“Electric Orange Paisley”

Mark Harris

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.” (James, ‘Tripping Down Under, “Tripping,” Charles Hayes, p162)

I’ve wondered why images that depicted or induced ecstatic states were stigmatized when compared to images generated by artists in a state of intoxication. What accounts, for example, for the gulf in estimation between Victor Vasarely’s discredited utopian vocabulary of disorientating optical images and Cy Twombly’s highly-valued De Menil paintings, so engrossed in their own patrician, rather kitsch materiality?


Where catalog and magazine tributes so routinely professionalize a practice, making it out as consistent and focused, the excess of day-to-day screw-ups and failures, the train wrecks of contemporary studio practice become a more pressing story to tell. [**slide Heilmann**] For example, the eccentricity of Mary Heilmann’s *The All Night Movie*, as it charts the links between personal drug use and compositional changes in her painting, [**slide Parrino 1**] or a disconcerting visit I remember making ten 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, [**slide Parrino 2**] and for the show I was curating offering me a piece he had pulled out of the trash that morning.

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? [**slide Marden**] —
“I think that day I was incredibly stoned. I like art. I like to look at it.” (Marden talking about a panel he was on at the Whitney).

"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."
"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." (Art-Rite/Painting, Spring 1975)

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 perfect stoned muteness and blank zone for transcendental meditation, successfully polluting the culture of New York painting through its hedonistic rigorlessness and anti-intellectualism. [**slide blank**]

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…" (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" (87) engages a lexicon of visual effects that may remind us of some contemporary painting [**slide Jim Lambie, David Burrows, Kristin Baker, and Katharina Grosse**].

In *Human All Too Human* Nietzsche imagines an uprooted subjectivity intoxicated by a world which 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. [**slide Moffett**] Such a definition might relate to the absorbing encounter one has with "The Incremental Commandments," an installation of paintings by Donald Moffett. Its set of highly-textured black paintings, of diminishing size, is accompanied by a soundtrack incorporating versions of Chic's "Le Freak," one of which is played on the organ of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine. [**slide blank**]

Nietzsche's drifting subject is given a narrative in "Hashish in Marseilles." In this most developed of his extensive hashish writings, Walter 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-eighteenth 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.

Materiality

"'*All colors take their rise from the snow—you must have regard for the colors.'…[Benjamin] turns to colors again uttering the work '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.'*" (Fritz Frankel: Protocol of April 18, 1931)

[**slide Grandville 1: fishing for humans with commodities as bait**]. 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. [**slide Grandville 2**]. Two other images from the book visualize a Louvre Salon where the paintings' verisimilitude is exagerratedly depicted by having their contents tumble out into the gallery. Grandville's text describes museum guards warning visitors not to get too close to the battle painting in case of injury. Opposite, birds fly through an open window to peck at the fruit protruding from a landscape painting. Grandville's illustrated paintings behave as commodities, not just reading the desires of their consumers, but practically assaulting them in the process. Their three-dimensionality anticipates texture's function as an advertisement for painting. As such, texture and other material properties implicate paintings in exactly that commercial endeavor from which artists claim those properties separate them. The emphasis on facture in late-twentieth-century abstraction inherits this ploy, couching its self-advertisment behind acclamations of expressiveness and authenticity.

Signature materiality in painting is something that obtrudes into the viewer's space (as the Grandville images exaggerate). [**slide CAM gestural paintings**] 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.

[**slide Reise/Ryman**] Barbara Reise's subtle writing on Robert Ryman (from 33 years ago, this month) suggests potential, however, for an erotic or 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." (Barbara Reise "Robert Ryman I & II", 1974). It's possible that the discipline of her intoxicated phenomenology was intended by Reise as a corrective to prevailing superficial aesthetic fascinations, similar to how Benjamin's hashish trances oppose his contemporaries' intoxications.

[**slide Ryman cover/Stoller photonovella**] A year after the Reise articles were published Ryman designed the sober cover for the Spring 1975 Art-Rite issue on painting which also featured a satyrical photo-novella about a once-famous, now washed-up alchoholic abstract-expressionist painter Calvin Stoller. Stoller's visitors discuss his desperate painterly gesture 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"—as well as having a go at the typically casual formalist conversations scattered throughout the same magazine.

[**slide blank**] In October 2005, Artforum ran three articles on Cologne artist/painter Michael Krebber. Daniel Birnbaum, John Kersey, 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." 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.

[**slide Krebber/Stoller**] And what of the resemblance between the main form in Krebber's work *Untitled* of 2002 (reproduced in the same Artforum) 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.

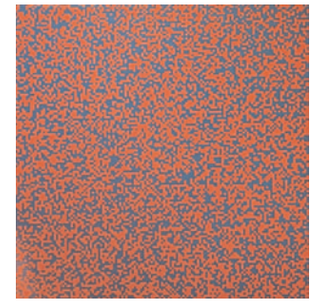
60s painting

[**slide Haight Ashbury posters 1**] *"The depth of the phenomenon was driven home when the peripheral areas of my vison 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 coudn't find the word.*

'It's electric orange paisley,' I stated, and he ageed 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." (Brendan, 'Pealing Faces', "Tripping," Charles Hayes, p76-7).

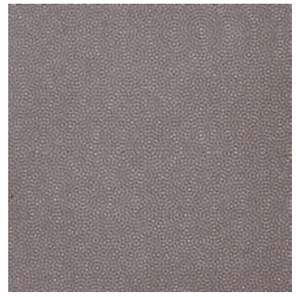
Psychedelic and optical art are detached from the familiar painting discourse that takes materiality and flatness as antitheses. [**slide Haight Ashbury posters 2**] Instead they consider the picture surface as transitory, as an appreciable two-dimensional visual phenomenon that represents, or catalyses, extraordinary physical and mental states that have no base in our everyday spatio-temporal experiences. The elastic letter and image forms at the edge of legibility enable the psychedelic graphics of the Haight-Ashbury posters from the late 60s to destabilize viewing. [**slide Fillmore East**] But clearly they also advertise the immersive experience of Fillmore East and Avalon Ballroom rock concerts with their psychedelic light shows, frequently enhanced by LSD. 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" far more effectively than has been achieved by other artefacts. [**slide Haight Ashbury posters 3**] Certainly the disorientating effects of barely legible typography, dazzling close-toned primary and secondary colors, with 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 (LSD and club environments) classifies them as ecstatic representations that dispute the value of an exclusively rational understanding of materiality.

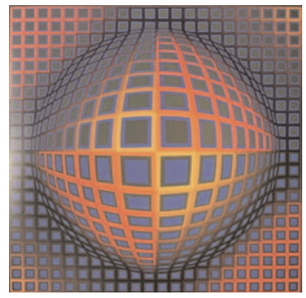
[**slide Haight Ashbury posters 4**] Criqui indicates a connection between Op Art and these psychedelic designs: "…[Victor] Moscovo's achievement was to appropriate the optical illusions developed by Vasarely, Yaacov Agam and Bridget Riley and redirect them into the realm of the hippie counterculture, radically shifting their intended aims along the way." Although the posters invite the same kind of immersive disorientation proposed by art like Vasarely's, they are transitional images linking optical excitement to hippie ideals of expanded awareness and cooperative living whereas Op Art bases its utopian aims of a dehierarchized aesthetic for all consumers on a self-abnegating formal rigor. [**slide Morellet 1**] François Morellet resisted association with the optical effects of Vasarely's work claiming instead a concrete facticity for his painstakingly constructed mathematical designs. His paintings though continue to destabilize the viewer's hold on their material properties and

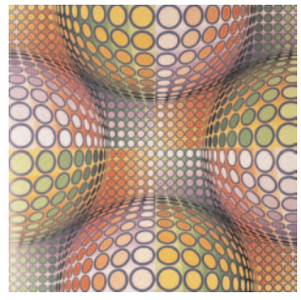


effect the kind of transition intended by the psychedelic posters. [**slide Morellet 2**] As Guy Brett explains: "In the Morellet, calulation and a forseeable system produces the improbable, ambiguous and unpredictable: perhaps one could say the hallucinatory." (*Force Fields*, p24). [**slide Vasarely 1**] Coming very close to hippie values, Vasarely argued that the visual language of optical effects that he and other artists were developing provided a universal aesthetic to engage the greater population in productive 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." (Studio International, February 1967). [**slide Vasarely 2**] Influenced by his Bauhaus education, Vasarely's geometry may have been based on a disciplined investigation into 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. The paintings resemble extreme hallucinatory distortions, where solid surfaces give way or bulge outward. These newly destabilizing images may reasonably be related to the increasing number of drug experiences recounted in the time when they were produced and as such would link Vasarely's formal experiments to a corrected recognition of communities as subcultures that are capable of generating specific, non-universal, utopian visual vocabularies. [**slide Vasarely 3**] 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 drug narratives [**slide Vasarely 4**]. 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: [**slide blank**] "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'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 hashish accounts of colors and might easily be applied to the experience of Haight-Ashbury posters: "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 colours of the world of pictures."

The utopian impulses within such uses of saturated color recall Fredric Jameson's celebration of Van Gogh's paintings as exemplifying particular modernist goals: "How is it, then, that in





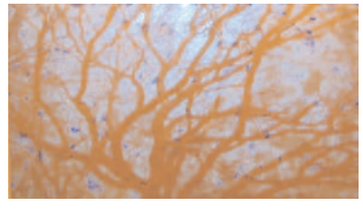


Van Gogh such things as apple trees explode into a hallucinatory surface of color, while his village stereotypes are suddenly and garishly overlaid with hues of red and green? I will…suggest…that the willed and violent transformation of a drab peasant object world into the most glorious materialization 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…". In varying intensities this act is encountered again and again, from Fourier, through Benjamin, Psychedelia, and Vasarely. But what does it resemble in the present?

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. (Kate Coleman 'Then the Emotions Started Happening,' "Tripping," Charles Hayes, p228-9)

[**slide Moffett 1**] Donald Moffett's 2003 *The Extravagant Vein* is a series of near-monochrome paintings onto which are projected video images of Central Park's The Rambles, for over a hundred years a popular location amongst gay men for meetings and sex. 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 can be hard to decifer. [**slide Moffett 2**] Photographs tend to overclarify the images. Their vari-colored underpainting is in each case covered by a haphazardly applied layer of copper and gold enamel. This textured metallic finish 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 shadowy sex around about 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, p158-9). [**slide Moffett 3**] As Moffet'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. [**slide Moffett 4**] 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.



[**slide Moffett 5**] Characteristic of Moffett's work, the material components of *The Extravagent Vein* exceed their purpose in articulating the theme and establishing a presence to the paintings. Their own extravagance recalls the exuberance of drug narratives as they account for their intoxicated glimpes of an overwhelming potentiality. The richness of these paintings is a call for richer experience. As he tries to account for the intense expenditure of the drug trance, Benjamin's calculatedly plangent coda to "Hashish in Marseilles" fits the Moffett paintings well: "[like] that squandering of our own existence that we know in love…[Nature] now throws us, without hoping or expecting anything, in ample handfuls toward existence." (Benjamin, 1999, [ii], 678)