Ken Johnson is an art critic who lives in New York and writes for the arts pages of The New York Times, where he covers gallery and museum exhibits. He is the author of the book Are You Experienced?: How Psychedelic Consciousness Transformed Modern Art, which was published this past year by Prestel. We spoke about how psychedelics have influenced the traditional art forms of painting and sculpture.

David: What initially inspired you to write the book Are You Experienced?

Ken: I can’t pinpoint exactly what inspired the book, but several factors contributed. One is that I personally came of age during the peak years of the psychedelic revolution—from about 1965 to the early 70s. As a teenager I was fascinated by psychedelia and all that it seemed to promise aesthetically, philosophically, and spiritually. In this I was far from atypical, but it was not until years later—sometime in the late 80s, I think—that it occurred to me that perhaps psychedelia had something to do with some of the huge and wild changes that art underwent around the same time. My first idea was to ask artists themselves if psychedelics had influenced their art. But artists are not always the most reliable witnesses about their own work, so I thought the best approach would be to look at art itself for evidence.

The big question that eventually became clear to me was this: if the psychedelic revolution had not happened, would art today look different than it does? I was convinced that it would look a lot different. If I was right about that, and if, on the other hand, the influence of psychedelia has been inadequately addressed by academic art historians and critics, as I think has been the case, then the follow-up question becomes: How might the ways we think and talk about art of the past half century differ from the official version?

David: In your book you wrote that “in the 1960s some kind of awakening took place in art.” Can you explain what you mean by this, and how this “awakening” is still affecting the art world today?

Ken: There have been three so-called “Great Awakenings” in American history—periods when the populace was gripped by religious fervor,
awakened somehow to the Christian God. I think the psychedelic revolution was a similar awakening but not to God. It was more like an awakening to what the first and second century Gnostics thought of as Divine Mind. The new art that came out of the 60s had nothing to do with the progression of styles identified with Modernist art from Manet to Abstract Expressionism. The new frontier for art was and still is, I think, mind and consciousness, which psychedelia has revealed to be far more expansive, complex and variable than was previously ordinarily thought. No longer did it seem that consciousness had to adapt to a fixed state of affairs; mind came to seem the tail that wags the dog of reality.

David: How do you think that psychedelic drugs, and psychedelic culture, have influenced—and are influencing—how paintings and sculpture are created in the art world?

Ken: Painting and sculpture got more psychedelic in all kinds of ways—and not necessarily along the lines of conventional “psychedelic art.” Painters and sculptors have explored possibilities from hallucinatory illusion-making to the unvarnished display of found objects and raw materials. The idea that there must be one dominant style like Cubism or Abstract Expressionism went out of style, at least in part, I believe, because psychedelic consciousness, excited by all things great and small, is inherently non-hierarchical. Why should a three-inch piece of rope nailed to a museum wall by Richard Tuttle be any less compelling than a giant spiral of rusted steel by Richard Serra? Artists today need not identify with and work along the lines of some great tradition. Whatever it takes to put your own mind into play and to engage the minds of others is okay.

David: How do critics in the NYC art circles generally respond to the idea that a particular piece of art had been inspired by a psychedelic experience?

Ken: Critics will certainly take note if a given artwork exhibits formal or stylistic features similar to those conventionally identified with psychedelic art as a genre—day-glo colors, Op art effects, intricate patterning, and flowing shapes or hallucinogenic hyperrealism. But if the work was the literal by-product of an actual psychedelic experience, I, as a New York art critic myself, would consider that of secondary interest to the experience of the artwork itself. On the other hand, I think I would tend to find more significance and deeper meaning in whatever psychedelic dimension may be found in the work itself because I think that a psychedelic ethos runs through many superficially different kinds of art being made these days.

David: What kind of an effect do you think that psychedelics have on creativity and the imagination?

Ken: There’s no doubt that when on psychedelics many people feel more creative and imaginative—and, I think, they really are. Whether that leads to making more creative and imaginative artwork during or after a period of altered consciousness is not guaranteed. A bad artist on LSD is still a bad artist. So I’m agnostic about psychedelics and creativity.

David: How do you think that psychedelic drugs have influenced the way that art is viewed? (Are you familiar with the term “museum dose”?)

Ken: I’ve never heard that term, but it makes sense. What better way to enjoy visually extraordinary things in a quiet, cloistered environment? But the museum experience of a 19-year-old art student on LSD is not what art historians and critics generally are concerned with.

If by “viewed” you mean how art is talked and thought about—as opposed to how it is really experienced—I don’t know. There is a paranoid dimension in much of the theory that academics have indulged in over the decades since the 60s, for example in Michel Foucault’s idea that all people internalize the order of power that keeps them in place. I recently read Derrida’s Of Grammatology for the first time. It is very trippy. Jean Baudrillard’s writings about simulation and reality are hallucinatory. In the U.S., theory imported from Europe met up with the homegrown, paranoid radicalism of the hippie era, which still informs, I think, some important conversations going on in the art world.

Artists today need not identify with and work along the lines of some great tradition. Whatever it takes to put your own mind into play and to engage the minds of others is okay.
The perceptual and intuitive experience of art is harder to talk about, and in that respect, it seems to me that mainstream academic ways of talking about art have lagged behind what artists these days are doing. The prevailing vocabulary of art criticism, with its emphasis on conceptual and ideological analysis and its broader tendency to think compartmentally, is less well equipped to talk about the resonant ambiguities of metaphor and the psychology of the spiritual in art.

David: Why do you think that discussing the relationship between psychedelics and art is still a somewhat taboo subject?

Ken: Psychedelics bear the stigma of illegality and association with anti-social behavior. I don’t know that anyone takes seriously the idea of psychedelics as performance enhancers like steroids for athletes—I don’t—but there’s that, too. I’m not sure that the topic is taboo so much as that it has not been regarded as worth investigating. For most observers, psychedelia has been a minor blip on the sociological radar and has had little effect on art. There is a risk of embarrassment if you do take psychedelic culture seriously.

Since the 60s, psychedelia has been a popular culture with a low price of admission. Anyone could be a hippie; you didn’t need an advanced degree. A lot of stuff that seems hare-brained to someone with a Ph.D. in art history—astrology, neo-paganism, New Age spirituality, Jungian psychology, UFOs, Burning Man, the Mayan calendar and so on—must be on the table for anyone who does want to take psychedelia seriously as a socio-cultural force. Also, you’re not talking about high culture appropriating pieces of low culture for its own reasons but about high culture being inspired by and following the lead of popular culture. This is contrary to what the avant-garde is supposed to stand for; the avant-garde typically works to maintain critical distance between itself and popular culture. The question of psychedelic influence presents a problem that high art discourse has trouble getting its mind around.

David: What type of relationship do you see between art and altered states of consciousness in general?

Ken: The phrase “altered state” suggests a condition of mind that is somehow different from that of the norm, whatever it may be. Is “normal consciousness” universal? Or do norms vary in different communities and societies? I suspect the latter is more the case. Anyway, most people, it seems, are happy to conform to prevailing norms of consciousness and ideology in their part of the world. But modern artists are suspicious of norms and tend to regard them as repressive. So they try to make art that expresses, represents and communicates non-normal states. Along these lines, avant-garde art tends to be negative, to define itself by what it rejects, and much critical writing supports this characterization. Psychedelia adds something more positive: the idea that you can connect to Divine Mind through altered states. I doubt if many artists would say that in making art they are communing with Divine Mind. The best artists are pragmatic mystics and wary of overblown, ego-inflating claims. But I like to think that as a collective, cumulative enterprise, what art is doing is not just communing with Divine Mind but feeding it, giving it more intelligible form and making it more present in consciousness and the world.

David: Is there anything that we haven’t spoken about that you would like to add on this subject?

Ken: I guess that methods of mind-expansion have been influencing art since the beginning of human time. The period studied by my book is unique as far as I know in that it is the first time ever that radically consciousness-altering drugs were available to and consumed by millions in an industrial society. Why did this happen? Because, I think, psychedelia was an answer to the spiritual yearnings of a population that could no longer find solace in established religions and science. Psychedelia and Divine Mind are live, Gnostic myths that continue to inspire seekers of all kinds, artists included.

For the unabridged interview with Ken Johnson plus more interviews by David Jay Brown, visit www.mavericksinthemind.com.