

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

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NEW YORK

Dude, You've Gotta See This
Charles Ray's minimalist
installations are as mind-blowing as
any hallucinogen.

BY JERRY SALTZ



*In Ray's Ink Line, now at
Matthew Marks, black fluid flows
from ceiling to floor.*

THE NEW YORK TIMES art critic Ken Johnson is writing a book saying that “psychedelic drugs and psychedelic culture have had a deeper, less obvious influence on the art of the past 60 years than has generally been acknowledged.” Johnson doesn’t mean that the intermingling of art and drugs is new; they’ve probably been canoodling as long as both have been around. And his idea isn’t about artists who actually use drugs. Sober-looking work is made by stoners and addled-looking art is made by teetotalers. Van Eyck’s hyperreal paintings are among the most hallucinogenic works

ever made. In some ways, all art is a hallucination. Johnson's idea has to do with the widespread availability and use of psychedelic drugs and the increasingly common understanding of their effects.

This notion has been around for a while. Five years ago, I wrote about a wily show called "Drunk vs. Stoned," which postulated that "stoned art" is introspective, hypersensitive, detail-oriented, and prone to surprise, spirals, and repetition, while drunk art is outward-looking, impulsive, romantic, and unafraid of messiness and sloppy emotions. Under these criteria, Expressionism is drunk; Pop is stoned. Pollock, Rauschenberg, and Nan Goldin are drunk; Warhol, Johns, and Cindy Sherman are stoned. Johnson's lens provides an interesting alternative to teleological-stylistic versions of art history. It is experiential rather than detached. Look at John Chamberlain's crushed-car-part sculptures this way, and you don't see commentary on consumerism and waste, or formal arrangements of color and line; you see exoskeletal creatures of folded space. Pipilotti Rist's burning color becomes the morphing of alternative universes, and Matthew Barney's crawling through Vaseline makes the malleability of space palpable.

The three Charles Ray installations at Matthew Marks right now, all brilliant examples of post-minimalist/conceptual sculpture, each created in the late eighties and new to New York, rattled my perceptions, jangled my faculties, and made me go "Wow!" They exemplify a drug-added view of the world. Ray's sculptures, part of a long tradition of minimal installations, are also forerunners to much of the theatrical Festivalism of recent times (e.g., Maurizio Cattelan and Olafur Eliasson). Each piece is nearly invisible and formally economical. Yet each is outrageously labor-intensive. *Ink Line*, the best and showiest of the three works, is a sculpture/drawing/fountain consisting of a stream of jet-black ink pouring from a dime-size hole in the ceiling into a dime-size hole in the floor. Initially *Ink Line* looks like a strand of yarn strung the height of the gallery, a pulsating Fred Sandback sculpture, a free-floating Barnett Newman zip, or a disembodied Sol LeWitt. Get close and you'll realize the line is liquid, glimmering, the consistency of syrup, moving fairly fast, fluctuating slightly, and thinner at the bottom than at the top. The ink forms a weird climatological aura around itself, slightly changing the humidity of the room. I was blown away when I was allowed to see the elaborate apparatus that makes

this simple effect possible. There was a large, noisy electric motor in the showroom beneath this gallery, all sorts of wiring, and plastic tubes that go under the floor, behind the wall, and above the ceiling. A gallery assistant arrives two hours early each day to drain the ink, "de-gas" it (!?), heat it with lamps to between 90 and 95 degrees, and put it back into the system. Anyone who looks at *Ink Line* can figure out how it works—yet the piece is as much a phenomenological event and a mystery as it is a work of formalist sculpture.

Spinning Spot is a circular section of floor, 24 inches in diameter, spinning at $33\frac{1}{3}$ revolutions per minute. Never mind that the section weighs more than a quarter-ton, is more than a foot thick, and is supported from beneath by a huge motor strapped to the basement ceiling. The effect is mesmerizing. Sometimes the spot seems to be standing still and the room to be moving, other times the room disappears and all you can see is the spot. Meanwhile, the third piece, *Moving Wire*, is a thin gleaming steel wire whose ends poke out through a wall into space. Get close and you see the two halves slowly changing length, one wire shortening as the other gets longer, then appearing to reverse.

Since the birth of the avant-garde in the mid-nineteenth century, art history has been considered mainly in formal ways: What led to what, who begat whom. That approach has a way of shutting out a basic idea—namely, the visionary, shamanic inexplicability of most of what we see. Johnson's idea brings such an escape from reason back into the discussion, and could relegate some major art to the margins and move marginal (and questionable) things to the center. Keeping psychedelia in mind as you look at art stops it from being just a building block or part of a stylistic family; it allows recent work to regain some of the value that art has had over its 50,000-year history.

All three of Ray's pieces, especially *Ink Line* (which some New York museum should buy and install, pronto) and *Spinning Spot*, are more than Merry Prankster sight gags. Each makes you ultra-aware of spaces outside the one you're in, of rooms above and below you, the things that make these rooms and effects possible, and how your own body relates to all of this. They put you back in the realm of the unknown, of double vision and oddity. In addition to making me imagine the gallery was moving, blurring around the edges, turning liquid, spinning, being sucked into itself, and sprouting shiny metal tentacles, each is a total trip. ■