

Reviews

Art



Miranda Lichtenstein.
documentation of Sondra
Shaye clearing E 4th St

“Strange Powers”

★★★★★

Artists reveal mystic truths. Or do they?

Creative Time consults the spirits. By **Andrea K. Scott**

The paranormal is having a mainstream moment: The last Harry Potter book was the fastest-selling novel in history, and ghosts whisper on primetime TV. But when it comes to art, the occult is a tool best suited to subverting the status quo. In the '20s, Surrealists channeled psychic forces in automatic-writing experiments that paved the way for Pollock's once-radical drips. Art objects pulled a vanishing act in the '60s, when they “dematerialized” under the spell of Conceptualism. Figures as apparently unrelated as Barnett Newman and Joseph Beuys turned to mysticism (Kabbalah and shamanism, respectively) for inspiration. Yet even artists who invoke the unseen admit to some

uncertainty on the subject. In 1967, Bruce Nauman made a spiral neon sign that reads THE TRUE ARTIST HELPS THE WORLD BY REVEALING MYSTIC TRUTHS. But when an interviewer asked if he believed it, Nauman said, “I don't know; I think we should leave that open.”

A similar ambivalence pervades “Strange Powers,” an ambitious, if problematic show about the transformative power of art with an emphasis on the occult, curated by Laura Hoptman and Peter Eley for Creative Time. Installed on the second floor of an East Village tenement building that is rumored to be haunted, the show features 24 artists. Their methods range from inviting a clairvoyant to dictate their actions (Sophie Calle) and videotaping psychic healers (Miranda Lichtenstein and Euan Macdonald) to the classic psychonaut strategy of ingesting hallucinogens (Brion Gysin, and Pawel Althamer and Artur Zmijewski). Using a Ouija board,

Christian Cummings makes drawings in collaboration with dead artists (Paul Klee showed up at the opening). San Francisco's Center for Tactical Magic asks viewers to use ESP to help one plant thrive and another wither (the experiment appears to be working). And Douglas Gordon mailed the curators a letter bearing the words DO SOMETHING EVIL; but when Creative Time tried to hire someone to cast the words as a spell, no Wiccan, pagan or Satanist in the five boroughs would touch the job with a ten-foot wand, according to a wall label.

The problem isn't that the exhibition fails to prove its premise, but rather that the premise itself seems torn between the promise of empirical evidence and the (far more compelling) investigation of the metaphoric implications of magic. As Hoptman suggests in a short, lucid essay in the handsome pocket-sized catalog, artists' use of enchantment—the admission of

powers beyond reason or human control—can be seen as an antidote to the market-oriented solipsism of much recent art (what she dismisses as “glue and glitter souvenirs of privileged adolescence”). But a second, more significant problem emerges: For a show that aims to reclaim the art of fetishes and ritual, many of the works on view are less than visually engaging.

Notably, the most powerful piece in the show relies on sensory deprivation for its considerable impact. *The Ghost of James Lee Byars*, which Byars (who died in Cairo in 1997) conceived in 1969, is nothing but a dark room, separated from the main space by two sets of blackout curtains. But it is a very big

The most powerful piece in the show relies on sensory deprivation.

nothing: Once inside, a kind of ecstatic terror sets in that leads to a sense of the infinite. Byars had a lifelong obsession with Zen, and *The Ghost* is an eloquent expression of the koan “form is emptiness and emptiness is form.”

There are works here that deliver more conventional formal pleasures. Peter Coffin's wall drawing of intersecting circles rendered in rainbow-colored pencil conjures a hybrid of tantric meditation and Sol LeWitt. Taken at face value, Anne Collier's small-scale photographs of her friends' auras, shot at a Bay Area psychic shop, testify to artist's “strange powers”—John Baldessari glows blue and Thomas Hirschhorn beams yellow. But like Nauman's neon, Collier's project may also be a sly comment on grandiose expectations and magical thinking, a balancing act of faith and skepticism.

“Strange Powers” raises some interesting questions, but the fact remains: Artists don't need Ouija boards to summon the unseen forces that compel them to make art. As Picasso once put it, “Painting is stronger than I am. It makes me do what it wants.”

Creative Time's “Strange Powers” is on view through September 17. See Lower East Side.