

ON PARADISE CIRCUS

and unveiled visions

“Paradise Circus” is a theatre piece which, by means of movement, music, lights and spoken texts, brings to the stage a representation of the inner visions of the mystical journey outlined in the book “The Psychedelic Experience” by Timothy Leary.

The psychedelic experience can be referred to as a non-linear odyssey into the depths of one’s own unconscious, beyond the protective veil of the rational mind, the ego and the personality. „The psychic changes and unusual states of consciousness induced by hallucinogens are so far removed from similarity with ordinary life that it is scarcely possible to describe them in the language of daily living.“¹

The theatre apparatus offers a playground for these indescribable visions to be given shapes, colours, smells, movements and affects.

The following text, commissioned by the artist, is an account of my personal experience of the piece in relation to my reading of the book it was inspired by.

¹ Richard Evans Schultes, Albert Hofmann and Christian Raetsch, *Plants of the Gods, their sacred, healing and hallucinogenic powers* pg. 14

A quiet and almost solemn atmosphere receives us, the audience, as we enter the space and leave behind a dark and rainy sky on a cold December evening.

On stage the musician Nilsen Grey is standing at his table filled with instruments for live electronics; a downtempo beat breaks the silence and into the spotlight the performer Despina Kapetanaki emerges from a hidden corner of the stage, with red curly hair and glittering eyes. She is approaching the audience, walking with hesitation, convulsing her upper body and limbs. Her hips and hands are shaking in spasmodic gestures, slightly scared. Her figure brings to mind the memory of “the witch dance” (1926), the iconic piece by Mary Wigman, while her dance differs from the spellcasting of the witch. As she turns her neck from side to side, her gaze fixes on something just above ours, her movements hint to something we can't see, something she is hallucinating on.



Photo ©2023 Pablo Pérez Gómez

The photograph depicts the dancing body of the performer in a pitch dark stage, where only a white light shines on her upperbody and face. One arm is raised and bend before her face, the other outstretched behind her back, her red curly hair waive behind her head.

As she reaches centre stage, she sinks into a purple beanbag that moulds to the weight of her seated body. A robotic-sounding voice amplified by the speakers says: “Hello human. How are you today?” she replies: “Burned out.”

It seems to be a dialogue between an A.I. voice and the performer which consists of the human desperately seeking for answers to her existential anguish and the A.I. dispensing advice on how to improve the human's quality of life.

“Checking for solutions... shopping frst, antidepressants, sleeping pills, call a friend, call family, music”. The list is a mixture of neoliberal quick-fixes and general approaches to the fulfillment of emotional needs.

The human's psychological state is compromised by negative emotions and lingering despair, the support of the A.I. is cold and pragmatic, and rather than helping, seems to exacerbate the state of the human. The conversation ends with various existential questions and a clear task.

Human: "How to be a badass?"

A.I.: "Get your shit together!" - "you have to kill your ego, you have to turn your mind of".

This introductory interaction between the human and the non-human opens up an interesting reflection on the role of technology in the expansion of human consciousness and on the eternal question on what consciousness really is and whether non-humans are conscious beings. In traditional Western thinking we are conditioned to believe that only humans have consciousness, while in most indigenous cultures, an animist understanding of the world acknowledges that all things are different expressions of consciousness. Furthermore, plants and other non-human entities (mushrooms, toads, cacti and other) that when consumed (in very specific and respected rituals, under the guidance of shamans and other spiritual guides) induce an hallucinogenic effect on human, are considered gods and higher forms of consciousness. Could A.I., as well, represent a new form of consciousness in the universe and could it become a guide to the expansion of our own consciousness?

As the voice of the A.I. disappears, the rhythm of a heartbeat takes its sonorous space, engulfing us in the inner body. The performer is now lying down on the floor, shaking her body in contact with the floor and her limbs slightly lifted in the air.

The heartbeat transforms into the sound of an underwater world of muffled bubbles, and the performer is floating and drifting towards the back of the stage, until she becomes stranded on the back wall, a shipwreck washed ashore by the waves, red and blue lights shining on our path beyond the veil.

In esoteric practices like the Tarot, water represents the emotional side of the psyche and by diving into the pool of the unconscious we leave the rational mind to face our irrational fears, uncontrolled emotions and deepest terrors. The prepared initiate of the psychedelic experience wouldn't be discouraged to continue their journey into the unconscious, but for the unprepared these energies are too great to face without the protection of the rational mind.

For this purpose, Timothy Leary lays out a detailed description of how to prepare and undergo the psychedelic experience, in order not to be intimidated by the unveiling of what hides beyond the personality.

The performer disappears behind the scene and reappears wearing a mask that reminds me of the film by Pitof “Dark Portals: The Chronicles of Vidocq”. In this 2001 mystery film the investigator Eugène Vidocq pursues an assassin who wears a mirrored mask which has the power to trap the souls of his victims.

She comes very close to the audience and I observe the reflection of myself along with the rest of the audience in the mirrored mask. The lights are changing fast, almost at a stroboscopic pace, creating a frenetic vibration, a flickering of my own reflection, a faring of my own image, perhaps hinting at the volatility of my identity, self-image and “beloved personality” that we are asked to leave at the gate of the psychedelic voyage.

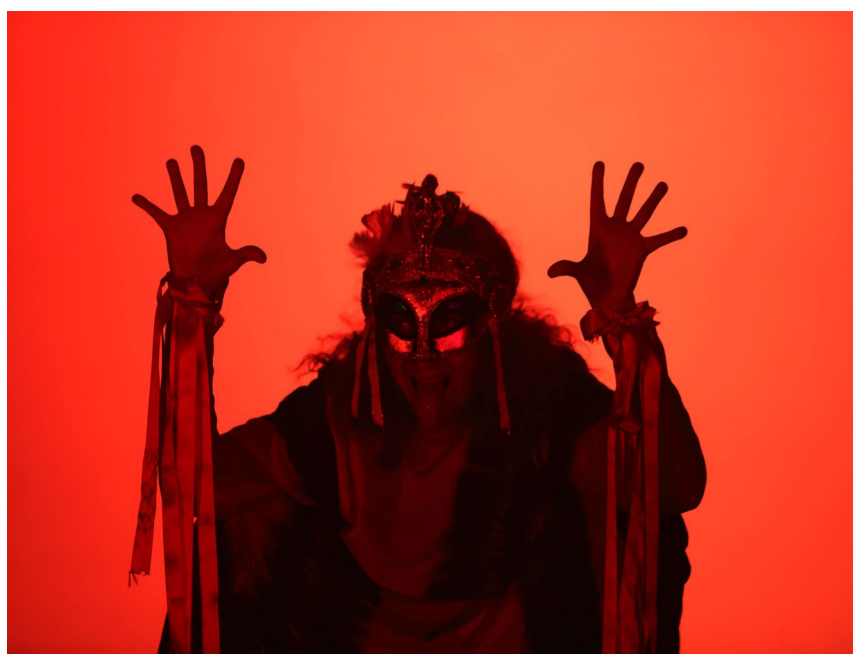


Photo ©2023 Pablo Pérez Gómez

The photograph depicts the performer's upper body and face in the orange lit stage. Over her eyes and nose she wears a golden mask decorated with ribbons, from her open mouth her tongue stretches out to her chin. Her arms are raised slightly above her head and her fingers spread wide open, from her wrists many ribbons hang to her bend elbows.

After a moment of high energy and accelerated beats and movement, the space settles into a calm harbour as the performer again disappears and reappears guiding us along another strand of the journey. She wears another golden mask and a rainbow-coloured dress, in the typical tie-dye style that instantly alludes to the freedom movement of the 1960's. The lights also follow the transformation, turning yellow and green.

“Now you are seeing just what you ought to see” the A.I. vocalizes. Personally, as a spectator, I feel a resistance to letting go and merging with the experience. I feel far removed from the journey but my wish is to be part of it. Especially in the next scene, where the performer is enacting what seems to be a shamanic ritual. I feel the desire to partake rather than merely observe from my seat, as she dances alone in a circular motion around the stage beating a drum. The collective invocation is missing and the stage set-up constrains it to a representation of a ritual.

Smoke fills the stage as she lights incense, of which the scent pervades the whole space, as she now holds the drum in front of her upper body and kneels down under a patterned scarf. With a clear and profound tone, she speaks and gestures of great spirits: serpents and eagles. I am intrigued and absorbed by the scenery and I begin to ponder on the appropriation of sacred symbols and ceremonial objects for a performative representation of a spiritual journey. How can we resonate with the sacred practices of indigenous cultures for whom traditional celebrations with hallucinogens are at the core of their spirituality? How can these practices be portrayed in the theatre apparatus without altering their cultural and sacred value?



Photo ©2023 Pablo Pérez Gómez

In a dark backdrop the performer is seated on the floor, her upperbody and face are covered by a patterned scarf. She raises an arm up holding a drum in front of her upper body with the other hand. On the floor in front of her the slice of hollow tree trunk contains incense sticks, a small bag and a cup.

Once the depth of the unconscious is reached, the mind requires us to return to its ordinary state, which of course will never be the same; the psychedelic experience enriches the reality we live in. Our perception is not fixed or unmovable rather it is in constant flux with the universe. After once again moving through a fluid water-like state the performer re-emerges, leaving those visions to subside again in the unconscious. The piece concludes with the iconic quote by Timothy Leary: “Turn on, tune in, drop out”, which he himself defines as follows:

“‘Turn on’ meant go within to activate your neural and genetic equipment. Become sensitive to the many and various levels of consciousness and the specific triggers engaging them. Drugs were one way to accomplish this end. ‘Tune in’ meant interact harmoniously with the world around you—externalize, materialize, express your new internal perspectives. ‘Drop out’ suggested an active, selective, graceful process of detachment from involuntary or unconscious commitments. ‘Drop Out’ meant self-reliance, a discovery of one’s singularity, a commitment to mobility, choice, and change.”¹

¹ Timothy Leary, *Flashbacks: A Personal and Cultural History of an Era* pg. 253