Few visual cultures have permeated contemporary life the way that psychedelia has, and coloured expectations of transgression and the re-enchantment of life. If something can undo convention and oppression and make things good again, it is psychedelia. Its promises of fun, spirituality, togetherness and sex has pervaded all art forms and levels of culture, in ways that make pop art seem academic.

But psychedelia also turned into a clichéd format of excess. Its stylisation of freedom and anticipated non-conformism ultimately challenged the imagination and pleasure that it was supposed to stimulate. Just consider how the history of sixties' counterculture was populated by references to expansive male subjects, flaunting myths of a white west's recovered innocence.

Reflections from Damaged Life revolves around visual art's connections to psychedelic experiences, concepts, and practices. it attempts to suggest that this relationship harbors an unexplored aesthetic potential that art history has failed to address. Its investigation follows a path that is both specific and non-canonical: instead of the visual culture of the youth revolt or the retrieval of a lost "ism", the exhibition focuses on singular artistic interpretations of how the psychedelic promise of transformation and estrangement might lead to new possibilities for experience.

Drug cultures often attempt to redress the impossibility of modern experience in un-stimulating and easy ways – take a pill, expand your mind, enjoy spiritual awakening pharmaceutically guaranteed – and psychedelia was famously part of the countercultural turn towards new age holism that attempted to heal a broken world with narratives of harmony. Other aspects of the psychedelic imagination, however, are oriented towards difference. These prepare for the departure from existing conditions to explore the unknown, or even other forms of being through an empathy with the non-self, the elsewhere and the next moment, in which one can attain another body (and be transformed into a bird, a molecule or a stone), or connect to other temporalities (crooked or spiralling time lines, deep pasts and future worlds...). Through this, the radically foreign continues to act upon us by challenging the adequacy of our representations.

Thus the works in this exhibition make it clear that in aesthetic terms there is no easy way out. Peace, love and nature can't be reached harmoniously. Psychedelic experience cannot be articulated without the traces it leaves behind, the events and effects it provokes, the technologies it uses and the bodies it impacts. Through its psychedelic connection, art loses its innocence and transparency. No truth can be reached directly and so there must be irritation and incommensurability. This is the symbolist way of using drugs to replace authenticity with scepticism, vis-à-vis Charles Baudelaire's artificial paradises, Walter Benjamin's profane illuminations, Henri Michaux's miserable miracle.

In art history, psychedelia is either beyond the law or makes for an exotic whiff of sixties disaffection. The artist Adrian Piper puts it bluntly: ‘It may be that the art establishment has ignored this kind of work because they just don’t understand it – didn’t understand it then and don’t understand it now. In that way the art establishment’s reaction to psychedelic art may be a lot like its reaction to political art: many of these people just can’t relate on a gut level.’ Still, it seems futile to insist on a psychedelic art in a strict and institutional sense, like pop art or Conceptual art. What was and still is called “psychedelic art” was made in the service of hippie lifestyle and politics. It unfolded on camper vans, in communal murals, in light shows and media happenings, and in the graphic design of rock posters and record covers. However non-conformist and immersive these were, the counterculture was generally indifferent towards the art concept and reified art in its aestheticisation of everyday life. Moreover, as a journalistic and colloquial term rather than a curatorial or art critical one, the notion of a “psychedelic art” was never institutionally inscribed. Most importantly though, artists were already wary of it in the sixties because “psychedelic” quickly became a magic sales word, and was aesthetically exhausted by carrying out representational duties for the “psychedelic experience”. Artists criticised psychedelic styles for ‘giving the trip a handle’ and lamented that through hollywood psychedelic epics and the canonisation of lSD art in mainstream magazines, the market push was on. and so psychedelia became just another ‘bag for the identity-hungry to climb into.’

But what was lacking that made people identity-hungry in the first place? In his book from 1951, *Minima Moralia, Reflections from Damaged Life* – a fragmentary text that weaves together philosophical aphorism and sociological analysis – Theodor Adorno renounces theoretical cohesion to reflect the fact that ‘there is life no longer.’ Life has been deformed by the horrors of war, he writes, and the culture industry – the place where imagination goes to the dogs – entertains a schematic and exploitative dominance over art. Even the great wars that profoundly defined the twentieth century lack an ‘epic’ element, as the body’s incongruity with mechanical warfare has ‘made real experience impossible’:

"Everywhere, with each explosion, [war] has breached the barrier against stimuli beneath which experience (Erfahrung), the lag between healing oblivion and healing recollection, forms. life has changed into a timeless succession of shocks, interspaced with empty, paralysed intervals."

A nostalgic identification with the Summer of love forgets that the sixties unfolded against a backdrop of the vietnam War and in the aftermath of Hiroshima and the Holocaust. From this perspective, the self-inflicted violence of the acid trip can be seen as a homeopathic “cure” for the

self that is inescapably situated in a context of historical horror. A way of fighting fire with acid and pitting one kind of delirium against another.

The history of psychedelia is resolutely post-Second World War. In 1956 the psychiatrist Humphry Osmond coined the term, deriving it from the greek psyche – soul, mind, and deloun – to manifest, to open. Thus substances such as psilocybin, mescaline, cannabis, and lSD were understood to be "soul-opening" or "mind-manifesting". The famous psychedelic sacrament, lSD, is a narco-technology whose relations of production are quite different from the opium or hashish swallowed in the nineteenth century, or indeed the shamanic rites of native cultures. A drug synthesised accidentally by a Swiss pharmacological company in 1942, it can be compared with the computer, space travel, the bomb and the pill as inventions that preclude the idea of a human being as biological unity. Indeed, hallucinogenic drugs were often understood as new media in the counterculture: only machinic and cybernetic concepts seemed sufficient to address vibrations, intensities, micro-speeds, and other challenges to human perception that occur on the trip. Even Timothy Leary, the "high priest of lSD", described the psychedelic lifestyle using machinic metaphors: 'tune in, turn on, drop out.' Turning on and tuning in is done to a radio, a radar system, or a thermostat. Similarly, poet and graphic artist Henri Michaux talked about being prodded and moved by robotic mescaline that turned him into a semi-automaton. Psychedelia implies a transformation of human subjectivity toward the post-human, and opens up a conception of the machine as something that should be articulated in complementary, rather than antagonistic terms to what is human. Thus psychedelia points to another complication of the possibility of sensing and reflecting upon what happens in the world: What is experience when it is uncertain who or what the experiencing subject is?

One could argue that this question is shared by all experimental art after the Second World War. However, in art's psychedelic connection, it is a problem that becomes visceral when based in the drug experience, and thus it becomes apt to address the nervous system as a site of production and creation. Here art is at its most nihilistic, in the Nietzschean sense, affirming what is outside and non-self, displaced from its institutions and markets, and its normal conditions of production and valorisation. For one thing, it was through the psychedelic connection that visual art first got intimately involved in exchanges with subculture and science, as two highly different but paradigmatically modern ways of mapping and reinterpreting life.

So, from different cultural locations and generational perspectives, the works in this exhibition filter psychedelia. Many of the artists have renounced the principle of the authorial self for forms of automatism or channelling. Their artistic media are no longer givens, but are conceived as variables

and force fields; and art's materials become flows of matter and signs that are reassembled and montaged. The results amount to an aesthetic processing that is dynamic and dialectical, revolving around slippages of form, vocabulary and media. Unlike Adorno's attempt at reanimating critical reason, critique is here lent a dimension of hedonism and madness that obscenely undermines any rationality capable of making art meaningful within a modern cultural economy.

Psychedelic visual style is typically associated with nature and natural forms, as antithetical to alienation. However there is more than organic art nouveau-inspired styles, and little chance for cultural healing, in the version of nature we receive from an art created in relation to the psychedelic that instead focuses on connectedness to plasma and Dna, magma and nebulae. This confronts anthropocentric worldviews with a quantum-physical dimension of subversive micro-levels that are imperceptible on the narrowband of the human senses. According to the artist Søren Andreasen, 'art created in relation to the psychedelic is not an orgy, but what it feels like to be hit by one proton at a time.'

More than an unambiguous tribute to nature or an excavation of the human unconscious, the psychedelic is a post-human aesthetic of events and effects that shows how the two intertwine and take over when human autonomy and agency wanes – notably in the event-shaping properties of technology and new media. The visual shrapnel of the strobe, for instance, acid rock feedback, the amplification of already amplified sound heaping event upon sonic event. Effects manifest forces that are external to the human body and reason, and this manifestation is the event. To Adorno and the philosopher and sociologist Max Horkheimer the "disobedience" of effects results from the fact that sensation and cognition no longer belong only to human subjects, but somehow to the effects themselves, the events they catalyse and the stimuli they produce. The effect is something as strange and counterintuitive as an autonomous supplement. it can take on a life of its own. This relates to psychedelic interest in synesthesia; a slippage between senses. The electrical shower of the strobe stabs bodies, 'slices up' dancers, and puts 'all of history up on a butterfly board'; and the feedback whine colours sound, giving it texture and plasticity. in this way effects push the present into virtuality.

And so the psychedelic connection to visual art is just that: a difference, something refracted that stands against both scientific instrumentalisation, the counterculture's aestheticisation of life, as well as art history's assimilated categories. It is a scandal of ephemeral form, hermetic imagery, and strange temporalities, used by artists to bridge impulses and brainwaves with real events in social space through works that reach for ways to re-imagine life from their place in the middle of history. Here, the artwork is an intensely playful process that can end up being simultaneously spongy and

crystalline, disembodied and materialistic, lucid and unbearable. The melancholy and joy of this unholy mess stem from a fragile refusal to mend the world's incoherence.

Soon after the Summer of love, psychedelic styles spread through the mainstream as fast as any capitalist rash. Marx's dictum that 'everything solid melts into air' seemed to have found its morphology at last: soft and pliable, virally deformed, every thing is liable to pseudo-recognition and ready to be reborn as a commodity subspecie psychedelica. The abrasiveness of lSD has a structural similarity to the capitalism that strips away determinate qualities and dissolves society into mediated intensities. Today this is epitomised in the archetypal psychedelic image – the screensaver – that watches over post-Fordist workers who mortgage their futures against their labour, imaginations and desires. Art's psychedelic relationship provides early missives from the info-sphere where late capital operates through neuroplastic processes and modular forms of control. Conversely, art's psychedelic connection in fact commands artistic strategies that can manifest such highly abstract biopolitical forms of control that are otherwise only fleetingly present in the nervous system.

An art created with psychedelic connections is often driven to tell stories. When life is broken and no image can hold the porosity of the dream world, what can no longer be experienced directly can only be reached as events reread and retold. in this way, when things fall apart, art's psychedelic connections can produce loquaciousness and drama against the silence of normative social powers. There is something utopian in psychedelia that doesn't release its pull on us, doesn't allow us to let go. Perhaps this is because of its intimate relationship with time and what is yet unformed, and its readiness for life's sudden reconfigurations. If art is that which is not yet a thing – a commodity, certain knowledge or something identifiable – the psychedelic perfectly inhabits this proto-state with the conviction that time is pregnant with events.

-Lars Bang Larsen