

Interview with Adrian Piper

by Matteo Guarnaccia*

MG: The mainstream art world for a long time dismissed so-called "psychedelic art" as something frivolous and whimsical, another by-product of the sixties. Art critics did not like to compromise themselves with a mode of expression that was too out of control, destabilizing and radical for the official thought (and they also did not want to be seen as backing illegal acts). Is the "outing" about experiences with psychoactive substances made by successful artists like you a sign that the rehabilitation of "psychedelic art" is coming at last after more than 30 years?

AP: Your read on the status of this kind of work, and the art establishment's reaction to it, is very interesting. I agree with a lot of it. But I'd say "rehabilitation" may be too strong and positive a term. I'd describe it as "reconsideration," or "re-evaluation." I think a major obstacle in dealing with psychedelic art is that it was generated by substances that have the potential both for very, very great harm and also great benefit. It's hard to know how to deal with experiences that for some were very beautiful but for others were incredibly DANGEROUS. The problem is that if you even talk about it publicly, some people may misinterpret this as advocating an activity that cost many people their lives. Art Linkletter's son was only the most high-profile victim who died because he jumped out a window in the mistaken belief that he could fly. There were lots of people like that. At the time, the group of people I was involved with saw themselves as undertaking a serious and quite strict perceptual and cognitive investigation into the spiritual. We really didn't understand until much later how dangerous LSD, and other psychoactive drugs could be when not used in a controlled and careful environment, until some people took psychedelic trips and just never came back. I'm very, very lucky not to have ended up as a vegetable. I knew some individuals who did. I've heard of others who later bore children with severe birth defects that were systematically traced to the psychedelic chemicals they ingested in the '60s. But in those days we all had this really very infantile and very American belief that we were invulnerable, that nothing we did could harm us. The more we've learned, the harder it is to know how to deal with something that has such radical potentials for both good and evil.

But I think now there's another aspect to it as well. In recent years I've encountered so many individuals in positions of power now who watched the sixties from the sidelines: didn't march, didn't protest, didn't take drugs, didn't experiment with alternative lifestyles, didn't form consciousness-raising groups - nothing. There were many who had nothing to gain and everything to lose by questioning the status quo. It may be that the art establishment has ignored this kind of work because they just don't understand it - didn't understand it then and don't understand it now. In that way the art establishment's reaction to psychedelic art may be a lot like its reaction to political art: many of these people just can't relate on a gut level. Still, I wouldn't underestimate the number of art movements that have been influenced by those experiences. I see it all over.

MG: At the time of your "through the looking glass" experience you were a teenager. How did you come in contact with psychedelia? Was it something connected with the music scene (the first hidden messages via Beatles-Byrd songs) or the usual bohemia of Greenwich Village?

AP: I had always thought of myself as an artist, and by the early '60s, when I was starting to look at contemporary art, my self-identification as a bohemian/beatnik was very strong. I listened to Joan Baez and Bob Dylan, learned to play the guitar, let my hair grow, wore black fishnet stockings. Consciousness-expanding drug experiences came with the territory. That was way before the Beatles and the Byrds. I was influenced by the visionary/mystical tradition inherited by the Beat poets, especially Ginsberg and Kerouac, and by their interest in Eastern philosophy. Starting around 1962 I had this regular Sunday morning routine: I would bike from upper Riverside Drive down to Greenwich Village, have breakfast at the Café Figaro, read the Sunday New York Times, then bike home. At the Figaro I met an artist, a man who was a friend of Timothy Leary's and a Buddhist. He conducted group meditations and discussions that sometimes used LSD. Through him I met an academic at Columbia University who synthesized it. But uptown I also had artist friends who were involved with a spiritual medium who used it in seances and for personal meditation. So there were several sources. It was really hard to avoid if you were involved in any kind of creative or spiritual endeavor.

MG: LSD was still legal in 1965. Universities were looking for human guinea pigs, Timothy Leary was around in Millbrook, etc. Tell us something about the story behind the "Over the Edge" works.

AP: Actually none of them were done during psychedelic experiences, although they were influenced by what I learned during them. I only took LSD about six times over a period of six months - I stopped taking it when it stopped having an effect on my usual state of consciousness. But by that time I had discovered the texts that helped me make sense of the experiences I'd been having - *The Upanishads*, *The Bhagavad-Gita*, *The Yoga Sutras*, and was deep into meditation and yoga. The paintings are very much about what it was like for me to go beyond the surfaces of things - to concentrate so intently on the fine detail and structure of a meditational object - on any object, really, any perceptual reality - that all of its surface sensory qualities, its conventional meanings and uses, its psychological associations and conceptual significance, all begin to move, breath, vibrate, break up, and fall away. That's when you start to realize how much of "ordinary" reality is nothing more than a subjective mental construct. When the surfaces of perceptual reality start to hum and crack open to reveal what lies beyond them, that's where the deep insights live that are beyond words or concepts. I view all of my work from that period as signposts that point the way to a deeper reality that by definition can't be depicted or described. It was a tremendously fertile time for me. I was drawing, painting, reading, writing, listening to music constantly, and hanging out with people whose own productivity and seriousness about cognitive investigation inspired me.

MG: What do you think of the huge number of people who went "chasing the white rabbit" in that period?

AP: Almost all of the people I knew at that time who were experimenting with psychedelics were considerably older than me, and virtually all of them had absolutely traumatizing, earth-shattering, often very painful psychedelic experiences in which all of their assumptions about reality were rooted out, blown out of the water. I saw people being completely cut loose from their conventional moorings, from the orderly, 1950s conceptual schemes in which they'd been raised. I think many people got lost because the cognitive foundations of their lives had been shattered and they didn't know which way to turn, what to hang on to. Nonconformity, oppositionality, spontaneity, sheer silliness became ends in themselves because there were often no deeper values to replace the false

conventional ones that had been displaced. People got sidetracked into nonconformity and spontaneity then just as they get sidetracked into sex and power now. My own experiences were earth-shaking enough, but always positive and powerful - nowhere near as traumatizing as what those around me were going through. I think my youth protected me. Because I was too young to have many settled or rigid beliefs, it didn't feel so threatening to have them undermined.

MG: Do you feel that psychedelic experiences had a fall out in politics?

AP: Yes, definitely. It caused middle-class white kids to look critically at themselves, their values, and the society they had inherited. Those are the people who are now in their 50s and running the world, both on the right and on the left. There's a connection between the interest in eastern philosophy of the 1960s and New Age conceptions of health care now; between the Jesus Freaks of the 1960s and American Christian Fundamentalism now, between the Sexual Revolution of the 1960s and Feminism now, between countercultural communities of the 1960s and leftist, communitarian politics now; and between the organic food/back-to-the-land movements of the 1960s and the environmental movement now. All of those 1960s trends were influenced by psychedelics, and all of them are showing up in political forms now.

MG: Your interest in yoga dates from the same period. Can you tell me the difference and the similarities between these two ways of modifying one's state of consciousness?

AP: For most people yoga is a much less traumatizing, slower, gentler, safer way to achieve the same ultimate ends as many of us sought through psychedelics - insight into reality, wisdom, self-knowledge. In the West we think of yoga as hatha yoga - the physical postures. But actually hatha yoga is only one, very small and comparatively unimportant part of a complete yoga practice. The more advanced practices of yoga can be dangerous and psychologically traumatizing in much the same way psychedelics were, if practiced prematurely. It's also possible to do much the same kind of damage to the brain and central nervous system that psychedelics often did, by rushing too quickly into advanced yoga practices. But practicing the physical postures under the guidance of a trained and experienced teacher is a good place to start. And reading and rereading the ancient texts (for example, *The Yoga Sutras*) is a good way to keep track of progress made because each rereading yields up deeper and deeper meanings as one's total practice deepens. In general, the difference between using psychedelics and practicing yoga is the difference between kicking the door down and unlocking it gradually.

MG: Minimalism and psychedelia seem to be on perfectly opposite ends of the spectrum. What's your opinion? How can your "Over the Edge" period can be included in your artistic career?

AP: I don't see minimalism and psychedelia as opposed at all! Here's how the continuum looks to me: Realism depicts the objects of ordinary conventional reality; Impressionism depicts the perceptual qualities of those objects broken up into light and color; Pointillism depicts the perceptual and formal qualities of those objects broken up even further into color and minutely small forms; Psychedelia depicts the cracking open of all of those perceptual and formal qualities; Minimalism expresses the underlying geometric essences behind those objects and their qualities; Pop Art depicts those objects shorn of the conventional conceptual schemes that give them meaning; Conceptual Art expresses the breaking up and reconstitution of those conventional conceptual schemes and the objects

(and subjects) embedded in them. At least that's the continuum within which I'd place my own psychedelic work. For me the transition from psychedelic painting to Minimalism to Conceptual Art was a very straight road to walk.

MG: In your work the concern about the perceptions and stereotypes of reality that are transmitted through society is very strong. What's the difference between the way power "offers" us the blueprint of reality today and in the sixties?

AP: I think the blueprint of reality we're being offered now by the powers-that-be is of a piece with the blueprint we were offered then. It's just the tactics that are different, and much more effective. Then we were getting the message to shut up and fall into line because of the threat of communism. The murders of Emmet Till, Schwerner-Chaney-and-Goodman, John F. Kennedy, Medgar Evers, Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, Robert Kennedy, and the students at Kent State and Jackson State Universities who were murdered by the government - all these were the public examples of what would happen to anyone who spoke out. Now we're getting the message to shut up and fall into line because of the threat of terrorism and/or the Evil Empire of the month, and we're all being bullied and narcotized into submission by cutthroat corporate hiring practices and the American advertising, news and entertainment media, which is the most harmful and dangerous drug of all.

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