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HEX, DRUGS AND DAMAGE CONTROL:

**Phenomenology, pharmaceuticals and catharsis
in performance art 1976-1992.**

“Drugs will work to better effect in a post-revolutionary society where the avant-garde desire to integrate art and life will at last be realized.”¹

The Church, Belfast, 1979

“There was a lot to use there, debris, an old piano, flags, old bibles, hymn books, plaster, wood, slates, broken glass, floorboards, clothing, things like that. What I did bring in to that derelict church space each time was a military holdall bag, I thought of it as a bag of tricks, a shaman’s bundle. There was also a length of green rubber tubing in it that seemed to figure quite prominently in a number of these ‘akshuns.’² This would be used in a number of configurations – mostly lengths held in my mouth as a kind of umbilical or as an allusion to some sort of psychic expulsion. It had a direct relationship to being hospitalised and having my stomach pumped out after a drug and alcohol overdose in 1979.”³

The Heritage Arts Centre, Brick Lane, London 1992

“At this time I was in a psychotic state: I actually felt capable of carrying out a murder... I have no recollection of the performance... By all accounts I had an insane breakdown in public... I was lost in addiction... and all I wanted was more drugs.. more alcohol, there was a strange sense of logic to becoming a failure; one could actually be quite self-righteous.”⁴

In this text I will explore how and why I made radical art with the aid drugs to produce altered states of consciousness as a means for conflict transformation. I will explore examples of my own formative engagement with mind altering substances (alcohol, prescribed medication, street and pharmaceutical grade drugs) that were used in combination with performance art in Belfast during the nineteen seventies and through my travels in the 1980's and complete mental and physical breakdown due to drug and alcohol abuse in the early nineteen nineties.

It is not in the scope of this text to produce and an in-depth time-line of the central role drugs and alcohol played in my life and art during this period. For the purposes of the current text I will draw attention to selected examples of early and later performance work from the period 1976-1992. I will also explore the various discursive elements that helped shape this work and how I was trying to formulate a strategy for an 'experimental exercise of freedom'⁵ that utilised a combination of mind, mood and body elevators with physical ritual, to achieve psychic catharsis as a means for liberation from a colonial/cultural conditioning.

ACTION REVEALED

The French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty sought to identify the specific role of the body as mediator between the world and self. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological proposition derived from the philosophies of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger is based on structures of subjective experience and consciousness. Phenomenology allows us to explore our relationship to the world using *all* our senses. Central to this is the argument that the body is a form of consciousness underpinning all action. Merleau-Ponty, argues, "there is not in the normal subject a tactile experience and also a visual one, but an integrated experience to which it is impossible to gauge the contribution of each sense."⁶

This embodied experience or phenomenological sense of being connected; in and of the present moment has a correlation with the emergence of performed acts by artists after the Second World War of the twentieth century. One might see this as a need to mutually engage on a more radical level and in a

more socially and politically active role in the world as a consequence of a catastrophic world trauma.

The American academic Kristine Stiles identified this as taking place after the Second World War “.. (When) performance by artists emerged almost simultaneously in Japan, Europe and the United States. The artists who began to use their bodies as material of visual art repeatedly expressed their goal to bring art practice closer to life in order to increase the experiential immediacy of their work. Emphasising the body as art, these artists amplified the role of process over product and shifted from representational objects to presentational modes of action..()..they also sought to reengage the artist and spectator by reconnecting art to the material circumstances of social and political events.”⁷ These new performance ‘actions’ by artists were seen as a radical gesture, and indeed corroborate twentieth century modernism’s rejection of tradition. Initially, although not exclusively, having their genesis in modernism’s avant-garde advances and the development of the gesture as a performative intervention in art through painting; artists sought to engage in what Harold Rosenberg called a “ sensual, psychic, and intellectual effort to live actively in the present.”⁸

From the 1940’s through to the early 1950’s focus shifted from the self-contained and autonomous artwork towards emphasis on process and action in art that drew attention to the work of art as a real life event.

“At a certain moment the canvas began to appear to one American painter after another as an arena in which to act. What was to go on the canvas was not a picture but an event.”⁹

In Europe during the early twentieth century a collapsed multiplicity in picture making through ‘cubism’ emerged to challenge preconceptions of time, space and perception. Eventually, particularly in the United States, a received ‘fluid cubism’ was radically demolished in favour of ‘all over’ or immersive experiences; what Merleau-Ponty might consider ‘integrated experiences’.

The process was initially revealed and accepted publically through the convulsive and revolutionary action of Jackson Pollock’s work from the mid 1940’s onwards. Here, with process revealed, it was now possible to consider the artist’s actions and its outcome as a form of embodiment. In Pollock’s work and in particular the work of live action based/performance artists that

followed, embodiment is not just an experience, it is the very basis of an integrated phenomenological experience that alludes to altered states of consciousness. Common to many artists including Pollock was the use of intoxicants, and mood altering or enhancing drugs as a social and creative lubricant.

Thereafter too, and through the 1960's and 1970's artists became increasingly assured through a conceptual and practical interdisciplinarity in being able to incorporate various media, and mind altering substances in combination with the human body to engage with social and political concerns. These historical/political/colonial, body-presentational, and phenomenological concerns came together in my own practice at a specific time and location in Northern Ireland in direct relation and as a result of civil conflict. The foundation for the phenomenological concerns implicit in this work was as a direct result of my childhood in the nineteen sixties and an experience of youth culture attuned to the legacy of drug impact upon consciousness and revolutionary or radical creative acts.¹⁰

The notion of embodiment and the use of my own body as a form of consciousness underpinning all action developed through intuitive stages. These initial stages are inextricably linked to my formative years growing up in a civil war in Belfast, Northern Ireland.

In my own personal experience the making and doing of art at that time (in the nineteen seventies) was underpinned by what was a necessary elevation from the traumatic events through the use of intoxicants. This however is not to be confused with a straightforward relief or escape from reality through drug and alcohol abuse but rather the use of mood/mind/physically altering substances as a confrontation or collision with that dominant reality. It came out of a precarious need to reach beyond the confines of a stifling social, cultural and political endgame. The hope being that 'mind manifesting'¹¹ substances combined with certain forms of radical/ phenomenological art would allow one to achieve altered states of consciousness and as a consequence a better society in which to function creatively, and that this in turn would result in a form of deconditioning from the confines of a limited and delusional ideological, political, mental, physical state to one of liberation.

POST POLLOCK PUNK

During 1976-78 a peer group developed around the Belfast punk music scene. Activity centred on playing music and imbibing in copious quantities of alcohol and drugs. Accepted as being 'liminal' i.e. special and different; a core group of social misfits including myself developed a more communal lifestyle living in a large mansion house on the outskirts of Belfast.

Here we embarked upon a series of tests using pharmaceutical grade amphetamines, alongside psilocybin mushrooms and mescaline.

As a group we would experiment with ingesting various substances that would physically and mentally alter our perception and consciousness in creative group activity. This included free-form music making and in particular, performance drawing and writing sessions that would last without a break for up to 4-5 days. The time slippage between past, present and future, and on occasion the eradication of personality and bodily awareness among some participants lead to psychosis.

For a few of us it was both exhilarating and liberating. The experience certainly gave me confidence to embark on art-based performances in a wide range of public and private situations. I started to incorporate the use of drugs that would vary in terms of type of drug and how much would be ingested depending on the situation. As my practice developed the use of drugs where combined with ritual activity in a performance art context to allow a form of catharsis to occur. One of the earliest public 'akshuns' using amphetamines took place at Belfast College of Art in April 1998 and was simply entitled 'Painting Performance'. A simple 'Pollock' painting 'akshun' it was fast and furious and didn't really last very long. It nevertheless took me to the next stage in my development from being considered a painter to something more confrontational, dissident and contentious.

rites of passage

In the autumn of 1978 I carried out a symbolic ritual immolation that consisted of the burning of my paintings in Belfast city centre while chanting and spray painting the slogan *'Art Is Not A Mirror It's A Fucking Hammer'*. Before the 'akshun' I had ingested a quantity of small speed pills called 'blues': pharmaceutical grade amphetamines. The performance was cathartic and transformative; expressed through a purging of traditional formulas and values associated with art making, (i.e. painting). The eradication of prior artistic concerns through the use of fire to cleanse and purge, enabled me as a young artist, to break free of traditional art making and to complete a transformation to a more radical and social/political engagement through performance art. The process of burning with petrol (a direct association with the rioting and petrol bombing in Belfast I had experienced and taken part in before going to art school) accompanied by a sloganeering manifesto converged in a act of purification that drew direct relationships between making art and the physical and psychic environment of Belfast in 1978. The performance reflected a number of concerns regarding territory, political power and the potential for ritual as a means of empowerment and for reclaiming or transforming identity. Although concerned with a transitional state – the seeking out of new ways of artistic expression beyond painting – the work embraced aspects of ritual from the repetition of tasks (amphetamines were also used to increase stamina) and the way the site was laid out, to the almost 'religious' incantation of a manifesto implicit in title. I personally experienced an overwhelming cathartic release particularly when I let out a primal scream at the start of the 'akshun'.

The use of pharmaceutical grade amphetamines allowed for increased stamina in many of these early performance occasions such as public or site-specific ritual based 'akshuns' in Belfast. This enabled repetitive ritual activities to occur over prolonged periods. I wanted to make work that could create liminal spaces that would subvert (and transform) social structure and therefore possibly allow catharsis to take place not only for myself but also for the public as participant/observers. By temporarily separating participants from everyday social structure, ritual (and drugs/intoxicants) creates ambiguous social status. "Liminality is inherent to ritual, since participants'

former identities and obligations to social status must be removed before new identities and obligations can be taken on. Transition from old social identity to a new one necessarily creates ambiguous social status. Most importantly, liminality represents the possibility of standing aside not only from one's own social position but from all social positions and of formulating a potentially unlimited series of alternative social arrangements"¹²

Thus liminality, inherent in ritual activity is also essentially 'subversive' of everyday social structure, and by association; the work I was making in the context of Northern Ireland with its ritual associations, content, codified signifiers and mannerisms could also be seen as inhabiting a liminal space 'subversive' of everyday social structure. The subversive or outsider status of drug taking also gets conflated into the art/social context and reflected back into the culture as a critique of a colonised (and colonial) identity. No more so than the use of a derelict church in Belfast at the height of 'the Troubles.' The church was in itself the physical embodiment of this liminal space. I felt at that time these elements combined with ritual activity and a specific sited space with all its incorporated history and my own personal projections of its meaning could be used as destabilising techniques in order to allow a deconditioning of my 'learned' identity to occur.

GHOST DANCE IN THE CHURCH

From 1979-1980 I spent over a year working in an abandoned and derelict church in my family neighbourhood in Belfast. This series of 'akshuns' at 'the Church' allowed me to formulate a language of materials and strategies for working that through site-specific works focused on the use of ritual behaviour and cathartic experience. I started consciously exploring, inventing and developing 'personal' rituals that would, I hoped lead me to some form of catharsis, understanding, and realisation, possibly a transcendence of my own conditioned identity. Through making these initial 'ritual akshuns' I identified ritual activity as a means of redressing the limitations of social structure. I identified it as a form of non-conformist art via ritual performance.

By creating performance art 'rituals' with the aid of 'mind-manifesting' drugs I was looking for a way to de-condition/re-condition/or even perhaps simply to demolish myself, as I felt had been subjugated or lost within an alien identity. I felt it would be possible to affirm as new identity outside of my own culture. I was convinced I was reconstructing an identity outside my culture that was both liminal and oppositional. I felt if I created these self-initiation rituals, I would be able to have some sort of power over my situation. However, I realised my condition was actually a kind of trajectory out of shamanic practice that centred on the archetype of the 'trickster'. Jung suggests it is the trickster's questionable behaviour and their subsequent power to convert, transform or indeed heal that is at the centre of the trickster as shaman/healer; it is the "...unpredictable behaviour of the trickster and his transformation of the meaningless into the meaningful that reveals the trickster's compensatory relation to the saint.¹³

At this time in 1979 I also began corresponding with Dr. Al Ackerman.¹⁴

We had an on-going dialogue concerning the possibilities of hallucinogens in performances that might allow access to my shadow side; my subconscious 'trickster'. In effect using the assessing of my 'trickster' archetype as a subversion of social structure through performance art and a seeking out of a limiminal space for liberation to occur.

I carried out several 'akshuns' in the Church in Belfast using Lysergic Acid Diethylamide commonly known as LSD or Acid. These performance 'akshuns' were durational and open ended in terms of time, although predicated on some form of preconceived ritual or repetitive activity taking place. In 'Ghost Dance' the activity was mainly static and lasted seven hours. During this time I wore a priests cassock that was nailed to a small wood platform. Several initial akshuns took place: cutting up a cows heart, chalking text, cutting my mouth and placing 'wadding' material in it, binding my penis and applying white body colouring. Thereafter I stood motionless on the platform for several hours. My recollection was that as I was 'coming up' and experiencing the full acid 'trip' I began passing through the walls and flying out into the street over a large crowd that were engaged in a street riot. There was indeed a real riot taking place in the street when I made the akshun. I experienced extreme synaesthesia. There was gunfire and very loud shouting, things being

broken, glass being smashed; everything outside the church was extremely loud. I experienced the sound of violence as various intense colours. I could also smell the colours. I would fly above the crowd and then come back into the church where I was 'anchored' on the platform. The flying and returning was a repetitive activity. I vacillated between feeling incredible freedom as a result of flying and a sense of loss when I was became aware of being anchored to the wooden platform. There was only one person present in the church; the artist Tara Babel who was taking photos.¹⁵ Tara's experience was one of fear concerning the riot outside and if the rioters, police or army might come into the church. As the external activity dissipated Tara then experienced boredom, as I didn't seem to be doing anything but standing on the platform in the church.

This akshun among many whereby I ingested LSD and more often psilocybin (as it was more easily obtainable and was free i.e. collecting quantities of mushrooms in the country) enabled me to experiment in a precarious liminal space between conflict and liberation. In these early experiments mind altering substances were always used in combination with making art, as a creative enabler. I did not use these types of drugs for recreational purposes. However, that was to change after the nineteen eighty when I moved to London.

OUT OF CONTROL

London occupies a zone in my consciousness inhabited by the ghosts of those formative experiences and later, throughout the 1980's the city seemed like a punctuation to something rather more sinister and inevitable in the unfolding drama of those times. The experience of Belfast was important, because it made me very aware of a certain social and cultural containment that would inhibit growth. Through making performance art 'akshuns' with and without the use of certain mind-altering chemicals I felt it was important to develop further my art practice as an alternative methodology for living and personal growth transformation.

My ongoing belief in communal living and collaborative art-making is something that remained through those experiences; living in Belfast and then through the squatting (the habitation of abandoned or empty buildings) scene

in London.

In London I began working with a host of music collaborators, bands, and artists in clubs and alternative spaces. We were interested in bringing performance art into the context of popular culture as a result we began to develop multi-media multi-squat events. I was living and working in an environment that attracted many damaged and vulnerable people to a lifestyle that was awash with drug and alcohol dependency.

My own addiction to prescribed drugs and a diet of alcohol and amphetamines with the attendant, desperation, mental twists, and unhinged psycho-states that resulted, was played out through a series of performances that in their own way also contributed to my complete meltdown.

During that time in the eighties and early nineties and as a result of leading a 'performance art lifestyle' my experience and perception of the public and the private disintegrated and fused into one. My performance art akshuns at that time were a potent part of my physical, emotional and spiritual unraveling.

"I made a performance in 1983 South of Canal Street in Tribeca (New York) at the original Franklin Furnace. I took too much speed and went berserk during my performance. This resulted in the gallery being sued by an audience member for physical and mental abuse. They settled out of court but I had to make myself scarce. I started dressing up in women's cloths and make-up and hung out at places like the Pyramid Club, Area, Danceteria, and a few 'tranny' clubs. I also did a few performances in that whole music and performance No-Fi hedonistic death cult trip scene that was happening, I also got into heroin, bad idea."¹⁶

Throughout the eighties I was making lots of very confrontational performances on the alternative club circuit and touring a lot. I also did several performance art tours of the USA. In particular the 1989 'Hardcore Live Art Tour' I did with Tara Babel & Shaun Caton, which was fueled by drug, associated behavior and is perhaps the most mythologized not least for regular projectile vomiting on stage brought about by a purposeful ingestion of conflicting alcohol and pharmaceuticals.

'ND' fanzine described a performance we did during the Hardcore tour at the Zero-One gallery in L.A. as having 'High levels of whatcore where the artists have their heads bent out of shape.'¹⁷ We were using a lethal daily cocktail of alcohol in combination with speed (Amphetamine Sulphate: Whizz), downers (valium/diazepam), acid and MDMA/Ecstasy (methylenedioxyphenethylamine - aka: E's). In fact 'E's' and Whizz' became my drugs of choice when I was doing regular club performances in places like the Zap in Brighton, Mutoid Waste, the Empire, and The Exploding Cinema in London and all-night raves around Britain at the end of the 80's and early 90's. I was making 'Geek' performances, a take on the earlier 'trickster' akshuns whereby I inhabited the persona of a deranged carnival freak. I had to take 'whizz' to keep going as I was often making my performances at some crazy time like 3.00am. I even did national TV shows in the UK as The Geek whacked out on speed.

AM I DYING MEESTER?

While creating performances that addressed that madness of the troubles in Northern Ireland and what I perceived to be a world in which I was increasingly marginalised and disposed I found myself falling into drug addiction, dependency and some serious bad craziness.

Hot Dog at the Exploding Cinema in London was "...the cathartic akshun that most totally indicated my state of mind (at that time: 1992) and the repugnance of who I was in a public context. I did it in close proximity to the audience, with a backing track of heavy rap with lines from a porn magazine. The atmosphere was one of debased chemsex. I shoved implements up my arse: huge scissors, a broom handle, a gun, stilettos, sausages. While some sections of the audience were horrified, shouting for me to stop, others were goading me on, shouting, "Go for it". I was stuck in the middle of it all. I was dead inside. A sense of nothingness, tempered with extreme pain and terror. I was lost in addiction...The only comfort I could get was when my head had stopped thinking - and the only way to do that was to drink to black out and do drugs to anaesthetise myself further."¹⁸

After two public car-crash performance experiences it all stopped on 17th November 1992. "It seems difficult to talk about such a thing – maybe

because I had some sort of a spiritual or mystical experience... I was lying on the floor of my squat... I felt like I had died, my whole essence was draining bit by bit out of my body. I remember feeling this incredible whoosh of energy and going down a tunnel into an incredibly bright light. I had a feeling of absolute perfection... That was the last thing I remember. I came to about 48 hours later. I was terrified but I knew it was over.”¹⁹

Perhaps someone from a ‘primitive’ society would have used different terminology to describe this experience. Stewart Homes has pointed out that what had happened to me was “...undoubtedly an instance of shamanic auto-initiation.”²⁰ and “...like so many of those following the rocky road to shamanic initiation, he passed through a deep mental crisis that is hard to distinguish from a descent into madness. The symbolic destruction of the former self is however only the pre-condition for the emergence of a new self, a transfigured body equipped with the higher powers of the shaman.”²¹

PHENOMENOLOGY & HEX REDEMPTION

By concentrating on societal ills such as conflict and imbalances of power it might be suggested that certain performance artists attempt to evoke trauma inherent within their observers’ psyches and elicit a purging of these repressed memories. This may be the case with variations when I consider some of my formative performance art experiences and their relationship with drugs and a willingness (or wilfulness?) in their usage to engage in liminal or altered states to achieve a form of catharsis relative to early trauma as a result of civil conflict. I was trying to formulate an artistic strategy for an ‘experimental exercise of freedom’ that used drugs in combination with physical ritual, to achieve psychic catharsis as a means for liberation from a colonial/cultural conditioning; and it worked, but it nearly didn’t and I am not sure I would recommend it, not even as a phenomenological model. At this point in 2015 I can only look back with certain incredulity at the strange unpredictability of those hard and dangerous times and the many years spent living precariously on the margins of our alienating society. This is tempered with a genuine gratitude for the best of times and the worst of times simply because I survived when many of my friends did not. I still marvel at how

those drug related performance art experiences contributed to their conversion into my rehabilitation and spiritual awakening.

word count 4,301

Footnotes

¹ Home, Stewart, *Voices Green and Purple: Psychedelic Bad Craziess and the Revenge of the Avant-Garde*. <https://www.stewarthomesociety.org/praxis/voices.htm> (accessed 14.09 15 Nov. 2015).

² 'Akshun' or 'Akshuns' is a term I have used since 1977 to denote the 'type' of performance art I make. Basically it is a Northern Irish phonetic translation of the word 'Action' as in 'live action' or 'action art'.

³ Jeffries, N., (2008) *Early Akshun, Belfast 1976-1980*, Stitt, André Substance, Exeter, England, SpaceX, pgs. 204-227.

⁴ Stitt, André (2002) *Small Time Life*, London, Black Dog Publishing/Locus+, pg. 53

⁵ A phrase coined in the late 1950's by Brazilian critic Mario Pedrosa who applied it to a range of artists motivated to abandon traditional art forms such as painting and sculpture for a new aesthetic that connected directly with political, cultural and social concerns through a performative practice.

⁶ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, (2002) *The Phenomenology of Perception*, London, Routledge.

⁷ Stiles, Kristine and Selz, Peter (ed.), (1996) *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists' Writings*, Berkeley and Los Angeles University of California Press p.137.

⁸ Rosenberg, Harold in Hess, Barbara, (2005) *Abstract Expressionism*, Taschen.

⁹ Rosenberg, Harold, (1952) *The Tradition of the New, The American Action Painter*, Thames & Hudson.

¹⁰ Savage, Jon (2015) *1966 The Year the Decade Exploded*, Faber & Faber, London.

Reflection on disenfranchised British 'Mod' culture and the use of Speed/Amphetamines pgs.35-79. Also the wider use of LSD as the year and decade progressed "the already hyperventilated teenage psyche was bombarded with sensations and revelations beyond the ken of most humans. This was instant satori...; it was fundamental." pgs.105-141.

¹¹ *ibid* (Homes, Stewart 2015).

¹² Alexander B.C. (1991) *Victor Turner Revisited : Ritual As Social Change*, Atlanta, Georgia, Scholars Press.

¹³ Jung, C.J., *On the Psychology of the Trickster Figure*, in Radin.P.,(1956) *The Trickster: A Study in American Indian Mythology*, Schoken Books, Pgs.195-211.

¹⁴ Dr. 'Blaster' Al Ackerman was the most commonly used name by an American [mail artist](#) and writer born as William Hogg Greathouse. Ackerman had been active various subcultures since the early 1970s. He died on March 17, 2013, in Austin, Texas. He is credited along with David Zack with the concept of Neoism, creating the performance art persona Monty Cantsin thereafter personified by artist Isztvan Kantor.

¹⁵ Babel,Tara (2015) [telephone interview Fri., Dec. 4th, 2015] Tara Babel (Northern Ireland) collaborated with André Stitt from 1979-1989 and documented many early performances in Belfast and London. Her active performance art career was from 1978-2001.

¹⁶ Stitt, A. (2006) *Tour Blog*, UK, Samizdat Press.

¹⁷ Plunkett, Daniel, (1989) *Why they called it Hardcore*, ND 13, Austin, Texas.

¹⁸ *ibid* (Stitt, André, 2002)

¹⁹ *ibid* (Stitt, André, 2002)

²⁰ Home, Stewart,(2005) *Revenge of the Shamans*, Reclamation, Cardiff, Chapter.

²¹ *ibid* (Home, Stewart,2005)