

Metamorphoses and Transgressions

Pandora Syperek

Writing on fantastic literature, Tzvetan Todorov identifies an interchange that takes place between matter and meaning in which—in an almost animistic process—all elements of the world gain a high level of signification: “In this world, every object, every being means something.”¹ This state in which “everything corresponds to everything else” constitutes a pan-determinism where things that cannot be explained by natural laws are explained by the supernatural, and one thing determines another: “On the most abstract level, pan-determinism signifies that the limit between the physical and the mental, between matter and spirit, between word and thing, ceases to be impervious.”² In Ben Judd’s recent performances, videos and photographs an analogous cross-signification takes place, one in which spaces and scenarios are charged with heightened meaning, objects take on animistic import and the senses meld into synaesthesia and the *gesamtkunstwerk*. With origins in the historical supernatural—in particular of the Victorian era—these ‘phenomena’ hold surprising implications for modernism and its legacies.

Marginalised and Misunderstood

The mediation of spirit and matter present in Judd’s work invokes—and sometimes directly references—historical supernatural beliefs. A long-running theme in Judd’s work is that of the fringe community. In early videos, this included trainspotters, Morris dancers, amateur photography clubs and street preachers. More recently, Judd has turned to the occult, working with witches, psychics and shamans. This shift is natural, as the various groups share a status of marginality, whether united by preferred hobby or belief—or both. The clairvoyance class Judd attends in *Close To You*, 2008, feels as much a community support group as a scene for the paranormal to enfold. Shots of the community hall setting’s banal details, including perfunctory kitchenette and shabby notice board materialise the contradictory concept of teaching supernatural powers. Similarly, in videos made whilst

Judd was on residency in the Canadian Rocky Mountains, ‘readings’ of the site by a psychic and a



The Symbol, performance and single-channel video, 8:49 min, Banff, Canada, 2009



Close To You, performance and single-channel video, 19:02 min, Surrey, UK, 2008

shaman feel surprisingly pragmatic. These manifestations of the ordinary within the extraordinary constitute everyday transgressions.

The histories behind these practices position them as what Michel Foucault terms “subjugated knowledges”—fields deemed secondary on the epistemological hierarchy to the official “knowledges of erudition.”³ The Victorian supernatural bordered on official knowledge and scientific thought, though it ultimately remained at its margins. For more than a century, occultism has largely been viewed as anti-modern—a “symptom of regression in consciousness”, according to Theodor Adorno.⁴ Psychic phenomena and mesmerism, or animal magnetism, historically correspond to marginalised subjects, in particular women, servants, non-whites, colonised peoples and the mentally ill. These commonly pathologised others of Victorian society were often taken as subjects onto which to perform mesmerism, since, considered incomplete or unformed, and less civilised, they were deemed more susceptible not only to the suggestion of the mesmerist, but also to the psychic visions and spirit visits that might occur under trance. Hence, while the mesmerist, as penetrator of the soul, was normally a white European middle-class male, the clairvoyant—a medium, or conduit—was usually female.⁵

In 1882, the French neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot discredited the efficacy of animal magnetism, which was initially introduced in the late-eighteenth century by the German physician Franz Anton Mesmer as a medical treatment. Charcot suggested that if its results were not imaginary, they were only perceptible in hysterics and the mentally unfit.⁶ Yet, however marginalised and pathologised, such practices equally opened up possibilities for alternative hierarchies of mental states. Founded in London in 1882, the Society for Psychical Research—which lent institutional validity to supernatural belief systems—proclaimed that hysterics, the insane and other groups labelled degenerate, were in fact “progenerate” in their capacity for other mind states. Likewise, the Society celebrated dreams, altered states of mind and trances as “revealing glimpses of new evolutionary advances in the powers of the mind”.⁷ Such Darwinist rhetoric was used to promote an inverted model of the Victorian self.⁸

This flipped status of subjectivities and knowledge bases resonates with Judd’s treatment

of unconventional beliefs, from those of the ‘street Jesus’ to the psychic medium, the Pagan and the visionary. Such beliefs are exhibited and interpreted via the medium of video. Positioning himself as an intrigued sceptic, the artist does not place judgement on his subjects’ ideologies, whether positive or negative. Of course, there is the risk of ridicule or exploitation in working with vulnerable communities (on residency in Canada, concern over the ethics of Judd’s practice emerged among some artists and staff, in particular where his work touched on indigenous belief systems). However, overall Judd portrays his subjects with tremendous sympathy, while

avoiding sentimentality or glorification of the other.

The proverbial soul-stealing ability of the camera, analogous to the mesmeric penetration of consciousness, is countered by Judd’s self-inclusion in the work. Assuming the anthropological tradition of participant observation, which acknowledges the impossibility of

detached objectivity, he subverts the mechanical gaze of the camera as a visual prosthesis for the (white male) artist.⁹ *Close To You* documents Judd's own attempt at harnessing psychic powers under the guidance of clairvoyant Val Hood. His endeavours to conjure a spirit appear earnest, his position (and, as a result, the viewer's) left ambiguous. Similarly, after communing with a tree to garner a site history of the Banff Centre for Fine Arts, the shaman featured in *The Symbol*, 2009, offers the artist a 'lesson'. Judd's compromising position—tree-hugging in below-freezing weather (though he declines the invitation to remove his shoes), his beliefs, or lack thereof, put aside in the name of research—is the stuff of early-twentieth century anthropologists Franz Boas or Margaret Mead. That the practitioner of indigenous spirituality is of European descent suggests a double-appropriation: first by shaman, then by filmmaker. The video complicates slippery issues of colonised beliefs and representation of the other, while pointing toward discontent with the dominant culture's discourses of Enlightened thought and scientific reason as providing the inspiration for exoticising and atavistic belief systems.

Uncanny Mediations

Although the late-nineteenth century surge of interest in the occult appears antithetical against the period's backdrop of scientific empiricism, such phenomena were not necessarily viewed as incompatible.¹⁰ Some have argued that the turn to Spiritualism and psychical research was the result of religion's recently destabilised position in Victorian society, constituting an attempt to discredit scientific materialism.¹¹ However, these practices employed the same techniques as natural science, and were at the forefront of a number of new technologies. Modern occultism can be seen as "a founding of a rationalist Modernity fervently believing in progress".¹²

In addition to progressive politics—despite her eschewal of Western Enlightened culture, HP Blavatsky, co-founder of the Theosophical Society, promoted equality among people of all races and religions; spiritualists campaigned for female emancipation and the abolition of slavery—advances in technology were fundamental to occult movements and belief in the supernatural.¹³ The telephone's disembodied voices, rail travel's superhuman speeds, telegraphy's instant messages, the radio's invisible waves, electricity's eerie light, the phonograph's ghostly recordings and photography's impeccable facsimiles all created uncanny experiences for the Victorians.¹⁴ In particular, "physical phenomena escaping sensual perception"—telegraphs, radio, ether—"fuelled notions of communication with the supernatural".¹⁵ Many believed telepathy and clairvoyance to work much like wireless telegraphy, while spiritualists considered electricity or magnetism to be the basis for phenomena.¹⁶ Mervyn Heard writes that an image was constructed of the medium "as a sort of reluctant radio receiver" in reaction against the "old style of messianic necromancer" that had fallen out of fashion within the current climate of materialism.¹⁷ The new technologies seemed obvious tools for communicating with and recording paranormal activity.¹⁸

Photography was one of the prevailing methods for capturing the spirits. Inspired not only by photography's uncanny posthumous likenesses, but also by the newly discovered x-ray's imaging of the skeleton (normally only visible after death), spirit photographs even produced a similar aesthetic to x-rays, with their soft, pale, translucent apparitions.¹⁹ Judd's series of stereoscopic prints recalls Victorian attempts to capture paranormal phenomena on film, and the centrality of the media to this process.²⁰ Stereoscopy creates the impression of three-dimensional



Sequential Opposition, two stereoscopic c-type prints, 8 x 17 cm, Hastings, UK, 2006

depth by presenting two nearly identical but offset images separately to the left and right eye. Displayed with nineteenth century stereoscopic viewers, Judd's series shows a middle-aged blonde woman in a long dark dress among settings including a rocky beach, a garden and stone ruins. In most of the dual-images, objects such as stones and driftwood hover in mid-air before the woman; in one set, she appears to levitate. A certain eeriness, induced by the model's distinctive appearance and the banal tranquillity of the setting, pervades the images, so

that even those that lack evident supernatural activity still appear charged with some unexplained drama. Meanwhile, the stereoscopic effect, combined with the use of double exposure, exploits the camera's potential for the uncanny.

Judd's explorations into the supernatural and its mediation through technology go further in his collaboration with London-based Norwegian artist Sidsel Christensen, titled *Conversations With the Other Side*, 2009–2011. This series of performances saw one artist put the other under a trance, so that he or she may communicate that experience while being videoed and transmitted to the audience. The "other side" refers both to the spirit world one might enter in a trance state, as well as to the hypnotised artist's literal location behind a wall. This barrier, and

its transgression through video, is integral as it echoes the membrane between empirical experience and the unknown; furthermore, the projected image of the hidden artist is demonstrated as a phantom. As the other artist facilitates a conversation between the entranced and audience members, the performance takes on a spectacular quality comparable to Victorian phantasmagoria: he or she guides the projected image around the room, distorting its angles, and draws on and around it, interpreting his or her partner's described trance-scapes. Through these various layers of mediation, the artists create incertitude, not simply surrounding hypnosis and the spirits, but more to the point, regarding the artist's tools: the barriers between ritual and performance are broken down.

Considering the associated histories of mesmerism, Judd and Christensen's use of trance is relevant not only to the tradition of public spectacle, but also to the implicit power struggles. "Throughout its British career", writes Alison Winter, "mesmerism brought to the surface issues of power and authority that, however potent, were rarely acknowledged publicly."²¹ The mysterious spiritual activity revealed by the subjugation of consciousness was tantamount to civilisation's encrypted social dynamics. However, Winter argues, the idea that mesmerism was perceived as pseudoscientific is anachronistic, as the rigid confines of science were yet to be put in place; it was but one of many practices that lay the foundations for such distinctions: "Rather than occupying a different world from orthodox or legitimate intellectual work, animal magnetism called into question the very definition of legitimacy itself."²² *Conversations With the Other Side* revives questions of authority and legitimacy within a contemporary artistic



Conversations With the Other Side (in collaboration with Sidsel Christensen), performance and single-channel video, 1:09:27 min, KINOKINO, Sandnes, Norway, 2011

context, challenging its audience's assumptions about reality and its mediation, whether through consciousness or the camera lens.

From Ritual to Theatre

In the performance and resulting video *Observance*, 2009, the apparatus and audience of contemporary art are once again implicated in supernatural phenomena, this time by a Wiccan ritual staged in the Barbican Art Gallery. Enacted by a group of actors in consultation with two practising Wiccans, the performance functions as an intervention in the sanctioned space of fine art. As with the video of *The Symbols* tree whisperer, technology comes to mediate the interface between nature and spirit. Here, however, ritual is heavily coded with the dialectic between modern art and the (super)natural. The various stages of the ritual respond to individual artworks in the gallery that form Radical Nature, an exhibition of contemporary nature-based and environmental art. The foliage-heavy setting of the exhibition could not be more appropriate for

the nature religion's rite. At the same time, however, the earnest ceremony of the face-painted, flower-garlanded performers could not be more out of place than amid the cool clinical atmosphere of the art museum. As they cast circles around a grass mound by Hans Haacke and summon Pagan gods with bids of "hail and welcome" via tree-based sculptures by Anya Gallaccio and Simon Starling, a palpable sense of discomfiture is experienced on behalf of the secular institution. But while the dark arts seem wholly incongruous within the white cube, by conflating spiritual talismans with the charged objects of high art, *Observance* breaks down the secular/sacred binary that has been constructed within modernism.



Observance, performance and single-channel video, 22:34, Barbican Art Gallery, London, UK, 2009

In recent works Judd has absolved himself of the participant-observer dialectic altogether by authoring his own rituals. Following on his work with shamans, psychics and witches, these performances distil the language of ritual to examine the nature of belief and its trappings. The genesis of this work is in *I Will Heal You*, 2007, Judd's ambitious project undertaken on residency in Cali, Colombia, in which he created a religious movement with custom text, song, costume and architecture. Performances of the past few years extract and elaborate on such individual elements, further abstracting their character from any definitive belief systems and relating them to other, unexpected cultural outlets. For example, *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, 2011, staged at the Wassaic Festival in upstate New York, combined movements adapted from the Shakers religious sect with the atmosphere of a barn dance (complete with hay bales) and recitations of famous political rhetoric. *Mysterium*, 2011, a performance at London's James Taylor Gallery inspired by the Russian Symbolist composer Alexander Scriabin's eponymous unrealised opera, created synaesthetic experiences to explore the concept of the *gesamtkunstwerk*, or total work of art, and the mysticism of Theosophy, to which Scriabin subscribed.

Concerning the Difference Between the Delights of Pleasure and True Happiness, 2010, a performance at Swedenborg House, London, and its consequent video, unites the seemingly disparate concerns of modern materialism and transcendental spirituality in the figure of Emanuel



Concerning the Difference Between the Delights of Pleasure and True Happiness, performance and single-channel video, 38:30 min, Swedenborg House, London, UK

Swedenborg. In his work, the eighteenth century scientist and Christian mystic sought to unify matter and spirit. Eight performers interpreted Swedenborg's spiritual writings through recitation, song and movement. Embedded among the audience, arranged in a circular, séance-like format, the actors—distinguished only by white shirts—made themselves known one by one. Their gradually layered performance built up to a frenzied crescendo of visionary text, singing and instrumentation, their increasingly agitated actions accompanied by the swirling, colourful projections of a magic lantern, animated by the phantasmagoria specialist Mervyn Heard.

The magic lantern, whose history dates back at least to the seventeenth century, was the primary instrument of phantasmagoria, and was commonly used to create illusions of spirits, ghosts and demons. However, many nineteenth century magic lantern slides, including several used in Judd's performance, depict astronomical, geographical and zoological imagery that would have illustrated scientific lectures.²³ Once again, the technology draws attention to the historically blurred lines between occultism and empiricism, as does Swedenborg's text locating spirits on Mars and in his own foot and ear. After all, though phantasmagoria was intended to ridicule archaic belief in ghosts and subvert ghost-raising activity, it nevertheless resulted from and further fuelled fascination with the supernatural.²⁴ As the actors relay the visionary's unearthly experiences, the kaleidoscopic patterns that reflect onto them, combined with details such as the odours and gentle breezes of the spirits, contribute to the synaesthetic effect. This type of textuality characterises Judd's work. From the 'lyrics' of street preachers set to music in an early video to seminal political speeches and esoteric writings, rhetoric becomes a currency in and of itself, an object that finds its equivalent in song and movement—not only words, but sounds and gestures gain fluency.

In the recent performance *Ensemble*, 2013, which saw singers' arpeggios echoed by dancers' increasingly frenetic movements, such 'language' is thoroughly reduced to abstraction. As in Judd's other recent works, the performers' embeddedness in the audience creates an uncanny sense for the audience member, as if something otherworldly transpires among the alternately mundane or sanctioned space of the gallery. The performers, who regularly wear their own clothing, vary in age, gender, race, ethnicity and body type. This creates a sense of their being 'normal people' onto which something extraordinary has been projected, and consequently a levelling effect—apart from their actions, there is little to separate them from the audience. This consistent device points toward the ambiguous but important stage of liminality that takes place in the middle of a ritual, before a metamorphosis is achieved.

The subjects of Judd's work can themselves be seen as liminal—in between modernism and atavism, science and metaphysics. The Victorian era saw the "simultaneous spiritualisation of science and 'scientification' of Spiritualism".²⁵ By the start of the twentieth century, mesmerism and psychical research had been absorbed into physiology and psychoanalysis. However, artists including early abstractionists and the Surrealists soon developed a fascination with such phenomena, explored, for example, in the practice of automatic writing and drawing. Carl Jung believed

automatism tapped into universal consciousness and spurred the act of artistic creation.²⁶ The veritable fluidity of art and mysticism has provided a running thread throughout modern cultural history into which Judd's work taps. Despite his professed atheism, Judd's regular lectures, performances and screenings in forums such as Swedenborg House and the Pagan Society suggest an earnest interest in involving himself beyond the elite, primarily secular confines of the contemporary art world. Moreover, they point toward longstanding linkages in modernity between art, science and the supernatural that have been fundamental to the development of each of these fields, despite modernist myths that suggest otherwise.

Endnotes

- 1 Todorov, Tzvetan, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, Richard Howard, trans., New York: Cornell University Press, 1975, p. 113.
- 2 Todorov, *The Fantastic*, p. 113. The first quote is from Gérard de Nerval, *Aurélia*.
- 3 Quoted in Lockhurst, Roger, "Knowledge, Belief and the Supernatural at the Imperial Margin", *The Victorian Supernatural*, Nicola Bown et al., eds., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004, p. 199.
- 4 Adorno, Theodor, "Theses Against Occultism", 1951, quoted in Dichter, Claudia et al., "The Medium as Artist," *The Message: Art and Occultism*, exh. cat., Claudia Dichter et al., eds, Cologne: Walther Koenig, 2007, p. 163.
- 5 Winter, Alison, *Mesmerized: Powers of Mind in Victorian Britain*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago, 1998, p. 2.
- 6 Lockhurst, Roger, "Trance-Gothic, 1882-1897", *Victorian Gothic: Literary and Cultural Manifestations in the Nineteenth Century*, Ruth Robbins and Julian Wolfreys, eds., Houndmills, Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave, 2000, p. 148.
- 7 Lockhurst, "Trance-Gothic", p. 153.
- 8 Lockhurst, "Trance-Gothic", p. 153.
- 9 Judd's earlier video *I Love*, 2003, does this explicitly by turning the camera back on an amateur photography club. The artist's lingering shots and obsessive voiceover provide scopophilic scrutiny of the actions and physiognomy of the all-male membership, mirroring the men's lascivious attention to their chosen 'artistic' subject matter of female glamour models.
- 10 Noakes, Richard, "Spiritualism, Science and the Supernatural in mid-Victorian Britain", *The Victorian Supernatural*, p. 24.
- 11 Oppenheim, Janet, *The Other World: Spiritualism and Psychical Research in England, 1850-1914*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985, p. 1.
- 12 Dichter et al., "The Medium as Artist", p. 164.
- 13 Dichter et al., "The Medium as Artist", p. 164.
- 14 Bown et al., "Introduction", *The Victorian Supernatural*, p. 1.
- 15 Dichter et al., "The Medium as Artist", p. 164.
- 16 Harvey, John, *Photography and Spirit*, London: Reaktion, 2007, p. 70.
- 17 Heard, Mervyn, *Phantasmagoria: The Secret Life of the Magic Lantern*, Hastings, UK: The Projection Box, 2006, pp. 221, 219.
- 18 Dichter et al. propose stenography, photography and phonograph recordings' "fascinating attempts to lend aesthetic expression to the intangible" as artworks in their own right, "The Medium as Artist", pp. 164-165.
- 19 Harvey, *Photography and Spirit*, p. 74.
- 20 'Ghost stereos' were also produced in scores in the late-nineteenth century, Heard, *Phantasmagoria*, p. 240.
- 21 Winter, *Mesmerized*, p. 7. It should be noted that *Conversations with the Other Side* maintains the Victorian gender dynamic in that in most versions of the performance, and in the definitive video, Judd acts as mesmerist while Christensen undergoes the trance.
- 22 Winter, *Mesmerized*, p. 5.
- 23 For the various uses of the magic lantern, including scientific and educational ones, see Richard Crangle et al., eds., *Realms of Light: Uses and Perceptions of the Magic Lantern from the 17th to the 21st Century*, London: Magic Lantern Society, 2005.
- 24 Heard, *Phantasmagoria*, p. 219.
- 25 Harvey, *Photography and Spirit*, p. 70.
- 26 Gorsen, Peter, "The Entrance of Mediumism into the History of Art. Inexplicability—the Surrealist Key", *The Message: Art and Occultism*, exh. cat., Claudia Dichter et al., eds., Cologne: Walther Koenig, 2007, p. 171.