?" provides an interesting filter with which to view the history of art. Late last week, the author took time out to chat with me about the history of American drug culture, drunk versus stoned art and the best museum in New York to be stoned in.

WNYC Arts Critic Carolina Miranda: So how exactly does a book about art and drugs come about?

Ken Johnson: I proposed this as an article for Art in America, which I was writing for in the '90s -- to interview people that were making work during the '60s and ask them directly, 'Were drugs a part of your formative experience?' [The magazine] didn't want to do that. But my book isn't research into who did drugs and that sort of thing. It's more my personal commentary.

"Are You Experienced?" -- critic Ken Johnson's new book looks at art through the lens of 1960s drug culture. (Courtesy Prestel)

“ In 1965, taking drugs became something that not just a few isolated individuals or small underground groups did. It became something that a mass populace in an industrialized society was doing. — Ken Johnson

CM: In the introduction, you say that you had the sense that certain types of works -- like minimalist sculpture -- might reflect aspects of druggie culture. Was there a piece in particular that led you to this conclusion?

KJ: The first thing I mention in the book is a piece by Carl Andre, one of his floor sculptures. (He refused permission to have his work illustrated in the book. I don't know why.) I thought it suggested a hyper-alertness to the sensory experience of space and time. Then I thought, what enhances that type of experience? Well, that's what pot does for a lot of people. This is the thing that may surprise people in reading the book. It's not about work that looks typically 'psychedelic' -- like acid posters -- but certain kinds of abstraction. I quote Robert Barry in the '60s, too. He'd type up these note cards with phrases in which he would propose that you think about something that is impossible to think about.

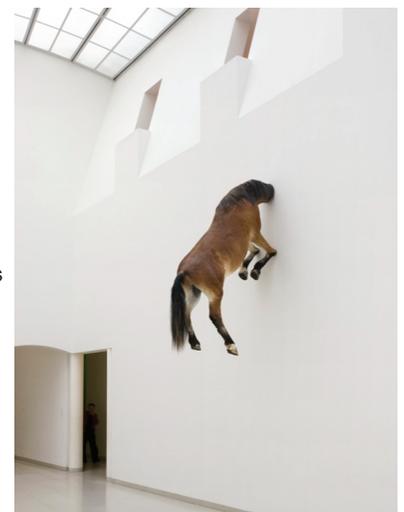
CM: That's pretty stoner.

KJ: Yes, it's the fun of the thought experiment. That's what started to strike me -- is that a lot of art from the mid-'60s on is a kind of thought experiment. There are precedents for it in people like Yves Klein, but it becomes a much more popular kind of genre from the mid-'60s on.

CM: The book focuses on the drug culture of the last 50 years, yet painters like Hieronymus Bosch were making some pretty psychedelic art back in the 15th century. Why the narrow focus?

KJ: Because in 1965, taking drugs became something that not just a few isolated individuals or small underground groups did. It became something that a mass populace in an industrialized society was doing. As far as I know, it's completely historically unprecedented. In other words, drug culture became mainstream culture. Psychedelic mushrooms have been growing in England for centuries. There are reports of people accidentally eating them and acting weird. But I think it's pretty significant that no one thought, 'Let's do that again. That's a cool thing to do.' You need a culture that makes sense out of such a strange experience in order for it to thrive. In a way, you could say that people got onto it because they liked it and it was fun. But it was also a desperate moment in history, with the Vietnam War and Civil Rights. The world was sort of going nuts.

CM: How did American culture change as a result of psychedelic culture?



Maurizio Cattelan

KJ: I think it drew attention to consciousness. Prior to that time, people would think that consciousness was this basic normal, perceptual, cognitive, average kind of thing. If it changed, it was because there was something wrong with you. In the '60s, because of drugs and because of the kind of thinking that came out of psychedelic culture, people started to think that consciousness was a much more changeable kind of thing. We tend to make judgments about art now in terms of how it affects our consciousness: how does it change how we think or feel?

CM: Aside from the obvious -- rock posters, etc. -- what are the significant ways in which drugs have influenced our visual culture?

KJ: I haven't seen the Cory Arcangel show [at the Whitney Museum] yet, but that strikes me as very much the product of neo-psychedelic thinking. It gives a sense that the purpose of art might be to get under the surface and tinker with the machinery of what we take for granted as reality.



Deborah Kass's "Daddy" from 2008

CM: There were a couple of shows at Gavin Brown's gallery in the past decade that exhibited art under the organizing principle of 'drunk versus stoned.' How do you see those qualities breaking out?

KJ: [Drunk art] boils down to expressionistic painting. Painting that is impulsive, active, aggressive -- like Abstract Expressionism, which is generally associated with painters who drank a lot. Stoned art tends to be introverted, tends to focus on details, tends to be repetitive. In the book, I mention a James Siena as something that looks like a kind of stoner art -- a certain kind of system of incremental mark making that yields something more than those marks.

CM: What's the best New York museum to be stoned in?

KJ: It would have to be the Met. It's so big and so varied and so intense. Go to parts of the museum that are less popular. Look at things like silver -- I'm very attracted to bright and shiny and intricate things. I suppose it would be interesting to go to Dia: Beacon because you have these vast spaces and they're kind of minimalist, in the way we were talking about earlier. Any museum could be transformed with a little herbal assistance. But without a doubt, the Met is the place to go.

Photos: Maurizio Cattelan's sculptures (such as the embedded horse figure from 2007, above right) are exemplary of a more high-concept school of drug culture-influenced work, writes Johnson, of "an age of irony and contingency where nothing is inherently meaningful, no truth absolute, no authority unimpeachable; wherein the ultimate value is the free play of creative mind." At bottom left, Deborah Kass's "Daddy" a painting from 2008, embodies the Technicolor qualities of the '60s psychedelic visual style while playing with notions of gender. (All images courtesy of Prestel.)