On The Validity of Illusion (and its Attractions)

by
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Abstract

A material aesthetic practice of making objects, works on paper, and performance; a mystically tinged exploration of lived experience; and a path of theoretical research are synthesized through the co-ordinating “Now” of the camera lens. The resulting 31 minute, 2 channel video confronts a mystery. A spiritual teacher appears, internet-style, on a monitor and a contemporary artist runs aesthetic tests. These tests include the presentation of objects and colored materials and the staging of scenarios all within a system of reflective surfaces. Driven by fascination and a sense of play, the video shifts between the totality of illusion and the clues of its ruse. As with the techniques of trompe L’oeil, a gap opens, between belief and knowledge—an open space of inquiry.

Keywords: video; performance; Romanticism; trompe l’oeil; panpsychism; New Age
Dedication

For my parents: Joy and Keith Edmeades who passed on the raw materials.

For my sister: Fiona Edmeades with whom I was busy making stuff right from the start.
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Figure 1    Studio during the shooting process
Thesis Project Statement

On the Validity of Illusion (and Its Attractions)

Introduction, The Project

One could think of On The Validity of Illusion (and Its Attractions) as an empirical machine that chews zealously and exhaustively on mystery. It comprises a material aesthetic practice that includes making objects, works on paper, performance and video; a mystically tinged exploration of lived experience; and a path of theoretical research—all mobilized in the space of the studio-turned-film-set by the co-ordinating “Now” of the camera lens. This “Now” approximates the “Now” of Thomas Metzinger, a materialist philosopher of mind who works in close association with neuroscientists. As Metzinger points out, “a complete description of the physical universe will have no information about what time is ’now’.” The “now” is in fact, a simulation created by the brain as a tool for the access of pertinent information.

This empirical machine enthusiastically embraces several such hallucinations—including color, and the fact of conscious experience itself—through the deliberate and consistent staging of optical trickery. I will discuss this strategy in relation to trompe l’oeil and how the psychoanalytic conception of trompe l’oeil as it relates to film may counter social ideology through the purposeful disruption of narrative continuity and identification. I will consider how the use of trompe l’oeil supports Walter Benjamin’s “theory of experience” and how Benjamin’s particular recommendations resonate with those of the German Romantics of the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Then, via Object Oriented


Philosopher Graham Harman, how the pursuit of Benjamin’s theory may lead to an idea of panpsychism. Lastly, I will outline a trajectory in the history of performance art—in which my project is firmly grounded—that can be seen to support this theoretical line of inquiry.

In the video, a spiritual teacher of sorts appears—internet-style—on a monitor, preaching along the lines of Walter Benjamin’s “theory of experience” (as I will explain). Her image on the monitor is further mediated by the fact that she appears as a two-dimensional graphic animation. Her character can be thought of as a re-incarnation from nineteenth century New England—a transcendentalist of sorts. In a general way she also pays homage to politically and economically deprived historical female characters, both literary and real, whose only outlets for their tremendous energies were spiritual or philanthropic pedagogy. As part of her method for the escape from the oppressive effects of a prescriptive identity, she advocates her invention of reverse method acting. Method acting is a technique that draws on sense memory as the engine for the creation of a believable character or scenario. Reverse method acting on the other hand is technique invented by the fictional space of this video. It is where the practitioner’s identity as a character, defined by various imposed narratives, is recognized as belief. In the momentary space that opens, the sensory experience that animated the belief is foregrounded. Here the practitioner may either generate alternate interpretations of the sensory experience (possibly leading to different beliefs about the self) or may linger as the space itself.

The teacher’s double, a contemporary artist, dressed in a girlishly playful gauzy skirt and leopard skin tights is her audience. The artist runs aesthetic tests: books and their pictorial contents, colored materials and constructed objects are presented to the lens via mirrors and other fluid reflective surfaces. Through a mimetic process involving eye contact, some of the objects become quasi-subjects and acquire the functions of listening, looking, experiencing and speaking and replace the artist as audience for the

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4 For example: The character of Dorothea in George Elliot’s *Middlemarch* or Mary Baker Eddy, the founder of the Christian Science religious movement.
teacher. At other times they double up as instruments that chart and probe this mysteri-
ously exhibited subjectivity.

Color is used throughout as the marker of subjective experience—neither of which, according to a strictly materialist point of view, can be proven to actually exist.\(^5\) More specifically, the palette consists of Goethe’s six fundamental colors which he de-

rived from his exhaustive (and highly subjective) study of color,\(^6\) and which are distinct

from Newton’s more famous seven “objective” primary colors.

The mediating reflective surfaces through which almost everything appears in the

video are manipulated for the purposeful construction of illusion: paradoxical unities,

abysses, distortions and strange animation of scenes, objects and images. The effects

are created pro-filmically and performatively. The process serves to feed a fascination or
curiosity that occurs on this side of the lens. This fascination feeds on the exchange be-
tween the familiar and the unfamiliar in the image being viewed. The camera (AKA me),
is chasing a sense of not being able to believe its eyes as it watches and records. It is
fascinated by the fact of its own deception. Crucial to the work is the fact these effects
are happening in front of the camera, in the co-ordinating “Now” of the present mo-

ment—as opposed to belatedly in post production.\(^7\)

**Trompe l’oeil and Walter Benjamin’s “Theory of Experience”**

The mechanism at play relates to the psychoanalytic conception of trompe l’oeil.

Trompe l’oeil deceives you precisely for the purpose of revealing to you that you’ve been
deceived, thus creating an epiphany of sorts. Belief and knowledge are staggered in

such a way that their non-coincidence is obvious and one is suspended in the gap that
opens between them. This concept when applied to film contrasts with the dominant

practices of classical narrative cinema, in which every effort is made to conflate

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\(^7\) Except for the image of the teacher appearing on the monitor within the video that is rendered
through a graphic effect.
knowledge and belief in order to fortify narrative continuity and identification. The deliber-erate separation of belief and knowledge on the other hand—like the kind staged with trompe l’oeil—disrupts identification and may lead to the uncanny experience of glimpsing what Walter Benjamin might call a “prehistoric self”.

Benjamin’s “theory of experience”, as painstakingly constructed by Miriam Hansen, is specifically in relation to the medium of cinema. It concerns what he saw as an increasing impoverishment of experience due to an increasing technological re-organization of perception. In particular Benjamin is concerned with the potential loss of the capacity for what he calls auratic experience. This rather enigmatic notion seems to relate to an impersonalized sense of subjectivity, or an intersubjectivity connected with the spatio-temporal phenomenology of the gaze, particularly in relation to nature. This gaze requires a distracted kind of attentiveness and is connected with the capacity for reciprocity. As Hansen points out: Benjamin evokes “above all the romantic metaphor of nature looking back”. This returned gaze however, “does not mirror the subject in its present conscious identity, but confronts us with another self never seen before in a waking state.” The significance of this for Benjamin is that this epiphany is a “prehistoric” moment that is outside of historical time and the self we are confronted with is therefore outside of an already interpreted identity. Hansen also links this moment to the Messianic “Jetztzeit”, which literally means “Now Time”.

In his relating of experience to cinema and his concerns for the recovery or preservation of the capacity for auratic experience, Benjamin looked to the avant-garde of the ‘20s—the Dadaists and Surrealists. In their critique of cinematic strategies of identi-fication and narrative continuity in the service of ideology, these artists emulated what Tom Gunning has since called “the cinema of attractions”. This cinema, from before 1906 (as in the films of Méliès) solicited the viewer more directly. It foregrounded the illusory nature of film and used it to fascinate the viewer with its magical ability to trick.

8 Hansen, “Benjamin, Cinema and Experience,” 179.
9 ibid., 188.
10 ibid.
Screen actors from this period would also periodically glance at the camera, fostering a complicity in illusion on the part of both actor and viewer. Slapstick, a form of action self-consciously performed for a viewer, was used to similar effect. For Benjamin, films like these could be used in an almost therapeutic manner along with practices of Flâneurist walking, psychoanalytic sessions, surrealist séances and drug experiments—to shock the human body into moments of recognition by activating layers of unconscious memory buried in the structures of ideologically reified subjectivity.

**Romanticism**

This technique of trompe l’oeil, the staggering of knowledge and belief to create a gap, or my deliberate courting of illusion may also relate to the technique of defamiliarization—or as Novalis put it “romanticizing”\(^\text{12}\) — that the German Romantics of the late 18th and early 19th Century proposed in order to become re-enchanted with the world in the face of the newly unfolding “Age of Reason”.

Benjamin’s explicit linking of aesthetic practice with other experiential procedures—to which we could add meditation, or as Metzinger advocates for the study of consciousness, a practice of lucid dreaming—also recalls the Romantics’ philosophical methods of the late 18th and early 19th century. The Romantics were responding among others to Kant who argued that we can only know the world through a representation that we create in the mind consisting of pre-existing categories. The world or the “thing-in-itself” can never be fully grasped. This philosophical critique of rationality, taking place in the aftermath of the French Revolution, forced the realization of the limits of human reason and amounted to an intellectual and moral crisis that demanded new ways of understanding.\(^\text{13}\) Hence the Romantics insisted on a pursuit of truth that included what cannot be known. Their approach was cross-disciplinary and tended toward a synthesis of speculation and exact knowledge, intuition and experimentation, science and art.

\(^{12}\) Novalis, "Logological Fragments 1" *Novalis Philosophical Writings*, trans. Margaret Mahony Stoljar (State University of New York Press, 1997).

My methodology for this project is thus decidedly Romantic. The video references the Romantics through its use of Goethe’s color studies, and the showing of paintings and diagrams by artists like Caspar David Friedrich (1774–1840) and Philipp Otto Runge (1777–1810) among others. It also indirectly references the movement through the character of the spiritual teacher, who—as a quasi-transcendentalist—is, according to cultural theorist Eve Sedgwick, not only an heir to the European Romantics but a forerunner of another quintessentially North American Movement that the video evokes—the “New Age”.14

**Toward Panpsychism**

I draw on a more contemporary influence, from the ranks of contested Object Oriented Philosophy: Graham Harman. Harman’s objects (which may include a human, a rock, a stadium full of people, an electron) are neither reduced to their component parts (“undermined”) as from a reductive materialist point of view, nor determined primarily contextually as with a more post-structuralist approach (“overmined”). Instead they “emerge from their components while withdrawing from all direct access”.15 According to Harman, objects seduce us with their allure and we may only approach them indirectly through allusion. In the same way that magic tricks are ruined if you explain them, or wine and food criticism works through innuendo rather than declaration, so a philosophical approach needs to be oblique. He reminds us that the original meaning of the word philosophia was “love of wisdom” making no claim be an actual wisdom and states therefore that “The real is something that cannot be known, only loved”.16 This “love” resonates with the Romantic longing that could never be satisfied because although one pursued truth, it would always remain a mystery to the human mind. Harman makes a strong case for art when he says that we need not invent the wheel on this allusion business, as this is what art does, for artists attempt to “establish objects deeper than the features through which they are announced, or allude to objects that cannot quite be

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15 Graham Harman, "The Third Table" *100 Notes, 100 Thoughts, Documenta Series 085* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz; Bilingual edition, 2012).
16 Harman, "The Third Table," 12.
He further argues that for the last four hundred years philosophy has aspired to a rigorous science, but it could do well in the next four hundred to aspire to being a vigorous art. It is a short step from Harman’s characterization of philosophy as an art to imagine art as a curious type of philosophy, which is how I’d like to think of my practice.

Interestingly, Harman maintains that the main difference between a Kantian position and his is that for him it is not just human subjects interacting with object, but objects interacting with objects. And for Harman, a human qualifies as an object. This view has obvious sympathies with panpsychism, which allows for the possibility of mind/psyche or some form of experience—usually only associated with humans and other organisms with specifically developed nervous systems—to be a fundamental attribute of the universe. How else could nature look back as our uncanny self?

The objects that appear in On The Validity of Illusion are created in part through “reverse method acting”, i.e. conjured sensorily, and in part through a studio practice of material aesthetic construction. They become quasi-subjects, in that they take on functions of looking, listening and speaking—or perhaps it is that the artist becomes the objects. Either way they are on some level interchangeable. Or as Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev states in the Artistic Director’s Statement as part of the introduction to documenta 13:

“When an artwork is looked at closely, it becomes, as in meditation, an ever more abstract exercise, a thinking and imagining while thinking, until the phenomenology of that viscous experience allows the mind to merge with matter, and slowly, possibly, to see the world not from the point of view of the discerning subject, the detached subject, but from within so-called objects and outward: I am the ball, the ball is me.”

17 ibid. 14.
18 Graham Harman, What Objects Can Do For The Arts, (presentation, JCI Lecture Series in collaboration with CENES Ziegler Series, University of British Columbia, February 27, 2014).
Performance

Finally, my project is perhaps best thought of as relating to a longstanding personal practice of performance that has continued at times outside of an artistic or academic context and into therapeutic or esoteric experiments. This practice draws from ’60s and ’70s performance art that questioned divisions of life and art through a focus on the body. For example, Lygia Clark and Linda Montano foregrounded forms of direct experimentation of a perceptual and therapeutic nature. This form of practice may operate as a precursor—as it did with Montano (and Adrian Piper’s Kantian philosophical experiments) to an interest in esoteric experience. This move has many precedents both from inside and outside the ranks of performance art: from Mondrian, Malevich and more overtly Hilma Af Klint who were all powerfully influenced by the theosophy of Madame Blavatsky; to Marcel Duchamp’s interest in alchemy; Robert Smithson’s fascination with Medieval art and the relic; and Marina Abramovic’s and Deborah Hay’s insistence on presence.

These early concerns occurred in many cases in tandem with its twin exploration of the self as a construction. Both of these approaches to understanding the ‘self’ remain the touchstone of my practice. This could simply be understood as the self as site of exploration into the fact of lived experience. This may include an impersonal subjectivity that as Benjamin notes may have a unique spatio-temporal phenomenology. Recall also Benjamin’s idea of aesthetic practice that includes a list of experiential procedures: flaneurist walking, psychoanalytic sessions, surrealist seances and drug experiments.

Performance art of the late ’60s and early ’70s coincided with early uses of the video camera to explore the self as representation. Along with mirror, mask and outfit, video—as—mirror was incorporated into performance by artists like Joan Jonas and Martha Wilson, as a means of interrogating the distinctions and boundaries between a mediated and unmediated knowing of self and its status in relationship to the other. More recently, Patty Chang has used mirror, performance, water and video to affect the inevitability of knowing/drinking from the self alongside its representation as narcissism.

The identity politics of feminism, queer and multi-cultural theory in the ’70s, ’80s and ’90s drew attention to narrative as a component of this mediation of the self: Eleanor
Antin’s multiple identities of nurse, ballerina and king; Lyle Ashton Harris’ photographs of himself and his brother; and Murray Hill’s drag king persona are all examples of character-driven scenarios that arose at this time. These scenarios and narratives were further elaborated and deconstructed through ‘80s and ‘90s artists’ aspirations of “crossing over” into mainstream media of theatre, cabaret and television. This resulted in not only monologue as a viable form of performance art (Holly Hughes and Eric Bogosian) but performance videos like those of Mike Smith and Alex Bag that borrowed from the conventions of television. Shana Moulton, Stanya Kahn, and Ryan Trecartin—who all perform in their videos and films—can be seen as examples of recent manifestations of the lineage that I have outlined above (and of which I am a part).

Having spent 17 years in New York City’s art and performance scene from the early ‘90s, I was very influenced by the aspirations of artists to “cross over”. The quasi-transcendentalist teacher in On The Validity of Illusion (and Its Attractions) is a recent example of my work with character-driven monologue. It is not the spoken text that is important, but the fact of the speaking—the character and the status of its reality. This is connected with my long-standing interest in acting techniques which are devised for the creation of “believable reality”. What is interesting here is how these techniques seem to parallel mechanisms that animate “actual reality”. Her direct address (skewed by the restaging of her performance as a video within the video and through an intermediary viewer) is meant to implicate the viewer in this questioning of the reality of personal identity.

On The Validity of Illusion (and Its Attractions) also bears the influence of television, particularly children’s television. Paul McCarthy and Mike Kelley seem to share this—think of Heidi with its absurd human/puppet performers and its makeshift theatrical sets. And the character-driven videos of Shana Moulton were influenced by the children’s show Pee-wee’s Playhouse. These artists also sculpturally foreground the sets that they perform in along with the props and objects that appear. My project draws es-

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especially on British children’s television of the ’70s as a medium of ultra low/no tech, silly performances by adults, craft making, toys, and magical elements, all employed for quasi-instructional purposes.

Afterword

_Blink!_ who appears as a character in the video has also been adapted and appears in the Audain Exhibition as a sculptural object along with a drawing intended as a map to orient the viewer in relation to the 30-minute video. The project will continue to unfold with other drawings, objects and scenarios based on what was generated or framed by the video: The Lab Assistant; The Rubber Hand Experiment; The Animator; The Monologue; The Fountain; Goethe’s Chart; the Ego Tunnels; The Spinners; and The Experiencer. Even the teacher might assume other forms.
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Documentation of Works

Figure 2  On the Validity of Illusion (and Its Attractions), Two Channel video, video still, 2014
Figure 3  *On the Validity of Illusion (and Its Attractions)*, Two Channel video, video still, 2014
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Figure 12  *On the Validity of Illusion (and Its Attractions)*, Two Channel video, Installation view, 2014.
Figure 13  Blink! Installation view, 2014.
Figure 14  *Blink!* Installation view, detail, 2014.
Appendix


This paper grows out of a response to the confusion and anxiety that the term Romantic held for me. I noticed in my artistic practice and theoretical discussions how strongly I felt compelled to dodge the accusation of being in any way ‘romantic’, yet I wasn’t quite sure what that meant. As a visual artist, I was peripherally familiar with the paintings of German Romantic Caspar David Friedrich and vaguely with images of paintings from later Romanticism. I didn’t like them. This situation was compounded by the fact that I was dodging something that, as it turns out, I was profoundly interested in. This was the complex through which I approached this paper which has a three pronged objective:

The first is to gain an understanding of what Romanticism was historically which I will do through an analysis of the political, social and religious context in which Romanticism first arose as well as outline how the the early Romantics responded to it. The major paradigmatic and revolutionary shifts the Romantics were facing and their responses to them still reverberate for us today and as such their legacy is tied up with the very makeup of modernity as we know it. Secondly, I will investigate and evaluate the not altogether positive connotations the term Romantic tends to carry. Lastly, the bulk of the paper is concerned with how the Romantic project can be seen as in fact never having come to a close. Focussing on contemporary art in particular, I will discuss how the strategies of the early Romantics have been influential through their re-iteration in Conceptual Art of the 60’s and how Romanticism in general is prevalent in current practice. I will end by looking at the work of artists Shana Moulton and Hilma af Klint to highlight the specific concerns, motifs and methods of contemporary practice in which the legacy of Romanticism is robustly alive.

Historical Background

The events that led up to the period of German Romanticism are of vital importance in understanding the movement and its relevance, as the major themes still reverberate for us today.

It was a very unstable time in Europe, which had just witnessed the French Revolution that took place 1789 to 1799. The French Revolution was the direct result of the Age of Enlightenment that was set in motion between the years 1650 and 1700. The Enlightenment was also known as the Age of Reason because it promoted reason and individualism along with scientific thought, skepticism and intellectual exchange over tradition and religious faith. The Age of Enlightenment was also tied to the long
process—started by Martin Luther—of religious reformation that spread across Europe and England. This was essentially the reformation of the absolute hierarchy of the Catholic church and resulted in the birth of protestantism. The Bible was translated from Latin into the vernacular thus emphasizing the participation and understanding of the individual over the absolute power and mystification of the clergy. This process of religious reformation was to continue in later forms such as Pietism that laid even further emphasis on individual spiritual experience over the authority of scripture, which was central to the Romantic project.

Although the objectives of the French Revolution were based on the enlightenment principals of nationalism, reason, democracy and inalienable human rights, much like the Reformation—which spawned numerous wars and thousands of heretical executions—the replacing of the monarchy with a secular republic was a chaotic and bloody period that lasted for ten years. Supporters of Enlightenment principles throughout Europe watched in horror as the events unfolded.

The immediate result of the revolution was seen by many of its initial supporters as disastrous. Conditions in France were worse than before. It had become more authoritarian, more militaristic and property-based. It had given rise to Napoleon whose totalitarianism was threatening the whole of Europe, and in particular Germany, which was being invaded and occupied by Napoleon’s forces. It is also important to note that Germany at that time was not the unified Germany that we know today, but made up of about 1500 German States. Some of them were large and powerful, like Prussia, Austria and Bavaria, but many of them were not much more than small principalities and even family estates. Each one was autonomously governed, although all were under the umbrella of the Holy Roman Empire and therefore politically connected with Rome and the Pope.

**Romanticism as a Response**

The aftermath of the French Revolution ran parallel with a philosophical crisis precipitated by Kant’s philosophy. Kant argued that we can only know the world through a representation that we create in the mind consisting of pre-existing categories. The world—or the thing-in-itself—can never be fully grasped. This political and philosophical landscape constituted the realization of the limits of human reason and amounted to an intellectual and moral crisis that demanded new ways of understanding.23

In response to Kant’s theories and building on those of the German Idealists, early German Romantic philosophers and writers like Friedrich Hardenburg (also known as Novalis) and Friedrich Schlegel emphasized the primacy of being (or Kant’s world-in-itself) over the way we conceptualize it. They surmised that if reason and therefore philosophy is incapable of understanding that from which it arises—the-word-in-itself—it is also incapable of understanding itself and that this would make a complete system of philosophy impossible. Instead of proceeding philosophically through exclusive focus on a closed conceptual representational system of knowledge, the Romantics insisted on

including what cannot be known, thus creating a radically open system. In this fragmentary and radically open ‘system’ things can only be defined by pointing to what they are not and thus never definitively defined. This is the root of Romantic irony in which what things represent is not what they mean and they always point outside of themselves, to what is unrepresentable—the infinite. Early Romantic philosophy is founded on this impossibility of ever resting with final certainty and this is the essential fact of human existence. The impossibility of understanding, however, does not remove the need to try to understand and this is what constitutes the sense of Romantic longing or yearning for wholeness or redemption.\(^{24}\)

The Romantics elevated Art for its ability to link theoretical ideas with the sensuous, especially the ability of music to convey Romantic longing while resisting conceptualization. More than that they were interested in a unifying, synthetic approach that included all human abilities and methods, as only this could come close to a possibility of understanding. Science and psychology were also integral to this project of synthesis. Romantic scientific methods countered many of the methods that characterized the way the scientific revolution was panning out. They saw positivist reductionism as dangerous and were more interested in a synthesis of speculation and precise knowledge, intuition and scientific experimentation, Science and Art. By contrast modern science had resulted in rampant specialization and an ever deepening schism between the humanities and the sciences. It also was also strongly influenced by the Cartesian dualism of Rene Descartes which categorically separated the world of matter from that of the mind. In this scenario (familiar to us), the feelings and expectations of the researcher were eradicated from the experiments that constituted the search for knowledge. Among the romantics, by contrast, one of the highest aspirations was to find a unifying principal that would falsify the Cartesian subject/object divide. They were very influenced by Schelling’s speculative philosophy of a monistic ‘world soul’ in which consciousness and matter were one and the same.\(^{25}\) For Schelling, the human mind and the structure underlying nature were in harmony, they corresponded, and were governed by the same principal. In this way a process of understanding the world (nature) would necessitate self discovery and vice-versa.\(^{26}\)

Franz Anton Mesmer was a German physician and a contemporary of the early Romantics. Mesmer claimed to have discovered a medical/psychological technique of healing using magnets which he called animal magnetism. Mesmer believed in a ephemeral universal ‘fluid’ that pervaded the cosmos including the human mind. This technique was very popular with the Romantics who hoped that it would provide empirical evidence of Schelling’s ‘world soul’. Mesmer’s theories were the precursor to freud’s unconscious. Practitioners of animal magnetism developed an intimate bond with the magnetized patients and took their their perceptions seriously—thus anticipating the later “talking cure” of psychoanalysis. Through this pervasive universal force (or fluid), the magnetized patients were able to interpret their own bodies which led them to be

\(^{24}\) ibid  
\(^{25}\) This seems to be a version of Spinoza’s “dual aspect monism” in which mind and matter are two aspects of the same substance.  
able to self diagnose, divine cures for themselves and in some cases read the magnetizer’s thoughts. For the Romantics this indicated that perhaps this force/fluid could “transcend time and space and (re) connect everything with everything”. The poet and philosopher Novalis was also a practicing magnetizer and as such the classic Romantic figure of the artist who was now in the perfect position to affect the Romantic unifying synthesis.

Romanticism’s Legacy in Modernity: Misinterpretations and Re-assessment

Around 1830 these complex Romantic ideas were largely abandoned in favor of the scientific positivistic world view that persisted and was propagated through the ever expanding industrial revolution. Although the naturalist trend that developed thereafter expressed outrage at the continuing devastation of such instrumental materialism on nature and social life, it remained indebted to the positivist scientific world view and rejected the holistic romantic approach. It was partly due to the fact that Romanticism was a popular and strongly literary movement that was re-enforced by a growing reading public, that many of its influences have remained alive. Many of its specifics however, particularly its critical aspects were dropped.

German Romanticism has variously been categorized as conservative, reactionary, nationalist, escapist and fostering a politically irresponsible self-absorption. As Eckart Kleßmann says, “[n]o epoch in German intellectual history has provoked as many misunderstandings, has found so many enthusiasts and apologists, but also as many sworn enemies, as Romanticism has”.

The fact is that German Romanticism emerged prior to the political ideologies that have conditioned our time. It was prior to German nationalist conservatism, democratic liberalism, socialism and even the categories of political left and right. The Romantics rather were concerned with the oppositions between the spiritual and holistic and the instrumental and materialistic. The deliberate indeterminate nature of early Romanticism, while crucial to methods and goals in the questioning of their political milieu, have allowed it to be appropriated on both the left and right to serve various ends. Most damning of all was Hitler’s appropriation of the movement to support his fascist German

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27 ibid 215
28 ibid 213
29 In the vernacular, the term romantic originally referred to the Romance languages derived from Latin and was associated with the chivalrous tales of quests that were written, in verse. In the 18th century the word expanded to also mean the fantastical, the fanciful and the picturesque. Because it was associated with the imagination it was often viewed unfavorably as compromising formal artistic rigor and leading to an excess in terms of what was considered to be appropriate subject matter. By the end of the 18 century it largely denoted landscape and feeling – particularly love. It was only during the brief period of Early Romanticism that the word transformed to indicate a critical, innovative and even revolutionary way of thinking.
30 Eckart Kleßmann, Die deutsche Romantik. Published by Dumont Verlag TB/Köln, 1991
nationalistic project. While aspects of Romanticism did include a emphasis on German culture and thus strong sense of nationalism, in the face of the Napoleonic occupations and pre-unified Germany’s precarious state, it was a revolutionary stance. Nonetheless, Hitler’s contribution, The fact that the movement was revived in altered forms that often moved away from the more challenging and critical specifics of its earlier manifestation has contributed to the obscuration of its original value. This is compounded by the fact that key texts of both Hardenberg and Schlegel were not published in their entirety until the 20th Century (1958 and 1960 respectively).

Romanticism is often characterized as opposing Enlightenment principles and thus impeding modernity. What is more accurate however is that Romanticism in fact reformed and developed enlightenment individualism. Romantic insistence on the autonomy of art is the prototype for what we take for granted today in a fairly independent, self-regulating system of the arts. The Romantics were also the first in Western history to advocate for spirituality without the religious institution encouraged our modern privatization of religion. It also seeded the widespread accessibility to spirituality within a secular context. Their aestheticisation of nature, dreams, the imaginary and the poetic has contributed to modern understanding of the psyche. Today we are seeing that an increasing understanding that a philosophical stance that only takes scientifically verified data as truth is a damaging in its disregard for the way that truth may be expressed through many different subjectivities and varying cultural forms. In general, we can safely understand the effects of German Romanticism as having modified and informed the modernity that we are so familiar with in fundamental and beneficial ways.\textsuperscript{32}

Romanticism and Contemporary Art

The influence of German Romanticism is not only intrinsic to the very fabric of modernity but it has been revived in various forms since its first appearance. From Schopenhauer and Nietzsche through Neo-romanticism at the turn of the nineteenth century that led to French Symbolism and Walter Benjamin to the present.\textsuperscript{33} In a sense Romanticism is a project that has never come to a close. It is not surprising then, as I will presently detail how it has powerfully informed the recent history of contemporary art as well as found itself very strongly represented in current practice.

Since the new millennium there have been two key art exhibitions that have specifically addressed Romanticism’s legacy in Contemporary Art: \textit{Ideal Worlds: New Romanticism in Contemporary Art} (2005) curated by Max Hollein and Martina Weinhart, and \textit{Romantic Conceptualism} (2007), curated by Jörg Heiser. \textit{Romantic Conceptualism} exhibited work from the 1960’s to the present day and included work (among others) by the artists Bas Jan Ader, Lygia Clark, Didier Courbot, Tacita Dean, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Rodney Graham, Susan Hiller, Louise Lawler, Yoko Ono, Frances Stark, and Andy Warhol.\textsuperscript{34} In one of the curatorial essays in the \textit{Romantic Conceptualism} catalogue, Jan Verwoert

\textsuperscript{32} ibid 260

\textsuperscript{33} ibid 260-274

\textsuperscript{34} Ellen Seferman, Jörg Heiser and Susan Hiller, ed by Christine Kintisch, \textit{Romantic Conceptualism}, (Kerber; Bilingual edition, 2008)
compares not only the conditions to which the historical Romantics were responding to with those of the Conceptual artists, but also the strategies and methods employed in their response.\textsuperscript{35} The catastrophe surrounding the French Revolution in relation to the absoluteness of artistic Classicism of the Romantic's day is compared with the increasing emptiness of Abstract Expressionism's claims in the face of the Vietnam war. In both cases, Verwoert says there was an exhaustion of artistic and social possibilities for agency. And in both cases the response was to develop forms of "radical potentiality" that "manifested in the creation of provocatively open work".\textsuperscript{36} Proclamations made by Romantic philosopher Friedrich Schlegel bear striking similarities to statements made by Sol LeWitt. Lewitt: "The words of one artist may induce an ideas chain"\textsuperscript{37} while Schlegel on his theory of liberated collective creativity said that the ideas continue to be written from work to work and thus they generate "A chain or a garland of fragments".\textsuperscript{38} Additionally, in his 1969 \textit{Sentences on Conceptual Art}, LeWitt says that "conceptual artists are mystics rather than rationalists" as "they leap to conclusions that logic cannot reach."\textsuperscript{39} In general, both the Romantics and the Conceptualists favored the "fragmentary and the open over the systematic and closed"\textsuperscript{40} which Jorg Heiser says "allows the mind to adjust to a contradictory reality instead of doing the opposite and fitting reality to its own parameters".\textsuperscript{41} Conceptual art privileges the work's communicative purpose which exists as part of an open network of intertextuality to which it points. The meaning of the work is not intrinsic to it and is often realized within the mind of the viewer much like Romantic irony in which things always point outside themselves, and are never definitive. The method of retaining this openness, Jan Verwoert adds, is a continual oscillation between the potential of the work and its concrete reality. This is reminiscent of the idea of the Romantic synthesis with its insistence on speculation and exact knowledge.

In the primary curatorial essay in the \textit{Romantic Conceptualism} catalogue, Jorg Heiser outlines the thinking behind his term Romantic Conceptualism.\textsuperscript{42} Using Andy Warhol's film "Kiss" and Bas Jan Ader's video "I am Too Sad to tell you" he considers the fact that the dominant discourse on Conceptualism has never acknowledged its sensual and emotional dimension. This discourse is reflected in how Conceptual artists like Sol

36 ibid 166
41 ibid
42 ibid
LeWitt and Joseph Kosuth theorized their aims and goals. Reacting to the subjectivism of Abstract Expressionism, LeWitt proclaimed that conceptual art should be “emotionally dry” and that the expectation of an “emotional kick” should be avoided at all costs. Heiser points out that in fact Romanticism constitutes a major stream within Conceptualism especially in intersection with feminist and global Conceptualisms. Heiser outlines how through the abstraction that a conceptual approach produces—directness, simple execution of an idea, and serial repetition—Romantic Conceptualism strips away narrative and specific subjective confession to deliver the full impact of emotion. Heiser discusses at length the perceived opposition, fraught relation and possible irreconcilability between rationality and emotion, cool communicability and subjective interiority as the tensions that underlie what he’s calling romantic conceptualism. These apparent oppositions, he points out, are not identical to a comparison between Romanticism and Conceptualism, as Romanticism was itself a critique: a productive conflict between reason and mystical interiority.

The second show Ideal Worlds: New Romanticism in Contemporary Art, (which chronologically preceded Romantic Conceptualism) included the work of artists David Altmejd, Hernan Bas, Kaye Donachie, Peter Doig, Uwe Henneken, Karen Kilimnik, Justine Kurland, Catherine Opie, Christopher Orr, Laura Owens, Simon Periton, David Thorpe, and Christian Ward. Unlike Romantic Conceptualism which foregrounded the history of contemporary art, Ideal Worlds focuses exclusively on current practice. The work in this show, although clearly indebted to conceptual art, doesn’t overtly engage with the cool communicability of conceptual art in the same way as the works in Romantic Conceptualism. By comparison the works in Ideal Worlds are a satisfying and unequivocal rampant expression of Romanticism. This Romanticism is expressed in the methods employed by the artists but also the motifs used. In her curatorial essay in the catalogue, Martina Weinhart describes the work in the show: “[t]he image, the photograph, or the installation becomes an abyss where one falls into the otherness of reality. These works are ultimately a provocation that lies in the conscious transgression of the convention of the political, and also aesthetic, correctness of years past”.

Metamodernism

The artists and their concerns in Ideal Worlds are reflected in the recent cultural theory of Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker who coined the term “Metamodernism” to describe what they see as a new phase of cultural production that is distinct from Postmodernism. This moment they see as being “most clearly although not exclusively expressed through the neoromantic turn of late”. According to Vermeulen and van den Akker this phase is characterized by its oscillation between Modernist

43 Sol LeWitt, “Paragraphs on Conceptual Art”, Art Forum, 5:10 (summer 1967) 79-84
44 Jörg Heiser, ibid
enthusiasm/sincerity and Postmodern skepticism/irony. (It is important to note that unlike Postmodern irony, which is connected with apathy, Metamodernist irony is connected with desire.) Within this trend is the affirmation that it is possible to hold contradictory beliefs and naïveté is deliberately cultivated as a strategy in order to affirm the possibility of the impossible. Vermeulen and van den Akker point out that this oscillation is fundamental to the Romantics who were concerned with turning the finite into the infinite while recognizing its futility (the impossibility of a complete understanding). I propose that the “both-neither” dynamic that emerges by forcing an acknowledgement of the polarities in the mind—neither of which are definitive—functions to temporarily disable rationality, thus allowing a more direct experience whereby something new may be glimpsed. Along the same lines, Vermeulen and van den Akker describe the strategies and styles of this neoromantic turn as employing mystical tropes (among others) as a means to signify alternate realities. They conclude their analysis of Metamodernism with the notion of Atopic Metaxis by citing three tendencies observed in much current artistic practices: “a deliberate being out of time, an intentional being out of place, and the pretense that that desired atemporality and displacement are actually possible even though they are not.”

Shana Moulton

The two artists whose work I wish to discuss with regard to this “neoromantic turn of late” are Shana Moulton and Hilma af Klint. Shana Moulton is a video artist who appears in or performs alongside her videos. Moulton’s series of videos Whispering Pines takes its name from the seniors mobile home park in California that her parents owned and in which she grew up. Whispering Pines is a character-driven series of videos in which Moulton’s hypochondriacal alter ego, Cynthia (whom Moulton describes as a more naive version of herself), repeatedly attempts to address various life inflicted ailments in the search for happiness. Crucial to Cynthia’s mission are her “New Age” tchotchkes, blankets, and wellness and beauty products with which she performs rituals that often lead to transformative adventures in a parallel universe. In Whispering Pines 6, fueled by the sugar free drink Crystal Light, Cynthia creates a decorative arrangement using different colored sands, bath pearls, beads and dried flowers. The decoration mysteriously sprouts a magical ladder, the climbing of which leads to a hallucinogenic adventure. Moulton makes extensive use of green-screen, low-tech effects and bold color to create scenarios of magical and mystical transformation.

Moulton’s appropriation of the “New Age” and “Wellness” industry, described by one reviewer as “aesthetically disreputable” and “aggressively unhip” is in fact a particularly rich gesture in terms of German Romanticism. The German Romantics—as the original advocators of religiosity without the institution—were echoed by the Transcendentalists in North America. According to Eve Sedgwick, it was the Transcendentalists who, as a

47 ibid
founding North American intellectual movement, gave rise to the also quintessentially North American “New Age”, “Wellness” and “self-help” industry.  

We only have to think of Emerson and his spiritual self reliance!

In her curatorial essay in *Ideal Worlds*, Martina Weinhart points out how several artists in *Ideal Worlds* employ the strategy of approaching the sublime or the uncanny through mediated sources, like Peter Doig’s use of historical photographs and album covers, Christopher Orr’s old magazines, and Kay Donachie’s super8 films. Shana Moulton approaches the mystical and spiritual through the marketing paradigm of the “New Age/Wellness” industry with its endless host of products of which the low-tech effects of her videos are a fitting extension. This strategy allows an ironical distance from a collapse into a suspect Modernist sincerity. Despite the suspicion generated by the products and the effects used, Moulton’s work is not merely aligned with parody, but also with a sincere quest for transformation.

In an interview with Moulton, Renata Espinosa asks about Moulton’s use of a specific brand of *Elizabeth Arden* beauty products whose marketing casts them as esoteric potions through which to obtain eternal youth. Moulton says: “whenever I see one of these new products, I really want it to work. I think, “[h]ere is the answer to beautiful skin.” But I’m also really skeptical of it, I want it to be the answer to all of my problems but at the same time, I feel like it’s garbage and it’s just about making money and marketing. It’s that dynamic that is really motivating most of the videos”. This full awareness and affirmation of desire in the face of the flawed method for its attainment is what Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker have identified as quintessentially romantic strategies of metamodernism. And indeed, although we may be laughing, Shana Moulton’s work seems to affect real glimpses of an alternate reality. Her essential technique for this is the romantic one of defamiliarization where the ordinary and commonplace are endowed with mysterious higher meaning. Moulton’s objects and banal scenarios—like the removal of blackheads through the application of cosmetic strips—take on an uncanny mystical quality in which Cynthia undergoes a real if temporary transformation.

**Hilma af Klint**

The second example that I would like to consider in my discussion of the relevance of German Romanticism to contemporary art is Swedish artist Hilma af Klint. Af Klint’s backstory is especially relevant to her consideration as a contemporary artist, since she was born in 1862. Af Klint was a painter, a spiritual medium, and mystic. She had an academic arts training and throughout her life made and sold conventional landscapes and portraits. Simultaneously however, af Klint created another, secret body of work.

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51 Weinhart credits the influence of Gerhard Richter’s re-invention of the Romantic tradition of landscape painting in Germany through his re-approaching of nature through its cultural mediation. 161

52 Renata Espinosa ibid

53 Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker, ibid
This second body consisted of abstract paintings and drawings that pre-figured modern developments in abstraction. One contemporary critic says “One searches for precedents and connections with other artists, but the references are all retroactive”.\textsuperscript{54} af Klint was making abstract works two years before Kandinsky was supposed to have made the first abstract painting; she prefigured many of Matisse’s moves; was painting watercolor square monochromes as early as 1916; was making automatist drawings decades before the surrealists did; she moved between abstraction and figuration with an ease that only surfaced later in postmodernism and anticipated Conceptual Art’s project of the importance of language and idea (see \textit{Parcifal Series, Group 2, Section 4 from 1916}).

Af Klint was isolated from the artist avant-garde of her time that consisted of the early abstract painters Mondrian, Kandinsky and Malevich. And although her work bears outward similarities to theirs and is even inspired by the same sources, her abstraction was not the result of formal development, but a means of visualizing philosophical, scientific, and transcendental ideas.\textsuperscript{55} Like her contemporaries, af Klint was influenced by the Theosophy of Madame Blavatsky. The esoteric and spiritual worldview of Theosophy was underscored by developments in science of the time that changed notions of space: the discovery of X-rays in 1885 and electromagnetic waves in 1888. Space was revealed to be filled with invisible forces that animated the material world. Af Klint was a member of of the Theosophical Society of which (from 1902) Rudolph Steiner was its Austrian/German head. Steiner was a philosopher, social reformer, architect, and esotericist. His philosophy was rooted in Goethe and the German Idealists and as such his thinking was linked with that of early German Romantics. Steiner’s theories of art were very influential for artists at the beginning of the 20th century as evidenced by Mondrian asking him for feedback and advice on his 1920 book, \textit{Neoplasticism}.\textsuperscript{56}

Af Klint formed a group with four women friends. The five met every Friday and held seances. They recorded these seances alongside automatic drawings in hundreds of notebooks. According to the notebooks they contacted spirit guides who trained them spiritually.\textsuperscript{57} It was in this context that af Klint started to make her secret abstract paintings which she describes as “executed under the instructions of a higher power”. She says of a series paintings (\textit{Group 4, The Big Ten},1907): “the pictures were painted through me directly without any drafts and with great force. I had no idea what the pictures were supposed to show, yet I worked quickly and confidently without changing

\textsuperscript{54} Adrian Searle, “Out of this world” \textit{The Guardian}, Tuesday 14 March 2006. http://www.theguardian.com/culture/2006/mar/14/2
\textsuperscript{55} Catherine de Zegher, “Abstract”, 3X \textit{Abstraction: New Methods of Drawing by Hilma af Klint, Emma Kunz and Agnes Martin}, The Drawing Center, New York, NY 2006. 23
\textsuperscript{56} ibid 34
\textsuperscript{57} Åke Fant, The Case of the Artist Hilma af Klint: \textit{The Spiritual in Art:Abstract Painting 1890-1985}, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles California and Abbeville Press Inc.New York New York 1986. 155
any brushstrokes. This series of 10 large paintings each over three by two meters was made in 40 days and her “instructions” included that she wasn’t allowed to show them to anyone.

In 2013 Contemporary historian and curator Gertrud Sandqvist organized *Channelled*, an exhibition which was based on the thinking of af Klint. The press release describes it thus: “[t]he exhibition title refers to the significant concept of inspiration, which originally meant ‘breathing in’, something that is breathing through you, or that you are precisely ‘channelled’ by this something”. This concept of inspiration was important to the Romantic notion of artistic genius as articulated by Wackenroder as ‘unmittelbaren göttlichen beystand’ (direct divine support). It was spontaneous, sudden and uncontrollable. It came from the unconscious or even from the divine.

Another way that af Klint can be seen to evoke the romantic project is the way in which her artistic practice could be seen as a synthesis of speculation and exact knowledge in the service of a quest for understanding. Her art was one link in a chain of practices that included her activities as a medium and a “mystic who took voyages into what she considered the invisible sphere of existence” and the findings of which she communicated through her painting. In the same vein, the already eclectic Theosophy did not preclude af Klint’s Christian beliefs or her animist interest in science and botany that she also sometimes overtly explored (see Group 3, Outline of Violets, 1919 and The Atom Series no. 9, 10, 11 and 12, 1917). This is related to the fact that her artwork was a form of pedagogy as much for herself as a potential viewer, for she says: “[a]t this moment, I have knowledge of, in the living reality, that I am an atom in the universe that has access to infinite possibilities of development. These possibilities of development I want, gradually to reveal”. Af Klint’s work was featured in the 2013 Venice Biennale in which Rudolph Steiner’s pedagogical blackboard diagrams also appeared.

According to historian Gertrud Sandqvist, af Klint’s oeuvre, although influenced by Rudolf Steiner, also exists in spite of him. Isolated as she was, in 1908 she decided to show her work to Steiner who disagreed with what she was doing. This precipitated a crisis for af Klint in which she stopped painting for four years. Throughout this time she recorded in her notebooks that she continued to communicate with the spirits as before, and to make drawings. All of which she considered to be spiritual training in

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58 Gertrud Sandqvist -" When Spirits are guiding Your Hand", Evening Lecture at the 23 August 2010 @ Salzburg International Summer Academy of Fine Arts 2010. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dbKcVXLON28


61 Catherine de Zegher, ibid 26

62 ibid

63 Steiner’s drawings, produced during his lectures, were mostly done on blackboards and influenced many artists, particularly Joseph Beuys who also used blackboard in the presentation of his work.

64 Gertrud Sandqvist, ibid
mediumship. In 1912 she took up painting again, continuing with the same exploration except this time with greater independence from the guiding spirits. In her notebooks, she describes herself as seeing and hearing directly what she should paint. In 1920 she tried again to show her work to Steiner who reacted in a similar way to the first time. After this and until her death in 1944 af Klint continued to receive visions of paintings which she recorded in her notebooks with exacting detail but she never executed any of them. Instead, all the paintings she produced were watercolors in Steiner’s prescribed style.

Af Klint and her body of work consisting of over 1000 painting and drawings and 124 unpublished manuscripts only came to light in the 1980’s when she was included in the exhibition The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890–1985 at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. af Klint is quite often described as a case study, perhaps because she challenges assumptions about how artworks are defined and produced, especially as her work contrasts with the early modernist abstract painters to whom she appears on the surface to be related. It is only through our contemporary framework however—conditioned by conceptualism and beyond—that we are able to appreciate her work. It is paradoxically because af Klint is only able to be understood now and that she subsequently informs us, that we may understand her as contemporary. Af Klint herself knew that she was painting for future generations, for in her will, she stipulated that none of the work was to be shown until 20 years after her death. It is this paradoxical status of af Klint’s work that links her to Vermeulen and Akker’s idea of Metaxis as “between”.

Indeed, Af Klint is definitely out of time and disturbingly out of place in that she resists classification, and as such is frustratingly beyond critique. (Incidentally, the escape of a determination through post-modern critique may also be a metamodern strategy.) As a contemporary audience informed by neoromanticism, our fascination for someone like af Klint may oscillate between a belief in or a desire for her enigmatic knowledge begotten on the astral plane and a simultaneous inability to believe in it. This affirmation of both, yet neither duality may in fact allow us the glimpse of something new.

Conclusion

In Notes on Metamodernism, Vermeulen and van den Akker elude to Francis Fukuyama’s notion of the end of history—which dates to the fall of the Berlin wall—and relates to the idea that humans have evolved as far as they can go with democracy. This notion is in contrast to Jurgen Habermas’ rejection of the term Post-modernism by saying that the project of modernity is not over. In light of this, I propose that this

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65 Åke Fant, ibid, 158
66 Åke Fant, ibid, 158
67 By this time Steiner had broken away from the Theosophical Society and founded the Anthroposophical Society.
68 Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker, ibid
‘Neoromantic turn’ signifies a renewed and redoubled interest in the Romantics’ aspirations of falsifying the Cartesian subject/object divide with its reductive methods (through which we have so detrimentally instrumentalized the world and each other). As Vermeulen and van den Akker point out, we are looking back at the Romantic not to parody it, nor in nostalgia, but “in order to perceive anew a future that was lost from sight”:71 A future in which neither we nor the world are simply a means to an end.

“The world must be romanticized. In this way its original meaning will be rediscovered”... I present the commonplace with significance and the ordinary with mystery, the familiar with the seemliness of the unfamiliar and the finite with the semblance of the infinite”72

— Novalis

71 Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker, ibid
72 Novalis "Logological Fragments1", in Philosophical Writings page 60
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