

**"SUMMER OF LOVE" *artUS* , issue 21 December-January, 2008 pp. 54-55.**

### **Whitney Museum of American Art May 24 -September 16, 2007**

When I last reviewed in these pages CMA's "Optic Nerve," which revisits MoMA's 1965 "The Responsive Eye," it occurred to me just how much we tend to forget that all the while a revolutionary utopian spirit in art was afire on a global scale, the war in Vietnam was raging. While I was specifically addressing the vigor of Op art, as compared to its docile successors (minimalism and pop art), "Summer of Love: Art of the Psychedelic Era" sheds light on the real revolution underfoot, making Op art's replacements all the more out of place. Focused on countercultural happenings in London, New York, and San Francisco from 1965-1970, "Summer of Love" elucidates psychedelia's broad impact on painting, graphic design, immersive environments, alternative media, and architectural possibilities. A 1966 *Life* magazine article on "Psychedelic Art" described its adherents as wanting "to expand consciousness by bombarding the senses." Exuberant, ornamental, and excessively detailed, psychedelic art played the psychological counterpoint to seemingly systematic, geometric Op art's experiential aspirations. As this exhibition demonstrates, that era's artists were involved in all aspects of this countercultural revolution, yet art history still neglects its influential role, its momentum interrupted by the shocking deaths of Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin, and four Kent State University students, as well as the burgeoning conceptual art movement, galvanized by Kynaston McShine's "Information" at MoMA (all 1970), followed by the military's departure from Vietnam three years later.

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Most "Summer of Love" participants were born in the 1920s and '30s, just as artists featured in Max Bill's "Konkrete Kunst" (1960) or William Seitz's "The Responsive Eye" had been, so this changed attitude represented a dispositional shift more than a generational shift. To its credit, "Summer of Love" is the singularly best family show I've ever attended. Geared more toward children, "family" shows typically leave adults apathetic. This exhibition enabled young adults to witness stuff they'd only ever heard about (like LSD, "human be-ins," or The Joshua Light Show), afforded children strange psychedelic experiences, and escorted grandparents down memory lane, leaving the rest of us to sort out our formative years. Distinctly remembering the day my dad just had to stop (en route to the beach) to purchase Cream's *Disraeli Gears* (1967), I was ecstatic to see its presence alongside a score of memorable LP album covers. Although one twentysomething commented that this show offered little more than a really good second-hand music store, the hundreds of objects gathered here, borrowed mostly from obsessive collectors, far outweigh what you could ever find in one place, let alone a few dozen shops and museums. For most American art lovers, it was their first encounter with Archigram's inimitable architectural fantasies, Verner Panton's crawl-through portable lounge, or John McCracken's Eastern-inspired renderings, let alone the British fondness for hand-printed oversized posters, as compared to the American partiality toward commercially available offset lithography.

[ILLUSTRATIONS OMITTED]

While Op art considered its precursor early-twentieth-century constructivist art, "Summer of Love" participants admired an earlier sensibility, Art Nouveau's ornate, flowing,

sinuous patterns, finding particular inspiration in the 1966 Aubrey Beardsley show at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. The main question the present exhibition implicitly poses is whether sensory bombardments actually facilitate consciousness-expansion. While immersive environments, such as Gustav Metzger's six carousels projecting morphing liquid crystals, USCO's strobe rooms, Yayoi Kusama's free-standing mirror box, Thomas Wilfred's moving light installation, or Abdul Mati Klarwein's densely imagistic Plexiglas house, are beyond fascinating, they appear to overwhelm spectators' senses, coercing bodies into passive roles, and eventually shutting them down, rather than opening them up or actively engaging them. Recall Laura Mulvey's concerns in her 1975 "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" regarding visual pleasure's delusional capacity, cinema's mesmerizing and repressive tendencies. Nonetheless, that era's counterproductive fascination with dropping out cannot be a criticism of the very exhibition that celebrates such experiments, however questionable their outcomes. Still, one can't help but wonder which project actually expands consciousness: psychological trips or physiological experiences, especially since neuronal rewiring requires bodily movements, rather than mere sensory bombardment. Wouldn't it be ironic to discover that late-1960s sensory bombardments actually nurtured mind control? Doesn't the U.S. military blast super-loud heavy metal music before overtaking a compound? In contrast to the dynamic environments described above, La Monte Young and Marian Zazeela's *Music and Light Box* (1967-68) was either not working or underwhelming, since several of us took our shoes off, entered the room, moved about attempting to hear something, and exited, overpowered by that room's stinky-feet aroma. Nineteen documentary and artistic films complemented these installations, including Mark Boyle and Joan Hills' films of colored oil shot through filters, The Joshua Light Show films, and Kusama's *Self-Obliteration*, Jud Yalkut's super-artsy 1967 documentary of Kusama's polka-dot fests.

[ILLUSTRATIONS OMITTED]

Most of the wall works were what one would expect: paintings or objects by Isaac Abrams, Oyvind Fahlstrom, Richard Hamilton, Robert Indiana, Paul Jenkins, Peter Saul, Peter Sedgley. Two surprises included Jimi Hendrix's watercolor, *Flower Demon* (1966), and Adrian Piper's triptych, *Alice in Wonderland* (1966), which she painted as a teen, four years before her inclusion in MoMA's "Information." Cheekily titled *Contraband* (1969), Lynda Benglis's psychedelic latex paint pour was sprawled in one gallery, looking particularly vulnerable to foot traffic. It seems odd that only one sculptor fit the psychedelic bill. Where was Nam Jun Paik, who never forsook psychedelic art? In addition to 147 club posters (including 25 by Victor Moscoso and 22 by Wes Wilson), 21 LP album covers, 139 documentary photographs, there was plenty of ephemera: 15 books, 22 newspaper clippings, and 20 magazine articles culled entirely from the underground press (save *Time* and *Life* magazines). While the curators cite Aubrey Beardsley's exhibition as a stylistic influence, ICA's groundbreaking 1959 "Pop Independence" in London, itself an immersive exhibition, clearly paved the way for this artistic generation's changed disposition.

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