

New Worlds and Ways of Seeing: Visionary Art After Postmodernism

By Neşe Lisa Şenol

Is there a tension regarding the presence and role of visionary art at MAPS conferences that otherwise focus on psychedelic science? I have heard concerns that the inclusion of visionary art could be a non sequitur that detracts attention and legitimacy from a controversial academic field—a nuisance at best, and at worst a liability. As an alternative to this view, I would like to propose one specific rationale for its inclusion and its relevance to MAPS' pioneering medical research: The time is ripe, I will argue, for visionary art to explode into the academic art scene, which would in turn provide an invigorated funding source for psychedelic research by circulating the cultural capital within the community. MAPS, in other words, has the potential to help popularize an art form that the academy is finally positioned to take seriously—and which will materially benefit all sides of the equation.

Although it has received remarkably little scholarly attention as yet, the rise of visionary art is a landmark event in the history of aesthetics and philosophy. It offers an alternative to the "postmodern" thinking that still preoccupies many scholars of the humanities across disciplines, despite a search for more practical alternatives. Notably, a Google Books search for "after postmodernism" produces over 8,500 results. Although a definition of postmodernism is difficult to pin down, due in part to an emphasis on difference and the rejection of the label by many of its own most influential thinkers. Postmodernism is often related to the absence of concrete perspectives and the ironic coexistence of symbols and time frames.

In the conventional version of art history, postmodernism emerged as a reaction to modernism's fascination with objective rationality, grand narratives, and universal principles. In place of these, postmodernism turned to cultural relativity and institutional critique. It opened the door for novel and minority perspectives. Truth became relative, and common foundations slipped away.

According to the editors of *After Postmodernism: An Introduction to Critical Realism*, "A buzzword which began as an emerging, radical critique became, by the 20th Century's end, a buzzword for fracture, eclecticism, political apathy and intellectual exhaustion...[A] new and different intellectual direction must come after postmodernism...because [it] is inadequate as an intellectual response to the times we live in."

Visionary art is a performative alternative to the outdated notion of a secular, ironic postmodernism that the academic art world still holds onto. "Performatism," a word coined by German scholar Raoul Eshelman in his book *Performatism, or the End of Postmodernism*, provides an alternative frame. In contrast to critiques and fractures, performative works create their own lineages and perspectives. Instead of disrupting the existing world, they create new worlds and ways of seeing: performances in and of context.

Visionary art is a performative approach to the conscious construction of a sustainable, aesthetically inspired worldview. In opposition to secular irony, the visionary art of Alex Grey, Amanda Sage, Michael Divine, Adam Scott Miller, Andrew Jones and others is spiritual, optimistic, and performative—which is to say it aims to do something, to introduce new symbolic frames and create ritualistic spaces wherein personal and collective identities can be consciously shaped and refashioned.

Performatism is a paradigm of identity without attachment. It is based on a principle of creative exploration of potential—possible worlds, ways of knowing, states of being, forms of communication and communion—without searching for a final resting point. Creative decisions are seen as probes for further possibilities, rather than as all-consuming limitations that close possibilities down.

Although visionary art and other affirmational performances have so far remained under the radar of academia and the high art marketplace, there are signs that the



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tides are turning. A few months ago, *New York Times* art critic Ken Johnson published a new book, *Are You Experienced?: How Psychedelic Consciousness Transformed Modern Art*. [Editor's Note: See David Jay Brown's interview with Ken Johnson in this issue.]

Johnson's argument is that the influence of psychedelics on art is more than a matter of what mind-altering substance a particular artist was on at a particular time. It was actually the much larger macro-level culture that tripped out in the '60s—many artists were inspired by psychedelics without ever having had personal experiences with psychedelic compounds.

Johnson's book is a monumental contribution to art history in that it "opens a field of inquiry that has lain inexplicably fallow for half a century." It demonstrates a psychedelic aspect of psychedelic art beyond the standard associations of fractal patterns and black light posters. But Johnson himself admits, at the end of his book, that postmodernism as a paradigm has likely seen its heyday—and that something new must arrive to fill its place.

The visionary artists promoted by MAPS fit the bill for a significantly novel paradigm—one where psychedelic-inspired visionary art is recognized for its aesthetic and historical importance. Johnson's book is an opening towards this possibility from within the mainstream, and the next step has not yet been taken. That next step is where we are now, and MAPS can only benefit from its early investments. •