

## A Leap in the Dark

Peter Eleey

For many of us, the larger questions begged by the possibility of the paranormal are of such enormous consequence that we tend to ignore them. We may flirt with the idea of ghosts or spirits, but to embrace their existence we must admit the prospect of our own afterlives; in denying them we seem to confirm the finality of death—prospects either reassuring or dreadful. I, for one, find terror and hope on both sides of this coin, and prefer to remain, well, curious, if perhaps more on the skeptical side, but looking to be convinced one way or the other.

As an exhibition located in a vacant, haunted loft of works that purport to be in some way actively magical, *Strange Powers* provides viewers with three ways of interacting with both its venue and the art on display. We can believe in their power, deny it, or simply move on, leaving the question open. These are, of course, the options available to us each time we encounter a work of art, not simply that which may engage

the paranormal. Is the psychic healer in Euan Macdonald's *Healer*, for example, attempting to heal us through the camera and projector? If so, is the magic working? How can we tell? By honing in on a topic that by its nature defies the empirically verifiable, *Strange Powers* rehearses and reinforces some of the most basic—if broadest, and most ambitious—conceptions we hold of what art can be and do.

As the exhibition is concerned less with proof than with power and possibility, it can be said to fit with a handful of recent shows dealing with art that specifically evades or extends beyond visual intelligibility. Some have detailed early photographers' efforts to test the boundaries of the medium's mimetic proposition, as did *The Perfect Medium: Photography and the Occult*, shown last year in Paris and New York. Others, like *A Brief History of Invisible Art* in San Francisco last year, and *The Big Nothing* in Philadelphia two summers ago, revisited the strain of conceptual

art that tends toward the complete dematerialization of the art object, raising many of the epistemological issues implied by the artworks in *Strange Powers*—a kind of art that effects, through its insistence on a presence unburdened by visibility, a similar reinvigoration of art's transcendent values.

The effect of Macdonald's healer, for example, or of Douglas Gordon's contribution to the show, is not terribly dissimilar from that of something like Robert Barry's radio wave pieces from the 1960s (not included in the exhibition), which broadcasted invisible fields of electromagnetic energy in the gallery space. We are asked to take on faith the existence of key elements of each of these artworks, which happen to be all but impossible to visually discern. But it is the artists' emphasis on invisible energy, in fact, and the resulting solicitation of trust, that forms an inextricable part of the works' meanings. Reprising a piece from 1997 that he had done for a show organized in Los Angeles by Jonathan Monk and Toby Webster, Gordon sent a letter to me and co-curator Laura Hoptman instructing us to "do something evil." Monk and Webster had responded by painting a black heart on the gallery wall with paint they had cursed with

a spell "obtained," according to Monk, near Santa Monica Boulevard.<sup>1</sup> We decided to reprise this response alongside Gordon's request, but with as powerful a curse as we could find, painting a small rectangular area the same size as the framed letter on the old blue wall of the haunted exhibition space.<sup>2</sup>

The presence of James Lee Byars pervades a dark, otherwise empty space that contains the artist's ghost. First made in 1969 while the artist was still alive, *The Ghost of James Lee Byars* fills a room so dark as to make the presence of the now-dead artist practically tangible. Peter Coffin charges the space in front of the doorway to the Byars room with a new wall drawing based on what is sometimes known as the Egyptian Flower of Life, a pattern associated with auratic power that consists of interlocking circles. Coffin also alludes to the role of circles in conjuring with a performance for *Strange Powers* that is available upon request. When visitors inquire as to its location or form, gallery attendants draw a chalk circle around them on the wood floor of the exhibition space. Historically, drawing a circle is a way of summoning and concentrating magical energy; the circled individual is empowered to invoke or conjure spirits, or be protected from spirits he or she does not

want. Important to Coffin's concept is the idea that the process of drawing the circle itself is a magical act.

The issue of the transferability of transformative power is addressed by Paul Pfeiffer and Joachim Koester, whose pieces each seem at first blush to be *about* magic, rather than magical themselves. Pfeiffer's *Poltergeist (Spoon)*, (2001), is a re-creation of the utensil bent by the spirit in the movie of the same name. But as the artist explained to me, "I see a strong materialist aspect in matters that have to do with ghosts, the devil, etc.... in this sense [my sculptures of] the fork and spoon are not a thematization of ESP, they are an attempt to summon the devil him/herself." Koester's new *Magical Mirror of John Dee* (2006) is a photograph the artist took in the British Museum of the display case holding the black Aztec mirror that once belonged to John Dee (1527–1608), who was an adviser to Queen Elizabeth I and originated, with Edward Kelley, the practice of Enochian magic (a type of ceremonial magic based on the evocation and commanding of spirits, which Dee and Kelley claimed had been given to them directly by an angel.) Koester notes, "I see the mirror as an embodiment of a phenomena— a certain type of vision which almost

bypasses the eyes." His image locates itself in a fractured continuum of reflected (magical?) light, passing from Dee's mirror through his camera onto film and eventually to the photographic print.

Anne Collier's aura Polaroids are portraits of artist friends, literalizing one of the motivating ideas of this exhibition: that artists themselves exude magical force, and that their powers are worth considering, however pictured or otherwise suggested. In contrast to Collier's images, however, Miranda Lichtenstein offers a simple and visually uneventful record of a psychic in the midst of her activities. Prior to the show's installation, Lichtenstein brought Sondra Shaye, a psychic healer, to the exhibition space to "clear" its spiritual energy and harmonize the room. During her visit, Shaye said she felt a number of histories in the space, including a period when she believes it was used as a brothel. Like Macdonald's healer, Lichtenstein's offers no apparent evidence of her paranormal power. But hung in the exhibition, the documentation functions similarly to Byars's ghost or Gordon's cursed paint, directing our attention to the otherwise unremarkable space around us through its invocation of the room's invisible energy. In a space so charged, Mungo Thomson's group of black wind

chimes seems to register energies beyond the thermodynamic.

A number of works, however, specifically offer evidentiary support for magical thinking, however possibly unconvincing. In the eight videos that Artur Żmijewski shot of Pawel Althamer under the influence of various psychoactive substances or induced altered states—including LSD, mushrooms, peyote and hypnosis—we find ourselves in the space between the objectively sober Żmijewski and Althamer, waiting to witness a Carlos Castaneda-like moment of psychic transcendence. Implicit in these videos is the idea, already generally embraced, that an artwork can register the psychological state of its maker. In this way, Żmijewski and Althamer's videos recall the paintings Lee Lozano did while drunk, stoned, in love or depressed, or Francis Alj's *Narcotourismo* (1996), for which the artist conducted walks while high on heroin, cocaine, hashish and other drugs. But watching Althamer in real time, we try to discern what among his various behaviors may or may not be paranormal, in an investigation concurrent with his own.

Sophie Calle leads us on a similar "live" experiment in her video made with Fabio Balducci, which records

a test she conducted with a Parisian clairvoyant. Calle first approached the psychic, Maud Kristen, with the proposal that Kristen would try to discern Calle's future, and in turn, Calle would go wherever her future dictated. Kristen, as we learn in the video, tells Calle that she is only comfortable attempting to foresee "where and when" but not "what." The artist accepts these terms, and they conduct a test that delivers some very odd coincidences, seeming to confirm the feasibility of Calle's proposition to engage her future more actively. While waiting for something to happen, for example, Calle receives a text message from a friend who has the same last name as the town Kristen has sent her to. "It seems that the universe has accepted us," Kristen says at the video's conclusion. "I was waiting for signs of approval, so that we can continue.... I just wanted to watch the coincidences unfold before us."

Jonathan Monk provides a similarly active vehicle for us to consider the coincidental and its magical portent. Like Douglas Gordon, Jonathan Monk reprises a previous work, for which he sent a number of letters to the last known address of the late artist Alighiero Boetti (1940–1994), on Piazza San Apollonia in Rome, and awaited their return. As of this writing, only one of the current batch has come back as undeliverable,

leaving the imaginative possibility that the dead artist may yet be receiving his mail, or having it forwarded elsewhere. The desire elicited by Monk's empty frames, either for the letters' return or their successful delivery, elucidates the tension between skepticism and belief at the core of the exhibition. Hung in the vicinity of Byars's spirit, the missing letters conjure another artist's ghost, but with a kind of converse power, suggesting through their provision of a weak sort of evidence that our insistence upon empirical proof of the paranormal is missing the point.

Christian Cummings and Friedrich Jürgenson (1903–1987) both channel spirits of the dead, and contribute to *Strange Powers* records of these spirit communications. Cummings conducts séances during the exhibition's opening weekend that result in spirit drawings brought forth through his ouija board, pen and paper. (The drawing by Barnett Newman, the only artist of note to have appeared to Cummings thus far, is featured in the show.) When we approached Carl Michael von Hausswolff to participate in the exhibition, he offered us archival audio recordings from his friend Friedrich Jürgenson's Sweden-based Studio for Audioscopic Research. More than forty years ago, after Jürgenson heard

his deceased mother's voice through his tape recorder, he stopped painting and focused almost exclusively from the 1960s onwards on investigations of electronic voice phenomena (EVP). Towards the end of his life, he began lecturing about the possibilities of spirit communication through television. Shortly after Jürgenson died, he communicated through a medium with his family, telling them that he would try to appear to them through their television on the day of his funeral. The photograph in *Strange Powers* is a posthumous portrait, snapped from a television that day in 1987.

Among those works in the show that make claim to empirical substantiation, The Center for Tactical Magic's project *Vital Psigns* (2005) is the only one that presents visible evidence of our participation. In connection with a workshop they will conduct on telepathic communications between humans and plants, they have set up a thought experiment that attempts to show the effects of positive and negative thinking—an investigation into “the nature of consciousness and the consciousness of nature.” Viewers are invited to project positive or negative thoughts onto two different plants designated to receive them; a third plant acts as the “control” subject, onto which

we are to project nothing. The previous time the project was undertaken, the “negative” plant visibly weakened in the first week and died thereafter; the “positive” plant continued to grow and bore fruit, which the “control” did not. Nevertheless, magical thinking can be subversive without even the pretense of possibility, never mind evidence. One thinks of the October 1967 protest in Washington, for example, at which Abbie Hoffman and the Yippies proposed to levitate the Pentagon and to exorcise it of the evil spirits that were killing Americans and Vietnamese women and children—an exercise realized by Mungo Thomson in his drawing in this publication.

These kinds of propositions, like all art, demand to be taken at face value. We evaluate art positively or negatively or simply pass over it, but when we find in it a kind of ceremonial magic, it is because we allow ourselves to be sympathetic to artists’ efforts to conjure this force from quotidian materials variously unremarkable and often intangible, invisible or otherwise elusive. *Strange Powers* reinforces a supply-side aesthetics, an auratic economy in which the value of an artwork is weighted towards what it proposes, rather than its effect. But perhaps more precisely, it invites us to consider artworks whose

effects are sometimes so inseparable from their propositions as to seem subservient to them. Does our expectation of having something bump into us in Byars’s room conjure his ghost, or is it there already?

Faith, of course, exists and works in this way. What is more powerful: God, or our faith in God’s existence? William James, whose seminal essay “The Will to Believe” remains among the classic texts on the subject, examines skepticism and the need for empirical evidence with an eye towards *utility*. “As a rule,” he states, “we disbelieve all facts and theories for which we have no use.”<sup>3</sup> He wonders whether scientists would look upon telepathy more generously if they were shown something that they might *do* with it. In the exhibition’s building, a portrait of Federico García Lorca (1898–1936) appeared in chipped paint in the stairwell after a theatrical production relating to Lorca’s life was performed on the ground floor. Certainly this alleged spiritual presence, revealed to us by the building’s owners before they knew the nature of our exhibition, made the building interesting to us as a site for the show. But did the “functionality” of this supernatural event for our purposes make us more credulous?

Indeed, we seem to be more and more willing to find uses for the paranormal—a kind of practicality that,

to James's point, implies a certain level of acceptance. Are we more inclined to find Miranda Lichtenstein's document of Sondra Shaye powerful if we know that a leading New York realtor uses her to harmonize hard-to-sell apartments? Her employment depends upon the belief, if derived from mere coincidence, that her work helps the bottom line. At high levels of government, psychics have been engaged in various national security programs. Not long after the September 11 terrorist attacks, it was reported that the FBI and CIA were consulting mediums and "remote viewers" as part of the war on terror.<sup>4</sup> According to one former Justice Department lawyer who was aware of the government's consultation of psychics following the attacks, "the attorney general told us to think outside the box... This is definitely thinking outside the box."<sup>5</sup> The CIA's involvement with remote viewers is nothing new, however, and dates back to the Cold War as part of an operation called Stargate, the records of which were declassified just over two years ago. (Is it coincidental that John Dee, who consulted a magic mirror and crystal ball, is said to have coined the term "British Empire"? Or is there some connection between faith in the supernatural and the paranoia that attends unalloyed governmental power?)

William James points to the fear we have of being duped, our suspicion that it would be better to forgo belief than believe a lie. Does the apparent preponderance of believers these days suggest that we are worrying less about finding faith in falsehoods? As James notes, "our errors are surely not such awfully solemn things. In a world where we are so certain to incur them in spite of all our caution, a certain lightness of heart seems healthier than this excessive nervousness on their behalf."<sup>6</sup>

Notably, this fear of having one pulled over on us animates the broader history of contemporary art, and remains one of the legacies of Conceptual art. Robert Barry once described a piece that he said existed in his mind, below the level of consciousness. How do we know—or, more to the point, how does *he* know—that such a work even exists? Barry's piece comes into being by sheer virtue of its proposition, as do all of the works in *Strange Powers*. Like faith of any sort, this exhibition tests our willingness to find power in ideas whose physical presence can sometimes be scant or nonexistent. We can inure ourselves to the pleasures believing in their magical possibility, or ignore the very assertion of their power, but why should we? In this endeavor, there is no wrong

choice, no one who can prove to us that art *does not* have the power we may find in it. "In all important transactions of life we have to take a leap in the dark," James argued.<sup>7</sup> Art is one such transaction.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Left unclear in my conversations with Monk, however, are the specifics of the spell itself: what it consisted of, whether the curators purchased it or not, whether they themselves applied it to the paint can. Toby Webster could not be reached for comment; Douglas Gordon was not involved in the spell casting, nor aware of how it had been done. The only documentation of the 1997 work is believed to be in Webster's possession, but he could not locate it.

<sup>2</sup> More detail on our efforts to obtain and apply such a curse can be found in the Douglas Gordon section of this publication.

<sup>3</sup> William James, "The Will to Believe" (1896), *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*, New York, Dover Publications, 1956, p. 10.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Geoff Gray, "Psychic Ops," *New York Magazine*, January 21, 2002.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> James, p. 19.

<sup>7</sup> James, p. 31.



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**PUBLICATION CREDITS**

Writers and Curators:  
Laura Hoptman  
Peter Eleey

Publication Coordinators:  
Brendan Griffiths  
Maureen Sullivan

Publication Design:  
Willy Wong

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