

## **Intoxicating Painting**

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### **Intoxication**

‘I had my first hallucinations that night. Cars were stretching in long, colorful streaks. As they drove past, perfectly normal automobiles would appear like crumpled wrecks, or as though their bodies were out of alignment with their chassis’ (Hayes 2000: 162).

It frequently seems that paintings depicting ecstatic states, or inducing physiological responses, achieve lesser status, even in comparison with works made by artists in states of intoxication. To what extent is this really true? The forces determining the significance of a painter’s work are at any moment complex and influenced by factors that can be hard to discern. Aren’t the different fortunes of Brice Marden’s deadpan minimalist paintings and Alan Shields’ (image #01) exuberant psychedelic constructions most likely due to the former’s allegiances with Minimalism, given that movement’s preeminence in the 1960s? Or could Shields’ (image #02) appetite for the ecstatic vocabularies of intoxication and eschewal of tropes of painterly rigour have more to do with his marginalization?

A great deal separates Victor Vasarely’s (image #03) disciplined, but extravagantly bulging, optical illusions (e.g. *Dirac*, 1978) and Cy Twombly’s habitually gestural, sub-aqueous and Rococo-framed green paintings (*A Painting in 9 Parts*, 1988) (images #04–12) at The Menil Collection. They are from different art worlds— Op art/abstract expressionist/populist/patrician, technophilia/classicist—with the differing lineages of Vasarely’s deindividuated, utopia-directed, present-day geometries and Twombly’s highly subjectivized, signature gestures and atavistic immersion in classical literature. The visually disorientating effect of Vasarely’s painting derives from a demanding geometry where counterposed gradations of bright colour define circles and ovals of diminishing size to generate the illusion of protruding shapes. Vasarely’s acceleration into futurity – ‘Today’s art is tending in the direction of general forms that can readily be created over and over again, and tomorrow’s art will either be a common treasure or will cease to exist’ (*Yellow Manifesto*, 1955, Vasarely Foundation) – contrasts with Twombly’s attachment to ancient narratives as if he sought visual form for Nietzsche’s dialectical resolution of ‘...a fraternal bond between the two deities’ where ‘Dionysus speaks the language of Apollo, but Apollo finally speaks the language of Dionysus’ (Nietzsche 1993: 104). Consider Twombly’s numerous *Untitled (Bacchus)* paintings, all from 2005. Following this formulation by Nietzsche, Twombly’s later work would seem to gain credit as a form of internally supervised inebriated painting (a cocktail of action painting, materiality and textuality) that entices viewers to become enraptured by this managed intoxication. In this interpretation the deranged graffitist that is the early Twombly, supposedly degrading the legacy of abstract expressionism, becomes one who resuscitates that tradition, but investing it with a sloshed gravitas.

Does Vasarely’s interest in readily apprehended optical effects, his distrust of expressive subjectivities and literary references, exclude his paintings from the kind of scholarship favouring Twombly? And does this classify the Op artist’s paintings as ‘lesser’ work? Are there differing

categories of worth when it comes to ecstatic pictorial vocabularies in painting, which Vasarely's often are, and if so, how are those categories determined? The closest contemporaneous American painting to Vasarely's is by Frank Stella whose late-50s 'Black Paintings' (made of hand-painted stripes that leave thin strips of blank canvas in between), 1960s 'Concentric Squares' (image #13) and 'Protractor Series' (image #14) (interlaced curves on shaped canvasses) have an opticality relating to European 'Le mouvement' and Groupe de Recherche d'Art Visuel, the kineticists and Op artists launched in Paris in 1955 (image #15). François Morellet's 1956 'Du jaune au violet', a painting of optical recession with concentric square frames that move from a purple border to a yellow centre, anticipates the similar composition of Stella's 'Jasper's Dilemma', 1962. In spite of resemblances, Stella and other American Minimalists aggressively distanced themselves from this European work, making it out to be a dead-end derivation of pre-war painting and emphasizing their disinterest in utopian motivations in favor of literalness. As if reclaiming authority for his own latter-day optical experiments Stella claimed: '...it still doesn't have anything to do with my paintings. I find all that European geometric painting – sort of post-Max Bill school – a kind of curiosity – very dreary'. (Foster, Krauss, Bois, Buchloh 2004: 515). In relation to European precedents the deadpan evacuation of literary and political content by Stella and Carl Andre seems an attempt to assert American matter-of-factness and scale over the innovations of audience participation and kinetic seduction.

All the same, as Peter Halley concluded in 1986, Stella's work did not shy away from some of the more ingratiating properties of the work of his European contemporaries: '...there is the space made by combining Day-Glo and bright acrylic colors which pulsate with an eerie push-pull effect...[spatial systems] combine to give as intense an effect as possible. Here we have left the unified modern space of reason and have entered a post-modern space whose purpose is to seduce' (Halley 1986, unpaginated). Although Halley has one eye on establishing laudable precedents for his own practice, he discerns a feature of Stella's work that signals the end of the continuously explosive present moments, of artistic revolutions, that for Alain Badiou characterize the achievement of the twentieth-century avant-gardes – 'The avant-gardes want there to be a pure present for art' (Badiou 2007: 134). Halley explains how Stella refines the making of paintings as variations within series that followed one another 'in almost yearly intervals like car models from Detroit' (Halley 1986) where neither rupture nor evolution was evident. Where Halley is excited by this, Badiou is critical: 'In the seventies and eighties, especially in the United States, this low form of beginning took the guise of an accelerated succession of formal "mutations", so that the plastic arts began to model themselves on fashion' (Badiou 2007: 136).

No stranger to commodification, Vasarely would certainly produce variants within series and exploit the market for multiples and prints. Yet these actions played out against the continuing interest of his in avant-garde aesthetic transformation, here shifted to the goal of a common visual language diffused amongst the wider population like a beneficent drug. The alienness of such aims to American milieus is clear from Stella's pragmatic assertion of painting's facticity – 'My painting is based on the fact that only what can be seen there *is* there' (Rorimer 2001: 15) – and his jingoistic dismissal of European painting as 'dreary' and imitative, as if it were a tired runway fashion, well past its sell date. A similar impatience is shown by the comment in the *Art Since 1900* publication that Vasarely's utopian aims were rehashed tropes of radical artistic statements

(ibid: 382). That may be partly true, but at least they *were* radical visions and not what Badiou identifies as the stifling realism of those ‘priests’ who argue against revolt on the basis of its consequences: ‘A priest is anyone for whom rebellion is no longer an unconditional value: a priest is anyone who measures everything in terms of “objective results”’ (Badiou 2007: 144-5). The kind of intoxication evidenced by Vasarely’s work (image #16) is itself a utopian concept that parallels the revolutionary avant-garde and contravenes American belief in the virtue of material prosperity. There is certainly intoxication involved there too, but only in terms of a thrall to commodities amongst which abstract paintings are, in the 1960s, playing an increasingly prominent role in market cycles through their charged colour, large scale, and imperturbability as savvy markers of contemporaneity.

So for Badiou there are slight, uninteresting, off-the-peg beginnings that cynically mimic the incandescent, revolutionary-for-its-own-sake, ecstatic beginnings marking avant-garde initiatives. He admiringly quotes André Breton’s fervent observation that ‘Rebellion is its own justification, completely independent of the chance it has to modify the state of affairs that gives rise to it’ (Badiou 2007: 141), so at odds with the more cautious assessments of Peter Bürger whose authentic avant-garde is one that attempts to sublimate art into life by an attack on the institution of art. Breton’s ‘spark in search of a powder keg’ (Badiou 2007: 141) may yet be a quality of this kind of attack but not its most important feature. That is rather the Duchampian poker-faced and cold-blooded knife thrust to the vital organs of the institution that, as we know, remains unaffected, leaving Bürger to categorize all later anti-institutional initiatives as repetitions of radicality by a neo-avant-garde. That disqualification of ‘neo-’ is what Hal Foster questions in an essay that first appeared in *October* magazine in 1994 and in which he nuances the violence of avant-garde ruptures with the terms ‘mimetic dimension’, where capitalism is parodied through mimicry, and ‘utopian dimension’, where what can’t be brought about is instead depicted (Foster 1994: 17). Coupled together like this, these terms seem variants on Fredric Jameson’s category of ‘utopian gesture, an act of compensation’ that reproduces (mimics?) capitalist depredations while depicting a realm of pleasure that might salve the pain, even though it would never be allowed to become part of that exploitative universe (Jameson 1991: 7).

Foster however, returns to the formulation in *Bad New Days: Art, Criticism, Emergency* to describe the ‘mimetic exacerbation’ of some contemporary artists (none of them exclusively painters) as a legacy of Dada: ‘Not heroic, this avant-garde will not pretend that it can break absolutely with the old order or found a new one; rather, it will seek to trace fractures that already exist within the given order, to pressure them further, to activate them somehow’ (Foster 2015: 94-5). If in our time the liberating revolutionary rapture of Badiou’s Breton is not to fall into a celebration of power and commodification through sheer exhilaration (or, as Foster fears, through capitalist nihilism), what kinds of intoxication are productive for artists? In a chapter on precariousness Foster discusses Thomas Hirschhorn whose immersive and chaotic fan-worship installations, celebrating theorists like Gramsci or Bataille and constructed from masses of low-value materials, are offered as an excessive gift to marginal communities. In the process Hirschhorn enacts and invites intoxication with materials, with theory, with images, with discussion and with community. What seems to separate his intoxication from others, at least for Foster, is its premise of explicit political engagement, even if the outcomes of his actions are difficult to quantify. By this model, the intoxication of drug users or Op artists is at best cast as a

prelude to action, like the Surrealist, or Benjaminian, instruction that no social transformation is possible without one that is simultaneously internal. Foster never uses the term intoxication, yet what else are Hirschhorn's passions, given his statements like 'Energy yes, quality no' (Foster 2015: 108) and a practice that looks to Marcel Mauss's commendations of the gift and to Bataille's concept of expenditure? It is as if for Hirschhorn there is no art, no energy, without the self-sacrifice, the surrender, entailed by intoxication. And this is the connection joining newer initiatives of this sort to Dada, but also importantly to those paintings, poems and experimental films that recognize how communication through representation of the world as revealed in intoxicated states comprises an essential, overwhelming and unrepayable gift that must nevertheless be offered.

Perhaps this is akin to what Walter Benjamin called 'that squandering of our existence that we know in love' (Benjamin 1999: 678). What does Benjamin understand by intoxication? In his essay 'Surrealism' he sees it deriving from an intensification of everyday experiences, such as reading, reflection, and idling, all of them 'static' introspective activities, not conventionally linked to revolutionary action. Could painting be one such action? He feels these are alternative experiences to hashish and reiterates Surrealist claims that revolutionary action should build on a life where ordinary pursuits are themselves imbued with an equivalent fervour. This kind of everyday intoxication may protest at disengaged inactivity but it is also a move against those who expect revolution to precipitate only from antagonistic action and anticipates the kinds of arguments made by Michel De Certeau for transformation arising from the practices of everyday life. It is a plausible alternative to radical annihilatory gestures often proposed by avant-gardes.

And so from the 'messthetics' of Hirschhorn to the everyday train wrecks of painting studios. Where catalog and magazine tributes routinely professionalize a practice, making it out as consistent and focused, the excess of day-to-day screw-ups and failures, the disaster zones of contemporary studio practice become a more interesting story to tell. For example, the eccentricity of Mary Heilmann's autobiographical splurge of a book *The All Night Movie*, as it charts the links between personal drug use and compositional changes in her painting, or a disconcerting visit I remember making twenty years ago to Steven Parrino's studio in Greenpoint, his fucked-up paintings surrounding a large motorbike, punk rock on the stereo, Parrino never once removing his dark glasses, and for the show I was curating offering me a piece he had rescued from the trash that morning (image #17).

At a 1977 lecture I heard Robert Motherwell complain that the work of young New York painters was suffering from the amount of drugs and rock music they were into. That remark reprised a lament that new work just wasn't as serious or engaged as the old. As in Motherwell's time, what if painters today are using new drugs and coming up with visual equivalencies unrecognizable to a previous generation invested in a different understanding of accountability? Even if drugs are not involved, we would expect the intoxications that inform the imagery and materiality of contemporary work to be new ones. Drugs and rock and roll; was Motherwell thinking of Brice Marden? Reflecting on a talk he gave at the Whitney Museum Marden explained: 'I think that day I was incredibly stoned. I like art. I like to look at it' (Marden 1975: 39); and on his 'Suicide Drawings': 'I was working at night about 5 o'clock in the morning. When I just couldn't unwind I'd sit and get stoned and draw' (Marden 1975: 40); and on drinking: 'I consider myself an alcoholic, but not a clinical one...there are periods when I don't drink at all. I mean at openings

you get drunk. How else are you going to deal with that? You could be real straight about it, but I take lots of drugs and I drink a lot. It's just standard behavior for any normal human being in this day and age' (Marden 1975: 42).

I can just see Motherwell getting irritated at those numbed stoner fields of Marden's. Those matt wax slabs of dead flat color sucking the light out of the room. A perfectly dazed muteness and blank tract for transcendental meditation, successfully polluting the aristocratic culture of some New York painting through its hedonistic disregard for rigour and its anti-intellectualism. It makes Vasarely seem a model of restraint. Paradoxically, in this period Marden is a hopped-up painter making work that is an abstemious evacuation of energy, an eschewal of the effusiveness of a world transformed by drugs.

What concepts come out of the philosophies of intoxication that have aesthetic application? As a philosophical autobiography written while in hiding during the Second World War, Bataille's *On Nietzsche* provides one extreme of ecstatic engagement: 'I want to be very clear on this: not a word of Nietzsche's work can be understood without *experiencing* that dazzling dissolution into totality, without living it out...[emphasis by Bataille]'. (Bataille 2004: xxxi). Taking Nietzsche at his word, Bataille lives out his philosophical legacy as an intoxicated revolt against all beliefs, including any that expect a measurable external impact. His assessment of the value of Nietzsche's proclamations as 'unfocussed...dazzling radiances...untraceable' (Bataille 2004: 87) engages a lexicon of visual effects that may remind us of some contemporary painting. Think of Jim Lambie, Katharina Grosse, or Kerstin Brätsch. (image #18)

Beyond his first book *The Birth of Tragedy*, cited earlier, Nietzsche is helpful here as his later writings more or less continuously reevaluate intoxication to reconsider the relation between individual and world. In *Human All Too Human*, for example, Nietzsche imagines an uprooted subjectivity intoxicated by a world it has neither created nor mastered, and in which it drifts contemplating itself as one phenomenon amongst others. Nietzsche's subversive concept is of the world as an aesthetic phenomenon in which hierarchies dissolve and the status of maker and made interchange. Nietzsche's drifting subject is given a narrative in Benjamin's 'Hashish in Marseilles'. In this most developed of his extensive hashish writings, Benjamin's feelings of benevolence and empathy for the material world are intended as a radical alternative to the intoxications with commodities and violence that grip European society from the mid-nineteenth century on. Benjamin's language of intoxication is intentionally emasculated, expressed in murmurs and assuming a state of emotional proximity to objects where, for example, he is alarmed that a shadow might injure the paper he's writing on, or concerned that a selection from a menu will offend the other items on offer. Such a definition might relate to the moving encounter offered by 'The Incremental Commandments' (image #19), an installation of paintings by Donald Moffett shown in London in 2000. A set of ten black oil paintings of diminishing size, textured like a shag-carpet with thousands of tendrils of paint, was accompanied by a soundtrack of Dorothea Papadakos improvising Chic's *Le Freak* on the organ of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine.

## Materiality

“All colors take their rise from the snow—you must have regard for the colors”....[Benjamin] turns to colors again, uttering the word “green” in a long, singing tone (held for about twenty seconds), and then he says “Green is also yellow”....“Thoughts of colors are delicate, and equally delicate are the people and flowers of Norway: delicate and very ardent”’. (Benjamin 2006: 75-7).

The illustrations of J. J. Grandville’s 1865 *Un Autre Monde* coincide with the first European accounts of recreational drug use. As Benjamin has pointed out, Grandville’s illustrations show the impact of commodities on a society defenseless against them. Two images from the book visualize a Louvre Salon where the paintings’ verisimilitude is parodied by depicting their contents tumbling out into the gallery. (image #20) Grandville’s text describes museum guards warning visitors not to get too close to the painting of a battle scene for fear of injury (image #21). On the opposite gallery wall birds fly through an open window to peck at fruit spilling out from a landscape painting. Grandville illustrates these paintings behaving like commodities, not only reading consumers’ desires, but assaulting them in the process. Their illustrated three-dimensionality anticipates the role of facture as an advertisement for painting. As such, texture and other material properties implicate paintings in exactly that commercial endeavor from which artists claim those same properties separate them. The emphasis on facture in late-twentieth-century abstraction inherits this ploy, couching its self-advertisement behind imperatives of expressiveness and authenticity.

Signature materiality in painting is something that obtrudes into the viewer’s space (as the Grandville images exaggerate). However shallow its relief, it nevertheless applies a pressure on that space in a contest for attention and impedes the kind of rapture that is often claimed for large gestural painting. As you start to lose yourself in the painting’s illusionist space, its facture pushes back, asserting the painting’s authorship and self-importance. Barbara Reise’s subtle writing on Robert Ryman (from forty years ago) suggests potential, however, for an erotic and ecstatic engagement with that kind of materiality: ‘Enamel coats the surface of one painting in a shining field whose liquid thinness lets the fine irregularity of the painting’s linen act as the texture of the paint surface itself, while the dark warmth of the bare linen at the frontal edges and on the sides counters this spare frontality with its own presence as light-absorbing material stretched into pronounced three-dimensionality’. (Reise 1974: 79-80). It is possible that the discipline of her intoxicated phenomenology is intended by Reise as a corrective to prevailing superficial aesthetic fascinations, similar to how Benjamin’s hashish trances oppose his contemporaries’ right wing intoxications.

A year after the Reise articles were published Ryman designed the sober cover for the Spring 1975 Art-Rite issue on painting (image #22) which also featured a satirical photo-novella by Michael Train with the memorable invention of a once-famous, now washed-up, alcoholic abstract-expressionist painter named Calvin Stoller (image #23). Stoller’s visitors discuss his desperate and inebriated painterly gesture (executed only when he hears them on the stairs outside his loft) in terms that parodically relate to Reise’s commentary on Ryman – ‘Look how that line forges into space...and resolves the tension of the edge’ (image #24) – as well as having a go at the typically casual formalist conversations scattered throughout the same magazine (Train 1975: 27-8).

In October 2005 Artforum ran three articles on Cologne artist/painter Michael Krebber. Daniel Birnbaum, John Kelsey, and Jessica Morgan each in turn quoted, or paraphrased, this same comment of Krebber's: 'I do not believe I can invent something new in art or painting because whatever I would want to invent already exists' (Birnbaum, Kelsey, Morgan 2005: 220-7). It was then cited a fourth time in a pull-out headline. Editorial oversight or not, this repetition emphasizes the studied unoriginality of a comment whose louche throwaway character is, one assumes, as calculated as the rest of Krebber's gestures. Worth noting also is the distinction of 'art' from 'painting' as if Krebber places the latter in a separate domain where rules can be bent differently. Perhaps bent the way his former employer, Martin Kippenberger, did as he made Stoller's drunken gesture into the lynchpin of an exceptional body of work.

And what of the resemblance between the main form in Krebber's work 'Chador 43' of 2002 (image #25) (reproduced in the same Artforum article) and Stoller's gesture, both traversing from left to right with similar awkward brushiness? For an artist whose painting inventory references other artists' gestures and dead ends, and whose procedures are interrupted before they become idiosyncratic or competent, the precedent of a painting casually produced as a prop for an art magazine photo-novella might be an appropriate place to begin.

### **60s Painting**

'The depth of the phenomenon was driven home when the peripheral areas of my vision were suddenly filled with a bright paisley pattern. At the same instant, Peter pulled back in his chair, saying, "Wow...it's...it's..." He couldn't find the word. "It's electric orange paisley", I stated, and he agreed that that was exactly what it was...The paisley pattern was consistent, though the colors shifted through reds, yellows, oranges, bright greens, and other intense hues' (Hayes 2000: 76-7).

Psychedelic and Op artists are detached from the familiar painting discourse that regards flatness as a perfect endgame of materiality. Instead they consider the picture surface as the site of a psychic or somatic encounter, as an appreciable two-dimensional visual field on which are represented, or which catalyses, extraordinary physical and mental states that have no basis in our everyday spatial-temporal experiences. The elastic letter and image forms, designed to remain at the threshold of legibility, enable the psychedelic graphics of Haight-Ashbury posters (image #26) from the late 60s to destabilize viewing. Clearly, however, they also advertise the immersive experience of Fillmore East and Avalon Ballroom rock concerts with their psychedelic light shows, frequently enhanced by LSD. The apogee of those events, the final Acid Test organized by Stewart Brand at San Francisco Longshoreman's Hall in January 1966, was documented by Ben Van Meter's *S. F. Trips Festival* (image #27-28) where the densely overlaid imagery of three nights of filming specifically evoked LSD experiences. Though small, the 60s posters would provide an adequate field of contemplation to anyone tripping. Discussing those psychedelic images, Jean-Pierre Criqui extends Walter Benjamin's observation concerning the value of certain nineteenth-century posters as providing everyday utopian images that project as yet unimagined futures. Criqui notes the intermediary status of the Haight-Ashbury posters as generating 'this imaginative space, halfway between the material world and the world of dreams' (Criqui 2005: 13) far more effectively than has been achieved by other artefacts. Certainly the

disorientating effects of barely legible typography with striking close-toned primary and secondary colors, and layered optical motifs, loosen the images from any secure mooring in the material world. The relation of these images to states of physical and psychic bliss (engendered by hallucinogens and club environments) classifies them as ecstatic representations that dispute the value of an exclusively rational understanding of materiality.

Criqui indicates a connection between Op Art and these psychedelic designs: ‘...[Victor] Moscoso’s achievement was to appropriate the optical illusions developed by Vasarely, Yaacov Agam and Bridget Riley and redirect them into the realm of the hippie counterculture, radically shifting their intended aims along the way’ (Criqui 2005: 24). Although the posters invite the same kind of immersive disorientation proposed by art like Vasarely’s, they are transitional images linking optical excitement to a subculture nurturing ideals of alternative life practices, whereas Op Art tends towards utopian notions of a dehierarchized aesthetic with appeal to a general audience, regardless of their ideals.

François Morellet resisted association with the optical effects of Vasarely’s work, claiming instead a concrete actuality for his painstakingly constructed mathematical designs. His paintings though continue to destabilize the viewer’s hold on their material properties, such that they effect the kind of transition intended by psychedelic posters. (image #29) As Guy Brett explains: ‘In the Morellet, calculation and a foreseeable system produces the improbable, ambiguous and unpredictable: perhaps one could say the hallucinatory’ (Brett 2000: 24). Conceding something to countercultural values, Vasarely argues that the visual language of optical effects he and other artists are developing provides a universal aesthetic to engage the greater population in gratifying visual experiences: ‘I believe that there are fresh possibilities of satisfying man’s natural instinct for sensory pleasures. The crowd, the masses, a multitude of human beings. That is the new dimension. That is unlimited space and the truth of structures. Art is the plastic aspect of the community’ (Bann 1967: 80).

Influenced by his Bauhaus-style education, Vasarely’s geometry was based on investigating what had come to be called the plastic qualities of form and design, but by the late 60s the results were becoming interestingly wayward, suggesting that psychedelia was now influencing his own art. With the 1960s *Vega* series, paintings resemble extreme hallucinations where solid surfaces give way or bulge outward (image #30). These newly destabilizing images could readily have been influenced by the increasing number of drug experiences depicted in cinema, experimental film and literature circulating at the time they were produced. These include Bruce Conner’s contribution to the LSD episode in *Easy Rider* (Hopper, 1969) (image #31), the hallucination sequences in *More* (Schroeder, 1969) (image #32), and the mushroom trip in *Performance* (Cammell, Roeg, 1970) (image #33). This would link Vasarely’s 60s formal experiments to a recognition of communities as subcultures capable of generating specific, non-universal, utopian visual vocabularies.

Vasarely’s later paintings incorporate the utopian significations of intense contrasts of hue that are familiar from psychedelic posters and the detailed accounting of color in hallucination narratives. A hundred-and-fifty years earlier Charles Fourier imagined his utopian community, the phalanstery, in polychrome as if he were counteracting the darkness, overcrowding, poverty, and lack of sanitation of the industrialized cities he was criticizing: ‘The same will hold for the

three groups cultivating yellow, grey and green rennet apples. Discord between contiguous groups is a general law of nature: the color scarlet goes very badly with its adjacent shades, cherry, nacarat and capucine; but it goes quite well with its opposites, dark blue, dark green, black, white' (Fourier 1971: 279). Fourier's fantasy reminds Benjamin of illustrations in nineteenth-century children's books whose enticing colors draw the young reader into the narrative. Benjamin's description of the process shares features with his encounters with colour in the hashish protocols and might easily be applied to the experience of Haight-Ashbury posters or Vasarely's paintings: 'The objects do not come to meet the picturing child from the pages of the book; instead, the gazing child enters into those pages, becoming suffused, like a cloud, with the riotous colors of the world of pictures' (Benjamin 1996: 435).

This suggests that Foster's 'utopian dimension' functions at many levels of art and literature, and may consist in a childhood patterning prompting adult expectations that utopian desires will be partly fulfilled by visual culture. The utopian impulses within such uses of saturated color return us to the earlier discussion by recalling Jameson's celebration of Van Gogh's paintings as exemplifying particular modernist goals: 'How is it, then, that in Van Gogh such things as apple trees explode into a hallucinatory surface of color, while his village stereotypes are suddenly and garishly overlaid with hues of red and green? [...] the willed and violent transformation of a drab peasant object world into the most glorious materialization of pure color in oil paint is to be seen as a Utopian gesture, an act of compensation which ends up producing a whole new Utopian realm of the senses [...]' (Jameson 1991: 7). In varying intensities this act is encountered again and again, from Fourier, through Benjamin, psychedelia, and Vasarely. But what kind of painting might it comprise in our own time?

### **New Painting**

'It was the most gorgeous thing I've ever seen. I was moaning. I can't believe I'm seeing this... Annapurna was scarlet and magenta and fire and red and pink and purple... The beauty of this display was natural enough, but the acid deepened my appreciation of it, making the darker colors throb and everything shimmer' (Hayes 2000: 228-9).

Featured in the 'Greater New York' 2015-16 exhibition at PS1 was *Gold/Tunnel*, (image #34) a painting of Donald Moffett's from the 2003 series *The Extravagant Vein*. These are near-monochrome paintings onto which are projected video images of Central Park's The Ramble, for over a hundred years a popular location amongst gay men for meetings and sex, in spite of the risk of beatings from homophobic gangs. As Moffett puts it 'The gorgeous and artificial wilderness is maze-like and full of footpaths and dead ends (like an extravagant vein). You can easily get lost but always with the comfort of the city in any direction but just out of sight... The paintings have different color underpaintings but the same opaque copper/gold enamel top coat was haphazardly (drunkenly?) applied to all of them' (Moffett 2007). The paintings (image #35) can be hard to decipher. Photographs tend to overclarify the images. This textured metallic underpainting interferes with the reading of the landscape images, lending these fairly prosaic scenes – a bridge, foliage, tree branches – a dream-like aqueous shimmer that recalls Louis Aragon's 1920s account in *Paris Peasant* of an intoxicated midnight walk in Buttes-Chaumont Park as he describes the furtive sex taking place in the shadows all around him: 'Perhaps the

betrayal of a gesture or a sigh will allow us to understand what bonds unite these tangible phantoms with the touching existence of the trembling thickets and the blue gravel that crunches under our feet' (Aragon 1980: 158-9).

The richness of these paintings of Moffett's is a call for more intense experiences, the type of summons common to the experiments in poetry and experimental film of the 1960s and 70s. Michael McClure, for example, actively plied language in work like 'Peyote Poem' to evoke these new hallucinogenic encounters with the limits of consciousness. These lines of his, 'Here is the light full of grains and color / the pink auras and flesh orange... / ...There is nothing / in the night but fast clouds. No stars. Smokey gray / and black the rooms the color of blue Mexican glass / and white. I see to the undercoats of paint / to the green and brown. I am caught in reveries of love. / The tassles of the shag rug are lace. / I am in the Park above all and cold', (McClure 1969: unpaginated), might as well be a guide to the somatic experiences offered by 'The Extravagant Vein' and encounters in *The Ramble* itself.

As Moffett's video is shot from a fixed camera there is only the slightest kinetic sensation to the surfaces of the paintings. Their incandescence is spatially disorientating, drawing you in at the same time that they call attention to their opulent materiality. They flaunt the rules for 'measure', or balanced treatment, in painting by using a flagrantly gimmicky illusionism to link a specific place with an evanescent emotional state. All at once they enact a bittersweet memorial to the intoxication of fleeting, presumably unrepeatable, sexual encounters, and evoke the gradual fading away of their sensation. Characteristic of Moffett's work, the material components of 'The Extravagant Vein' far exceed their purpose in articulating their theme and establishing a presence for the paintings. Their own extravagance recalls the exuberance of drug narratives as they account for their ecstatic glimpses of an overwhelming potentiality and return us to the act of the unmatched gift that may be the ultimate purpose of intoxicating artwork.

### **The Retinal Circus**

O nobly born, listen well:  
You are now witnessing the magical dance of forms.  
Ecstatic kaleidoscopic patterns explode around you.  
All possible shapes come to life before your eyes.  
The retinal circus.  
The ceaseless play of elements—  
Earth, water, air, fire,  
In ever-changing forms and manifestations,  
Dazzles you with its complexity and variety.

(Leary, Metzner, and Alpert 1971: 42).

I have suggested above that the wide differences amongst the supposed purposes of intoxication also prevail within those approaches to painting that invite identification with the intoxicated artist or provoke optical disorientation. A basic schema might imagine a gradation of disorientation, from paintings in which the artist loses themselves, to work made in which the

spectator gets lost. At one end are certain Abstract Expressionist works whose gestural procedures and scale invite identification with the artist's intoxicated state, and, at the other, Op Art of geometric precision that provokes visual excitement and involuntary immersion.

In all cases of intoxication the world is experienced as transformed. In terms of this essay's remit, such a transformed world is pictured for us in painted images made by others, or is generated by ourselves through hallucinatory states. In most cases the transformation must inevitably be temporary where an initially intense encounter with artwork subsequently fades to leave little residue or an introspective trance experience generates visions that don't linger long after we resurface. The latter is evidenced by the accounts of acid trips that begin each section of this paper. Although the tripper may hope to effect a permanently altered consciousness where capacities once hidden are now readily accessible, such open-mindedness and insightfulness are hard to sustain once the intoxication fades. Although the private, even self-centered, qualities of some studio intoxications (think Twombly and Marden) find their limit in the artists' realization of the drawing or painting without needing to impact audiences, it's clear that states of rapture of some writers and artists are intended as vehicles for evoking in others the kind of insightfulness that they have momentarily achieved for themselves (Bataille, Reize, Van Meter). Here the trance state blends private with public involvements. Even further along this gradation of the effects and intents of intoxication, still others intend their experiences to change lives. In the case of Vasarely or Moffett, studio practice arrives at political consciousness through experiences of elation and wonder that become converted into pictorial vocabularies designed to bring audiences to a similar realization.

Across this gamut of intoxications Timothy Leary's 'retinal circus' is the one experience without which nothing transformative can occur. The surrender to visual and ludic delight in excitements of form, light, pattern and colour is key to the probability of personal and social transformation, providing an alternative to avant-garde anti-institutional initiatives by advocating internal revolution before external change can hope to endure. Such a mandate, born of the Surrealists' dispute with the Communist Party over the appropriate content of a revolutionary programme, is also behind Benjamin's observation on the vital force within everyday experiences and which Breton argues should drive radical thinking – 'Breton and Nadja are the lovers who convert everything that we have experienced on mournful railway journeys...into revolutionary experience, if not action. They bring the immense forces of 'atmosphere' concealed in these things to the point of explosion. What form do you suppose a life would take that was determined at a decisive moment by the street song last on everyone's lips' (Benjamin, 1999: 210). The value of Benjamin's image of an idly-sung street song converting a life into action is that it can be shifted and updated to include hallucinatory experiences, ecstatic everyday encounters, the process of making paintings, and the uncontrollable fall into the centripetal pull of optical art.

## Biography

Mark Harris is an artist, writer, and curator.

Recent exhibitions include 'Morning Star', Country Club Gallery, Cincinnati (2010), 'London Open', Whitechapel Gallery, London, (2012), 'High Times', Wellcome Collection, London, (2011), 'Mao Songs', Baltimore Contemporary Museum (2011), 'Dial Collect' at SOMArts, San Francisco (2013), 'Sparrow Come Back Home', Delaware Center for the Contemporary Arts (2014), Cherry & Lucic, Portland, OR, (2015), Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati (2015). He has been performing his 'Bad Music Seminars' at various venues in London and America from 2014-15, and has upcoming exhibitions in 2016 at Root Division, San Francisco, and ICA, London.

In 2009 he received a Warhol Foundation/Creative Capital Art Writers Grant. Published essays include 'Pipilotti Rist's Music' (2009), for the Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston; 'Chelsea Hotel, March 14, 2008' (2009), on Marcia Farquhar's performance work; 'The City Sings' (2008), on Heather Phillipson's video work; 'A Local Culture: tradition and risk in Cincinnati', (2011), Philadelphia Academy of Fine Art; 'Marcia Hafif: Glaze Paintings' (2011); he contributed an essay to *West of Center: Art and The Counterculture Experiment in America, 1965-1977*, University of Minnesota Press (2011); 'Theresa Chong' (2013), Holly Johnson Gallery, Dallas; 'Cinema, Studio, Tools' (2014), Event Media Projects Ltd.; 'Mighty Sparrow's Calypsos' (2015), Delaware Center for Contemporary Arts. He has also been a reviewer to Art Monthly and Artforum.com.

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## Images

- 01 Alan Shields, untitled, c. 1968, 49 x 98 cms, dyed cloth, painted yarn, ceramic beads, wood, collection Michael Lowe and Kim Klosterman
- 02 Alan Shields, untitled, c. 1968, 84 x 30 x 30 cms, rope, acrylic paint, ceramic beads, baseball, collection Michael Lowe and Kim Klosterman
- 03 Victor Vasarely, 'Dirac', 1978, 200x200 cms, acrylic on canvas, Vasarely Collection, Szépművészeti Múzeum, Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest
- 04–12 Cy Twombly, 'Untitled [A Painting in Nine Parts]', 1988 [Rome], oil, water-based paint, graphite, and metallic paint on wood panel with painted frame, The Menil Collection [see check sheet from The Menil]

- 13 Installation view of *Frank Stella: A Retrospective* (Whitney Museum of American Art, October 30, 2015—February 7, 2016). From left to right: Frank Stella, *Marrakech*, 1964 (E.2014.0620); *Palmito Ranch*, 1961 (E.2015.0003); *Avicenna*, 1960 (E.2014.0598); *Jasper's Dilemma*, 1962 (E.2014.0607). Photography by Ronald Amstutz.
- 14 Installation view of *Frank Stella: A Retrospective* (Whitney Museum of American Art, October 30, 2015—February 7, 2016). From left to right: Frank Stella, *Lac Laronge IV*, 1969 (E.2015.0037); *The Fountain*, 1992 (2015.97a-c); *La penna di hu*, 1987-2009 (E.2015.0038); *The Grand Armada (IRS-6, IX)*, 1989 (E.2014.0664); *'At Sainte Luce!' [Hoango] [Q#1]*, 1998 (E.2015.0019); *K.81 combo (K.37 and K.43) large size*, 2009 (E.2015.0036); *Damascus Gate (Stretch Variation III)*, 1970 (E.2014.0600). Photography by Ronald Amstutz.
- 15 Victor Vasarely, 'Tinko-F' 1956–62, 145 x 145 cms, acrylic on canvas, Vasarely Collection, Szépművészeti Múzeum, Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest
- 15 Victor Vasarely, 'Gixeh' 1955–62, 170 x 160 cms, acrylic on canvas, Vasarely Collection, Szépművészeti Múzeum, Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest
- 17 Steven Parrino, untitled painting, 1995, approx. 90 x 90 x 25 cms., acrylic, gel medium and tape on canvas
- 18 Kerstin Brätsch, 'Unstable Talismanic Rendering 2 (with gratitude to master marbler Dirk Lange)' 2014, ink and solvent on paper, 274.3 x 182.9 cm, (KB 324)
- 19 Donald Moffett, 'The Incremental Commandments,' as installed at Stephen Friedman Gallery, London, October 20 - November 25, 2000, oil on linen, chairs, sound
- 20 J.J. Grandville, 'Le Louvre Des Marionettes' from *Un Autre Monde*, Paris: H. Fournier, 1844
- 21 J.J. Grandville, page 86, *Un Autre Monde*, Paris: H. Fournier, 1844
- 22 Robert Ryman, design for cover of Art-Rite, Issue No. Nine, Spring 1975, Art-Rite Publishing Company: New York
- 23 Michael Train, 'The Story of Calvin Stoller,' Art-Rite, Issue No. Nine, Spring 1975, Art-Rite Publishing Company: New York
- 24 Michael Train, 'The Story of Calvin Stoller' (detail), Art-Rite, Issue No. Nine, Spring 1975, Art-Rite Publishing Company: New York
- 25 Michael Krebber, *Chador 43*, 2000, acrylic, plastic sleeve, and xerox on canvas, 160 x 120 cms
- 26 Wes Wilson, silkscreen poster, 1966, 48 x 34 cms
- 27 Ben Van Meter, 'S.F. Trips Festival' [film still 1], 1966, video
- 28 François Morellet, *Random Distribution of 40,000 Squares Using the Odd and Even Numbers of a Telephone Directory, 50% Black 50% Night Blue*, 1961, Silkscreen ink and oil base on wood, 80 x 80 cm, unique piece, courtesy of the artist and Galerie Hervé Bize, Nancy © ADAGP, Paris 2016
- 29 Victor Vasarely, 'Woo' 1956–62, 200 x 105 cms, acrylic on canvas, Vasarely Collection, Szépművészeti Múzeum, Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest

30 Dennis Hopper (sequence in collaboration with Bruce Connor), 'Easy Rider' [film still], 1969

31 Barbet Schroeder, 'More' [film still], 1969

32 Donald Cammell and Nicholas Roeg, *Performance* [film still], 1970

33 Donald Moffett, Donald-Gold/Tunnel, 2003, video projection, oil and enamel on linen, 137 x 244 cms.

34 Donald Moffett-Gold/Landscape #2, 2003 video projection, oil and enamel on linen, 137 x 244 cms.