Julia Bryan-Wilson

Minds Over Matter: Telepathy and Cold War Conceptualisms

Minds Over Matter:
Telepathy and Cold War Conceptualisms

Julia Bryan-Wilson

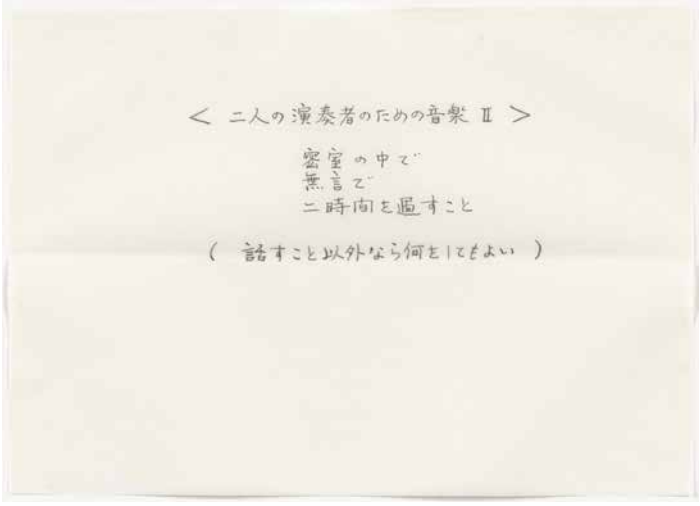
Cookie Jar 2
The Andy Warhol Foundation Arts Writers Grant

Introduction: Tune In

When M and I first met one another, delirious with love, our connection was so intense and fluid that it felt extrasensory. On a long plane ride we put it to the test using a deck of playing cards. It was true: we could read each other's minds. Later, during arguments, I would wish for more privacy with my own thoughts, attempting to put up barriers around my own head as M saw right through my caginess. They felt the same about me, sometimes covering their ears with their hands even though neither of us was speaking. This breach of our personal internal worlds was not always welcome; in fact, it was sometimes unwanted, even dangerous. We called this "telepathology."

In 1963, Japanese artist Mieko Shiomi carefully lettered with ink on paper the instructions for her score ‹ *music for two players II* › (fig. 1). The English translation reads: "In a closed room / pass over 2 hours / in silence. // (They may do anything but to speak.)" Shiomi, a founder of the improvisatory noise music and sound art collective Group Onganku, understood this piece not only as an iteration of the Cagean focus on ambient sound, but also as a method to facilitate communication between people for whom the variables of silence, confinement, and time might catalyze more interpersonal empathy. "The more I thought of the essence of music," Shiomi has stated, "the more conceptual I became. . . . I thought 'feeling duration itself is music.'"[1] Her focus on two participants suggests a conversation without

1. Kakinuma Toshie and Takeuchi Nao, oral history interview with Shiomi Mieko, December 1, 2014, translated by Reiko Tomii, Kyoto City University of Arts, https://www.kcua.ac.jp/arc/ar/shiomi_eg_1/.



(fig. 1a–b) Mieko Shiomi, ‹ *music for two players II* ›, 1963

words: "two players" are meant to open themselves to the environment of the closed room and to tune in to sub-aural sounds, in the service of better perceiving each other's thoughts and feelings. The work illustrates artists' enthrallment at this time with the possibilities of a pure, unmediated communication, one that collapses the distance between two beings in a manner uncontaminated by language. That is, ‹ *music for two players II* › is an experiment with telepathy.

Shiomi was far from alone when she dabbled with telepathic transmission. From the late 1950s to the mid-1970s, other artists were producing works steeped in this mode of communication and related phenomena: Yutaka Matsuzawa's corpus of "meditative visualizations," Yoko Ono's instruction pieces to be completed in the viewer's mind, Robert Barry's telepathic works, James Lee Byars's oeuvre related to the invisible, Pauline Oliveros's nonverbal sonic meditations, Marina Abramovic and Ulay's energetic syncopations, and Hannah Weiner's 1974 *Clairvoyant Journal*. A full consideration of these practice would also include works by Vito Acconci, Carolee Schneemann, Joan Jonas, Linda Montano, OHO, Robert Filliou, and more recent artists such as Gianni Motti. Many of these artists were affiliated with what came to be known as conceptualism—art primarily about ideas, deprioritizing physical objects—with telepathy acting as a kind of limit case for its precepts around dematerialization. But to claim that mind reading is merely the endgame in conceptual art is to overlook other serious engagements with telepathy across many cultural spheres. Why, especially in the United States and Japan, did artists working after World War II recruit the terms of telepathy into their practices? What were the uses and abuses of these telepathic investigations—some of which were

understood as utopian, while others were taken up by more malevolent agents? Why, in this moment, did parapsychic methods such as the decipherment of unspoken thought become strangely attractive to both conceptual artists and military agencies?

Wordless channeling of the dead via the spiritual realm, or divine inspiration that flows from the heavens: for centuries, these have been a wellspring of creativity for artists. In the nineteenth century, photography and the phonograph were deployed as technologies to help communicate with those who have passed. Something slightly different was afoot in the Cold War era of the long 1960s, when visual artists and experimental musicians were riveted by the effects of unseen forces on the earthly plane, testing the boundaries between cognition, perception, and sensing between living humans. Much of this art de-emphasized its visual and material dimensions, even if those elements were rarely fully abandoned. The space created by the withdrawal of objects was full of meaning and suggestion, extending an invitation to the viewer to engage á more direct kind of witnessing: when there is less to see or detect through ordinary means, there is more room for projection.

Rather than thinking about conceptual art's use as an occultist practice or tool for self-divination or self-knowledge, as in Susan Hiller's 1973 art event *Dream Mapping*, I am interested in a quite precise set of conditions, wherein conceptual art is both a way to transform matter via brain waves and a route towards languageless communication. I take at face value claims that it is possible to transmit thoughts in this manner, from one mind to another mind, without mediation. But what is at stake when artists try to beam ideas directly to their audiences, using mental energies to catalyze new forms?

What I offer in this essay is not an encyclopedic survey of telepathic art. Those inventories already exist, and I am grateful for the work of those who have dared to approach this topic.[2] Instead, this text takes the form of a restless meander, including or absorbing the mystical longings, telekinetic experiments, levitating government offices, and takedowns by Johnny Carson that occurred alongside these artistic practices and provided them with an eerie surround. By plumbing some of these practices, I speculate about how certain artists aligned with emergent feminist sensibilities while others suggested more sinister forms of mind control.

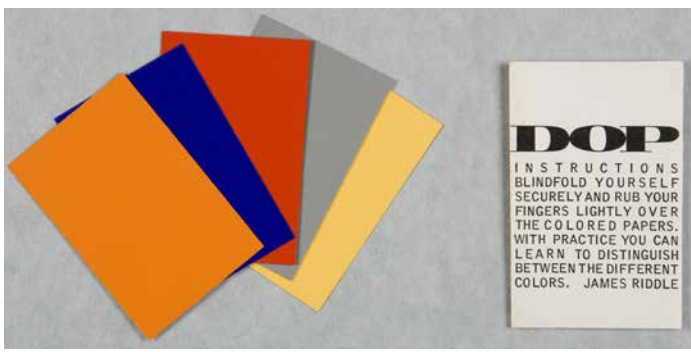
2. See Jacquelene Drinkall, *Telepathy in Contemporary, Conceptual, and Performance Art* (PhD thesis, University of New South Wales, 2005); and Warren Neidich, "Epilogue: Telepathic Exaptation in Late Cognitive Capitalism: A Speculative Approach to the Effects of Digitality," in *Big Data—A New Medium?*, ed. Natasha Lushetich (Routledge, 2020). See also the exhibition *Activist Neuroaesthetics: Telepathy and New Labor*, curated by Drinkall, Neidich, and Susanne Prinz, Verein zur Förderung von Kunst und Kultur am Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz e.V., Berlin, July 24–August 21, 2021, https://activistneuroaesthetics.art/exhibition/telepathy-and-new-labor/.

Mystics

"The true artist helps the world by revealing mystic truths," wrote Bruce Nauman in spiraling neon in 1967—his first work in the medium (fig. 2). This statement can be read several ways, and one of them is cynically. Is Nauman pointing out that there is no such thing as a true artist, much less one who (how grandiose!) helps the world by revealing something as dubious as "mystic truths" (rather than, say, economic truths or political truths or aesthetic truths)? Perhaps we are meant to read Nauman's words in a straightforward manner, as one would the words of a manifesto, or the arguments lodged in a polemic, about what some artists took to be their charge at this moment in the 1960s—not as some metaphysical truth, but instead as a statement of intent. As Nauman has said: "The most difficult thing about the whole piece for me was the statement. It was a kind of test—like when you say something out loud to see if you believe it.... I could see that the statement...was on the one hand a totally silly idea and yet, on the other hand, I believed it. It's true and it's not true at the same time.... For me it's still a very strong thought."[3] Nauman's disavowal of this "totally silly idea" is not complete but rather alive with the possibility of belief in the potential wisdom of this "very strong thought." Perhaps Nauman was acknowledging the ambivalent and precarious positions mystics hold in US society, likening them to artists, who are recognized as conduits to insight even as they lack any secure place in society's systems of valuation.

3. Quoted in Brenda Richardson, *Bruce Nauman: Neons* (Baltimore Museum of Art, 1980), 20.

(fig. 2) Bruce Nauman, *The True Artist Helps the World by Revealing Mystic Truths (Window or Wall Sign)*, 1967



(fig. 3) James Riddle, *E.S.P. Fluxkit*, 1967

Nauman's spiraling statement, writ in the commercial vernacular of tawdry neon, puts into words what many artists of this era were already testing out vis-à-vis "mystic truths." "Conceptual artists are mystics rather than rationalists," reminded Sol LeWitt in 1968. "They leap to conclusions that logic cannot reach."[4] Adrian Piper noted in 1971 that she "always had a strong mystical streak."[5] Were these claims of mysticism a lingering surrealist tendency to swerve away from order, or were they something else? Though many facets of conceptualisms coalesced all over the globe in the mid-twentieth century, including a playful streak that is often contrasted to the more dry, systematic, and informational version, it was the Fluxus-affiliated artists, including those working across the transpacific Japan-US nexus, like Shiomi, who most clearly flirted with the transcendental. Take, for example, James Riddle's *E.S.P. Fluxkit* (1967, fig. 3), which tests an audience's capacity to believe in alternative ways of knowing. It instructs us to blindfold ourselves so that we might distinguish the colors of a series of painted cards by touch or feeling or hunch rather than by sight—a kind of rerouting of sensorial input using methods not recognized by standardized, post-Enlightenment, Western norms of science.[6]

For centuries, the existence of thought transmission, sometimes

4. Sol LeWitt, "Sentences on Conceptual Art," 0–9, no. 5 (January 1969): 3–5. Written in 1968 and first published in 1969.
5. Adrian Piper, "Food for the Spirit," in *Out of Order, Out of Sight*, vol. 1, *Selected Writings in Meta-Art, 1968–1992* (MIT Press, 1996), 55. Written in 1971 and first published in *High Performance* 4, no. 1 (Spring 1981).
6. Riddle's piece was introduced to me by curator Constance (Connie) M. Lewallen when my students and I worked on her exhibition *Mind Over Matter* at the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive (BAMPFA), on view October 19–December 23, 2016. I have retained Connie's title for this essay, slightly altered, as an homage to her.

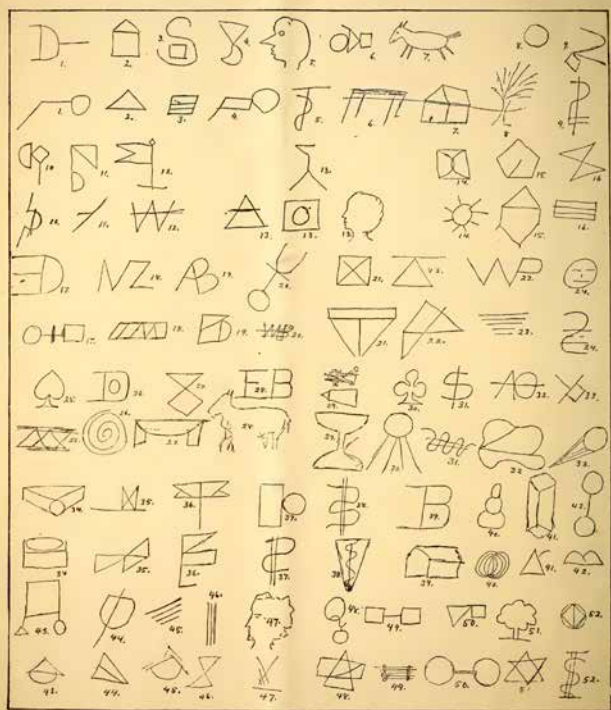
called brain-to-brain interface, has been posited within a range of scholarly realms, including physiology and neuroscience. Nineteenth-century French scientist Charles Richet conducted rigorous tests to try to prove the existence of telepathic abilities, asking participants to copy drawings made by others without seeing them. In an illustration published in 1885 (fig. 4), these pairings are somewhat less than convincing; in no case are the drawings identical and in many they appear to be utterly unrelated. Yet I am sympathetic to the illustration's caption, which optimistically spins it as demonstrating "some evidence of so-called thought-transference." For do not number 31 and its corresponding drawing—also numbered 31 and featuring S-curved wiggles bisected by straight lines—have an uncanny similarity despite being rotated? Who is to say the participants were not channeling a connection deeper than mere visual resemblance when one drew a tree and their partner then produced a Star of David? I could go on dissecting this sheet with its doodles to confirm my desires, and you, I am sure, will do the same. The noetic aspect of unspoken "gut feelings," "intuitions," "implicit understandings," "inner wisdom," and "hunches" within psychology cannot be discounted. Sigmund Freud believed in thought transference, and Jacques Derrida wrote that it is "difficult to imagine a theory of what they still call the unconscious without a theory of telepathy."[7]

The epistemological reach of Riddle's *E.S.P. Fluxkit* suggests a larger non-optical urge to create artworks that take place in the imagination rather than in the realm of visuality.

7. Jacques Derrida, "Telepathy," trans. Nicholas Royle, *Oxford Literary Review* 10 (1988): 14. First published in *Furor* 2 (February 1981): 5–41. For an examination of both Freud's and Derrida's theories of telepathy, see Royle, *Telepathy and Literature: Essays on the Reading Mind* (Blackwell, 1990).

THOUGHT-TRANSFERENCE IN BOSTON.

The committee on thought-transference, of the American society for psychical research, issued a circular during the winter, describing some simple experiments in guessing digits or the color of cards to test the theory of Professor Charles Richet of Paris, that thought-transference might exist to some degree in all persons. A large number of returns were received from persons making the trials according to the directions of the circular, and the results will



REDUCED FACSIMILE OF DRAWINGS SHOWING SOME EVIDENCE OF SO-CALLED THOUGHT-TRANSFERENCE.

(fig. 4) "Thought-Transference in Boston," *Science: An Illustrated Journal*, July–December 1885

This urge is exemplified by Yutaka Matsuzawa's notion of the "vanishing of matter." As Reiko Tomii explores in her book *Radicalism in the Wilderness* (2017), Matsuzawa drew from Japanese Buddhism, philosophy, and scientific studies of matter to theorize the ramifications of the invisible, which differed in its cosmic aspirations from what later would be termed dematerialization.[8] Frustrated with translation barriers between English and Japanese as he embarked on his research and sought recognition in Europe and the US, Matsuzawa worked to eliminate the physicality of art in the pursuit of a truly universal method of communication.

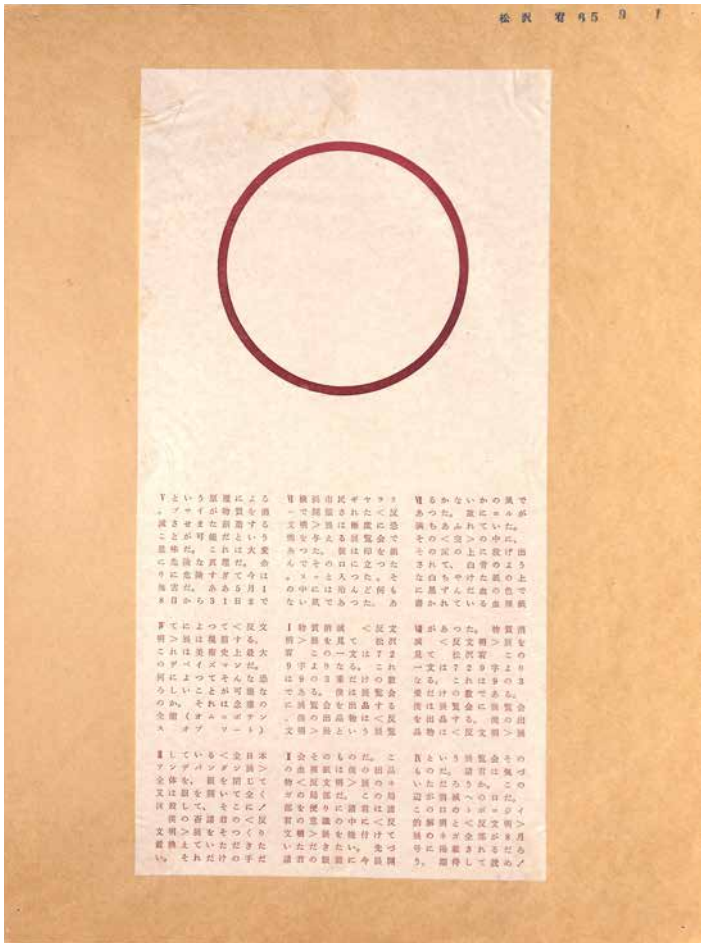
His earliest foray into invisible energy forces was an abstract cubic sculpture made in 1954, *Time-Space for Telepathy*, which, despite its title, is still tethered to materiality. Within a few years, as Matsuzawa approached the zero degree of *kannen geijutsu* (concept art), he would partly forgo the making of physical things, opting instead for a deep dive into other realms of perceiving. Though important distinctions remain between Matsuzawa's *kannen geijutsu* and Euro-American conceptualisms, both partook in an anti-capitalist ethos that sought to reroute artistic gestures away from market exchange. His 1960 manifesto "From Cybernetics to Mandala" lays out his theory of "psi powers," tracing an arc between spiritualism and the paranormal abilities to mind read and move objects with

8. Reiko Tomii, *Radicalism in the Wilderness: International Contemporaneity and 1960s Art in Japan* (MIT Press, 2017). Along with Tomii's groundbreaking work, I am grateful to UC Berkeley graduate student Kimberly Yu, whose research on romanticism and Matsuzawa I have learned from; thank you, Kim, for our conversations. As I was completing copy edits of this text, I was alerted to Olivia Shao's PhD dissertation, *Occult Conceptualism* (CUNY Hunter College, 2022), which includes a chapter on Matsuzawa.

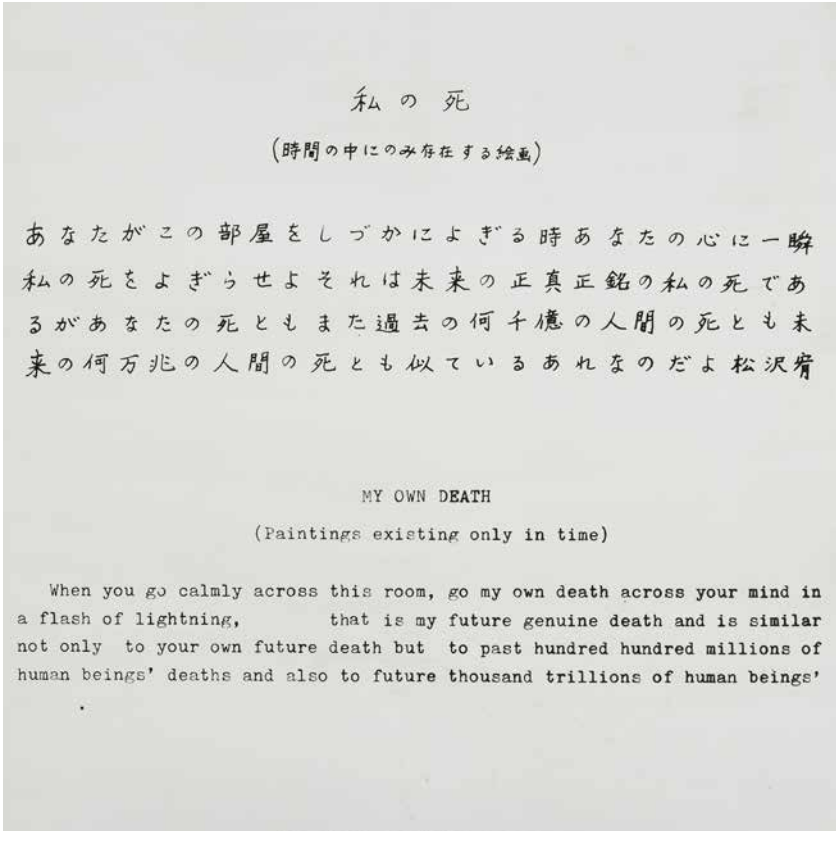
one's thoughts.[9] Though he never did fully renunciate the making of things, as Japanese researcher and artist Yoshiko Shimada has recounted, Matsuzawa was guided by a revelation that instructed him to "eradicate all objects" (figs. 5, 6).[10] In 1964, he organized the exhibition *Independent '64 in the Wilderness* in a mountain marshland of Nagano Prefecture, which eschewed the tangible basis of art in favor of what he called the "formless emission" of imaginary work.[11] Matsuzawa was interested in expanding art beyond the confines of civilization's numb modernities, and he looked to both pan-Asian religious traditions and contemporary physics research to ground his practice in psi power.

Like Shiomi, Matsuzawa worked in the context of post–World War II Japan; he recalls returning to Tokyo after it was firebombed and apprehending the city's ruinous "landscape of nothingness."[12] His grappling with invisible forces was inflected by the national trauma of widespread nuclear devastation in the wake of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Yet for Matsuzawa, scientific epistemologies were not at odds with unscientific processes. Rather, he considered them compatible knowledge systems that art practice was specifically adept at bringing together. His writings convey art's ability to merge impulses around energy, which might function not only as psychic powers but also as an emanating vibration—albeit one that nuclear science made into an

9. Yutaka Matsuzawa, "From Cybernetics to Mandala," *Geijutsu Shincho*, August 1960, quoted in Tomii, 52.
10. Yoshiko Shimada, "Matsuzawa Yutaka and the Spirit of Suwa," in *Conceptualism and Materiality: Matters of Art and Politics*, ed. Christian Berger (Brill, 2019), 271–97.
11. *Independent '64 in the Wilderness* call for entries, in Tomii, *Radicalism*, 2–3. Reprinted from *Bijutsu Janaru*, October 1964.
12. Tomii, *Radicalism*, 46.



(fig. 5) Matsuzawa Yutaka, *Vanishing of Matter: Seeing Anti-Civilization Exhibition*, 1965



私の死

(時間の中にのみ存在する絵画)

あなたがこの部屋をしづかによぎる時あなたの心に一瞬
私の死をよぎらせよそれは未来の正真正銘の私の死であ
るがあなたの死ともまた過去の何千億の人間の死とも未
来の何万兆の人間の死とも似ているあれなのだよ松沢宥

MY OWN DEATH

(Paintings existing only in time)

When you go calmly across this room, go my own death across your mind in a flash of lightning, that is my future genuine death and is similar not only to your own future death but to past hundred hundred millions of human beings' deaths and also to future thousand trillions of human beings'

(fig. 6) Yutaka Matsuzawa, *My Own Death (Paintings Existing Only in Time)*, 1970

agent of death. Matsuzawa's theories seem to refer to one set of vocabularies about energy (physics) while also incorporating an entirely different vernacular (Eastern spiritual lineages). While some of his counterparts in the US were also attracted to "energetic" means of nonlinguistic communication, their respective experiments were attended to by varied levels of peril.

The precedent set by Matsuzawa's direct modes of address in his "meditative visualizations"—which he acknowledged were derived in part from Eastern spiritual traditions—illustrated how telepathy as a mode of communication might be viewed as counter to, or an interruption of, Western scientific rationalisms. Yet, this false East/West duality is never entirely distinct: along with being influenced by regional traditions rooted in his home territory of the city of Suwa and its sacred lake (an aspect of his work that Shimada has investigated), Matsuzawa was familiar with the psychokinesis research undertaken by J. B. Rhine, at Duke University beginning in the 1930s, in an effort to legitimize extrasensory perception (ESP) through scrupulous tests and evidence-based proof. Matsuzawa's work proposes that we look past the paradigm of phenomenology to probe realms that go past what we think we know through our experience of the physical body. By thematizing intangible communication and scientific discourses around the plentitude of energy, his turn to telepathy can be understood, at least in part, as a dialogue with wartime technologies.

Perfectly Nothing

"I make you believe. . . . I am imaginary. . . . I give you perfectly nothing. . . . I made it of thought. . . ." These and other statements were inscribed on the flat rounds of Swiss sandstone installed on the occasion of James Lee Byars's first major solo exhibition, at the Kunsthalle Bern in 1978. Throughout his career, Byars shrouded himself in mystery. His carefully staged performances—or "plays," as he called them—put his outsized presence into constant tension with his investment in self-effacement and disappearance. Byars cultivated a very specific persona through his distinct sartorial choices, including dandyish gloves, a top hat, and solid-color outfits that suggested a preference for black, white, red, and, especially, gold—a color that for Byars was redolent of alchemy and freighted with both supernatural and economic value (fig. 7). He often appeared blindfolded, his eyes covered with a traditional Japanese loincloth (*fundoshi*) to emphasize his desire to thwart the primacy of the visual.

Critics and art historians have called Byars "a conjurer," "a magician, a wizard," someone with "psychic magnetism."[13] He was, in other words, an artist who participated in the kind of shamanic self-mythologizing pioneered by Joseph Beuys, whom he idolized (there are over a hundred letters from Byars to Beuys, but none back from Beuys[14]). Byars initially proposed that his 1978 show consist of nothing: he wanted to shutter the entire

13. See Klaus Ottmann, "Epiphanies of Beauty and Knowledge: The Life-World of James Lee Byars," in *James Lee Byars: Life, Love, and Death* (Les Musées de Strasbourg, 2004), 38; and Susanne Friedli, "Im the Genuis of the City of Bern," in *James Lee Byars: IM FULL OF BYARS* (Kerber Verlag, 2008), 54.
14. These letters are compiled in the volume *James Lee Byars: Letters to Joseph Beuys*, ed. Viola Michely (Hatje Cantz, 2000).

(fig. 7) James Lee Byars in front of
The Door of Innocence, 1986–87

building for its duration, and, in lieu of placing any objects inside, he would flank the outside entrance with two large, gilded speakers that would amplify onto the street the hums emitted by the curator as he mused over his decisions.

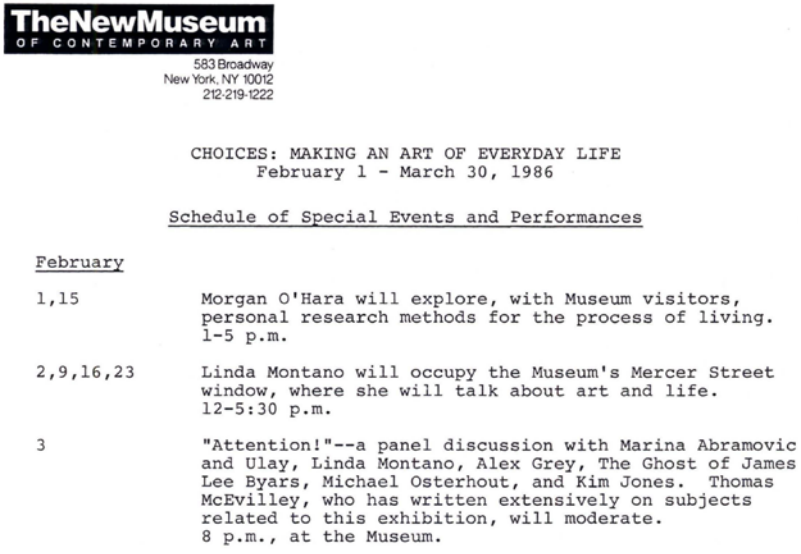
With these sounds emanating from the speakers, and making audible the otherwise hidden act of curatorial contemplation, this ideal version of the exhibition would have closed the institution off to spectators while its internal labor continued apace. For Byars, too, it would be as if the building itself were generating an almost otherworldly hum, like an incantation. Ultimately,

his idea of showing nothing was rejected and a more traditional exhibition went on view. Byars's proposal to present a show that would have dramatized the exhibition's very cancellation closely echoes another artwork involving negation as exhibition material: Robert Barry's *Closed Gallery Piece* (1969), which has been variously seen as a decisive act of institutional critique, a denunciation of the gallery system, and an annulment of the exhibition space.

Byars was likely to have known about Barry's 1969 piece, and its resonance with his exhibition proposal fits within his larger attraction to negation, the special powers of blankness, and the idea of haunting as a form of alternative embodiment. For a 1976 show entitled *James Lee Byars: Extra Terrestrial,* at the International Cultural Center (Internationaal Cultureel Centrum, ICC) in Antwerp, the artist presented a "telepathic lecture" in which he beamed in his thoughts from afar, claiming that he need not be bodily present to perform his pieces. In 1986, for the group exhibition *Choices: Making an Art of Everyday Life,* at the New Museum in New York (fig. 8), he presented a work entitled *The Ghost of James Lee Byars* (a version of which was first realized in 1969). Here is a quote from the press release: "James Lee Byars will be present in this exhibition by being physically absent as the ghost of James Lee Byars. IS THIS ART?" His ghost, according to curator Marcia Tucker, was registered via a "telepathic needle" installed in the lobby of the museum (painted gothic black for the occasion), raising questions about how one contains or locates a spirit or psychic entity.[15]

Byars's insistence on a communication beyond known networks of messaging, yet that is nonetheless fully reliant on the language

15. Martha Tucker, *Choices: Making an Art of Everyday Life* (New Museum, 1986), 67.



TheNewMuseum
OF CONTEMPORARY ART
583 Broadway
New York, NY 10012
212-219-1222

CHOICES: MAKING AN ART OF EVERYDAY LIFE
February 1 - March 30, 1986

Schedule of Special Events and Performances

February

1,15 — Morgan O'Hara will explore, with Museum visitors, personal research methods for the process of living. 1-5 p.m.

2,9,16,23 — Linda Montano will occupy the Museum's Mercer Street window, where she will talk about art and life. 12-5:30 p.m.

3 — "Attention!"--a panel discussion with Marina Abramovic and Ulay, Linda Montano, Alex Grey, The Ghost of James Lee Byars, Michael Osterhout, and Kim Jones. Thomas McEvilley, who has written extensively on subjects related to this exhibition, will moderate. 8 p.m., at the Museum.

(fig. 8) From *Choices: Making an Art of Everyday Life* press release, New Museum, New York, 1986

of titles, catalogue texts, etc., once again resonates with Barry, who created his *Telepathic Piece* for a show in 1969 at Simon Fraser University in Canada. The piece consisted of this statement, printed in the exhibition catalogue: "During the Exhibition I will try to communicate telepathically a work of art, the nature of which is a series of thoughts that are not applicable to language or image" (fig. 9).[16] Here is the artist's account of the origin of the piece:

> On 57th street [in New York], there were galleries before they moved to SoHo, and there was also a telepathic center with a

16. Seth Siegelaub, ed., *Catalogue for the Exhibition* (Simon Fraser University, 1969).

> library and I browsed some of the books. I was interested in invisible transmissions like radio waves, and the body does generate electrical currents.[17]

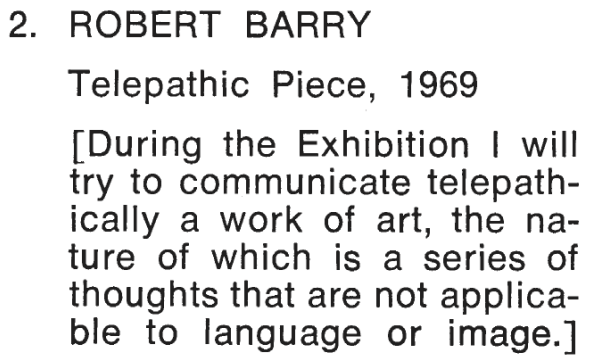
After this short bout of casual research, he tried communicating in this manner to an audience.

> The idea of performance was that I would sit there and say, "I'm trying to telepathically transmit an idea to you." And I would just sit there in silence like this, you know, and the people out there would be silent. And I'd say, "If anybody's getting anything, you know, just raise your hand." And people raised their hands to tell me what they were thinking.[18]

In 2017, he recounted to me that he "didn't believe in it, of course," but thought it was "fun," and that "people sometimes would say that they were receiving something."[19] For Barry this was not a transcendent experience; rather, he believed that in contemporary times "the mystical experience is closed to us."[20]

Barry has exhibited his work alongside Matsuzawa's, and while it is tempting to assume that Byars's and Barry's notions of telepathy stem from impulses identical to those that motivated Matsuzawa, their respective works foster different understandings of the world, the body, and the aesthetic encounter. The almost tricksterish aspect of Byars's and Barry's approach did not

17. Robert Barry, telephone interview with the author, December 22, 2017.
18. Barry, oral history interview with Judith Olch Richards for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, May 14–15, 2010.
19. Barry, telephone interview, 2017.
20. Ursula Meyers, "Robert Barry," in *Conceptual Art* (E. P. Dutton, 1972), 40.



(fig. 9) From *Catalogue for the Exhibition*, edited by Seth Siegelaub, Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, 1969

hold true for the likes of Matsuzawa, or for that matter Shiomi, who undertook their projects with rather more gravitas. I find the simultaneous repudiation and affirmation in Barry's account, which has precisely the same structuring tension present in Nauman's statement about mystic truths, quite telling. "Of course" he doesn't believe in it; and yet, at the same time, despite this disbelief, "people sometimes would say that they were receiving something." Note that Barry was focused on himself as the sole source of energetic output, rather than being curious about what the audience might be transmitting *to* him.

More pieces from Barry, circa 1969, include works comprised of the following sentences: "Something that is taking shape in my mind and will sometime come to consciousness"; "Something that I was once conscious of, but have now forgotten."[21] Barry's

21. Robert Barry, *Leverkusen Pieces*, 1969.

words are meant to trigger associations in viewers as the artist asks us, essentially, to read his mind in two tenses at once: future (clairvoyantly, by anticipating what he will be thinking) and past (by detecting what he no longer remembers). Barry's work is usually understood as an extreme instance of the idea school of Conceptual art with a big C, proposing the dissolution of art into sheer thought. Less discussed are his connections to the paranormal and parapsychology, and to models of knowledge and belief that verge on magic and sorcery. Barry has said repeatedly that in the telepathy works there is nothing to see (much less to buy), except of course for the very real materiality of the catalogue entry, or the typed piece of paper, but nothing to see does not equal a complete lack of picturing. Barry insists he always does actually try to transmit art during his telepathy sessions, but these transmissions go in one direction only—from the hallowed artist to his subordinated audience.

1969 was also the year in which Octave Mannoni formulated his well-known theory of fetishistic disavowal: "Je sais bien, mais quand même . . ." (I know well, but just the same . . .)[22] For Mannoni, the fetish is a construction that propels belief beyond the realm of the possible. Traditionally, the fetish is an enchanted ritual object; for Marx, it holds economic power, and for Freud, sexual power. But Mannoni's conception, which emphasizes simultaneous repudiation and affirmation, is helpful for thinking about telepathic conceptualisms and the stuttering or oscillating articulations by artists such as Barry, who attempt to posit beliefs in two competing worldviews at the same time (one that embraces ESP and another that shuns it).

22. See Octave Mannoni, *Clefs pour l'Imaginaire, ou l'Autre Scène* (Points, Editions du Seuil, 1969).

In a 1988 interview, Benjamin H. D. Buchloh straight-up asks Barry if he believes in telepathy, which the art historian calls "the opposite of the scientific." The artist responds, "If it existed, then it existed. I don't know if I believe or don't believe," hedging around Buchloh's suggestion that the work is ironic.[23] In an oral history from 2010, he calls it a "joke"—all the while leaving open the possibility that "people did claim they were getting ideas."[24] Art, Barry clarifies, is "series of thoughts" applicable to neither language nor image—but it's not clear if he means, then, that his audiences were telepathically receiving an emotion, an impulse, an inchoate sensation, or something else entirely. With this in mind, it is worth mentioning that the word *telepathy* is derived from the combination of the Greek *tele* (remote) and *patheia* (an act of feeling); it first appeared in English in 1883 in the writing of Frederic H. W. Myers, British poet and founder of the Society for Psychical Research.

23. Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "A Conversation with Robert Barry," *October* 159 (Winter 2017): 133.
24. Barry, oral history interview with Richards, 2010.

Heads

One of the most innovative explorations of the relay between experimental art practices and popular representations of parapsychology was the 1967 exhibition *Science Fiction*, curated by Harald Szeemann at the Kunsthalle Bern. This was a wide-ranging take on how, over the course of several decades, comics, movies, and pulp fiction had expanded ideas about the future and the promises and limits of technology. The exhibition catalogue was printed in a newspaper format (fig. 10) and referenced an eclectic range of source materials, from the teleportations of *Star Trek* to pulp paperback covers depicting monsters from outer space. One of the many film stills reproduced in its pages is from the 1958 movie *The Space Children* and features mesmerized kids huddled around a giant, glowing brain. In a superficial but suggestive way, the image prefigures Mario Merz's 1968 Arte Povera dome *Giap's Igloo*, an organic hemisphere overlaid with neon text that exerts a certain charmed power.

Two years after *Science Fiction*, Szeemann's famous 1969 exhibition *Live in Your Head: When Attitudes Become Form* asserted that a stance, or a feeling, or a disposition, might congeal into something concrete. The exhibition's title also hints that the head, or mind, is where real living happens. Byars, in his signature appearing-disappearing-reappearing fashion, was not among the show's official list of artists, for he was not actually invited to take part.[25] However, he sent two surrogates to

25. Harald Szeemann, *Live in Your Head: When Attitudes Become Form* (Kunsthalle Bern, 1969). See also Jens Hoffmann, ed., *Life in your head: when attitudes become form become attitudes: a restoration, a remake, a rejuvenation, a rebellion* (CCA Wattis for Contemporary Arts, 2012).

(fig. 10) *Science Fiction* exhibition publication, Kunsthalle Bern, 1967

perform *Two in a Hat*, one of his many garments for multiple people, and their rogue performance is documented in photographs taken at the opening (fig. 11). Byars's garment suggests an uncanny merging of subjects, with two heads connected by a single fabric, an externalized metaphor for a mind meld or telepathic connection that goes beyond words. Whereas Barry's telepathic work used *text* (the published announcement of his piece), Byars's used *textile*. Other versions of textile merging by Byars include garments with openings for more heads; his draped fabric conjoining multiple bodies into a unified unit also speaks to a visualization of cultic togetherness.

As Szeemann's exhibition demonstrated, telepathic art was part of a bigger popularization of psychic abilities and telekinesis at this moment. A prominent example is the widely publicized rise of

(fig. 11) Performance view of James Lee Byars, *Two in a Hat* (not performed by the artist), *Live in Your Head: When Attitudes Become Form*, Kunsthalle Bern, 1969

Israeli-born illusionist, television personality, and impresario Uri Geller, who became famous for his ability to bend metal objects such as nails and combs with his mind (fig. 12). In the 1970s, Geller was a regular on various programs aimed at popular audiences, such as the TV show *That's Incredible!*, and it was through him that parapsychology reached popular cultural saturation across the US and Europe. As a child, I believed in Uri Geller, whose powers I found no less miraculous than the fact that a container of actual goo turns into a winged creature that can soar and sometimes swim (it's called an egg). My sisters and I loved *That's Incredible!*, billed as a showcase of "amazing feats of human and animal endeavor." We took on faith that we were watching real people actually catch bullets in their teeth. Why couldn't Geller achieve the relatively modest goal of bending cutlery with his mind?

(fig. 12) Uri Geller, 1974

Not only did Geller claim to be able to rearrange the physical shape of items without touching them, including melting keys and twisting spoons, he also said he was able to grant such abilities to anyone watching him. His telekinetic powers were not a special talent but rather something directly communicable—something latent inside all of us already, which Geller had the power to activate. Geller recounts appearing on a BBC radio program in the early 1970s, during which he suggested that "people listening in their homes might concentrate on their keys—or spoons or forks—and see what happened." He instructed his audience: "If there are any broken watches in your house, please concentrate on them and try to make them work. Just take them in your hand and concentrate."[26] According to Geller, the BBC received calls from listeners across the UK, ordinary people astounded to report that their watches were fixed and keys newly bent. "URI PUTS

26. Uri Geller, *My Story* (Praeger, 1975), 5.

BRITAIN IN A TWIST," ran a newspaper headline.[27] A chart in Geller's autobiography *My Story* (1975), tabulates how many items across the country were altered: 1,031 clocks and watches, 293 forks and spoons, and 51 other objects (fig. 13). A photo taken in Germany, included in his book, shows a perplexed woman seated in front of an array of bent cutlery, uncertain about what happened and how one might restore order in the aftermath of Geller's unleashed chaos (fig. 14).

27. Geller, *My Story*, 7.

The newspaper made a final tabulation of the results from their readers:

Clocks and watches restarted	1,031
Forks and spoons bent or broken	293
Other objects bent or broken	51
	1,375

(fig. 13) From Uri Geller's *My Story*, 1975

(fig. 14) Photographs from Uri Geller's *My Story*, 1975

Exorgasm

Once, inside the geodesic dome in Joshua Tree, a group of adult women played the girl's sleepover game "light as a feather stiff as a board." We arranged ourselves around one of our friends as she lay face-up and tensed her muscles. To our astonishment, she shot way up above our heads as we barely, but securely, held her with only our fingertips.

The levitation of the Pentagon in October 1967 remains the largest-ever and most pointedly dissident instance of collaborative telekinesis in the US. This leap of faith and irreverent exhortation to *believe* were an offshoot of a massive anti-war demonstration—comprised of many demographics, from ragtag youth to older veterans in uniform demanding the troops be brought home—that became a turning point in public sympathies about the US war of aggression in Southeast Asia (fig. 15). With the participation of several high-profile figures, including Abbie Hoffman, Jerry Rubin, and Allen Ginsberg, some of whom would go on to form the loose and long-haired coalition of anti-war acid trippers known as the Yippies, the goal was to encircle the Pentagon, levitate it three hundred feet off the ground, rotate it, vibrate it, turn it orange, purge it of its evil, and, it was hoped, end the Vietnam war through this act of collective will. While the zeitgeist of the 1960s in the US is too often historicized with a "hippie era" gloss that erases numerous distinctions between New Left activisms and countercultural lifestyles, the levitation of the Pentagon is a concrete example in which those strands are interwoven.

(fig. 15) Anti-war demonstration before attempt to levitate the Pentagon, Washington, DC, 1967

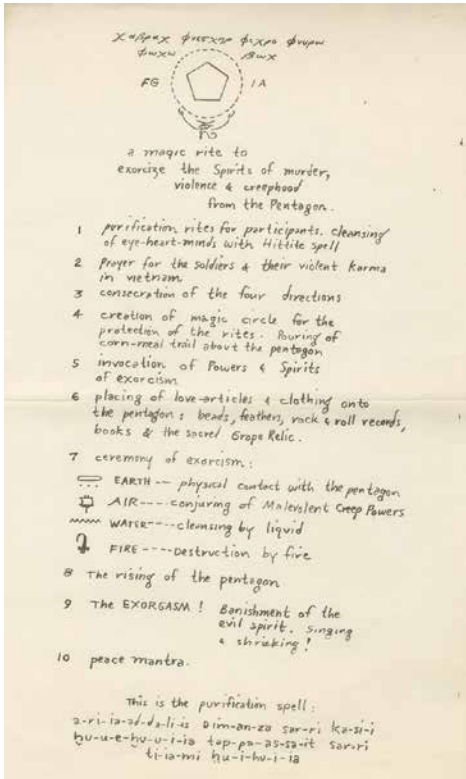
On that day, thousands of protestors gathered in Washington, DC, at the Lincoln Memorial, where a traditional anti-war rally was held. Then, a substantial faction of some 30,000 demonstrators sporting pins (fig. 16), waving daisies, and chanting "OUT DEMONS OUT!" marched to the headquarters of the US Department of Defense at the Pentagon. Though thwarted in their attempt to fully encircle the building, they proceeded with the psychic exorcism in an effort to cleanse the bad spirits accumulated by the building from so many acts of war, and to usher in positive energy and pave a way for peace.

Ed Sanders, of the band The Fugs, wrote up the run-of-show on a handbill that describes "a magic rite to exorcise the spirits of murder, violence & creephood from the Pentagon" (fig. 17). Along with diagrams and a chant-prayer-peace mantra, the handbill outlines a series of actions including purification rites, consecration of the four directions, the rising of the Pentagon,

(fig. 16) Levitating the Pentagon pin, 1967

and the subsequent "EXORGASM! Banishment of the evil spirit. Singing & shrieking!" The conjunction of a release of libidinal energy (orgasm) with the unhexing of the US military (exorcism) was supposed to be literalized by couples having sex during the proceedings. It is unclear how widely that initiative was consummated, since the marchers were met with aggressive pushback from federal troops and marshals. Many were bloodily beaten and over six hundred people were ultimately arrested.

An intervention drawing equally from poetry, magical thinking, psychedelia, pagan ceremony, performance art, and hucksterism, the action was meant to fight absurdity with absurdity. After all, the Pentagon is literally a *pentagram*—it is an occult symbol that echoes the alchemical symbol of the five-pointed star. So what better way to counteract its powers than with a radical act of minds over matter? Yet the perceived absurdity of the Pentagon from the US perspective dramatically diverges from how the Pentagon is viewed outside the US, especially given its effect on the world outside its shores. The exorgasm's prankiness comes nowhere close to truly upending the power of the Pentagon; likewise, the arrest of six hundred



(fig. 17) Ed Sanders, *A Magic Rite to Exorcize the Pentagon*, 1967

pales in comparison to the mayhem and atrocities the US military continues to perpetrate across the globe.

Still, levitating the Pentagon illustrates a historical moment when it seemed possible to change the world with shared thought. The event's organizers, including Hoffman, took the practice seriously and planned for it logistically, even negotiating for a permit with the government, who agreed to allow a levitation at the height

of three feet. In an oral history of the event published in 2004 in the countercultural magazine *Arthur*, Ginsberg discusses how he had been urging the anti-war left to embrace the aesthetic powers of art; his manifesto "Demonstration as March as Spectacle as Theatre" includes this exhortation: "We have to use our imagination. A spectacle can be made, an unmistakable statement OUTSIDE the war psychology which is leading nowhere. Such statement would be heard around the world with relief."[28] But this notion that a serious intervention could be transformed into a shamanistic pageant to great effect was met with intense skepticism, including, maybe predictably, by many leaders in the Mobilization to End the War in Vietnam (aka the Mobe). Perhaps more surprisingly, some artists and filmmakers also opposed it, including Kenneth Anger, who performed his own personal mystical rite on the perimeter of the Pentagon that day, but felt the levitation was a childish mistake—"the kind of energy that can be generated by a march can be dissipated by just turning it into a sideshow."[29]

However, many others deemed the event a wild success. Sanders later commented, "Yeah, we did levitate the Pentagon—it worked—but we forgot to rotate it."[30] Hoffman "was thrilled. He had insisted that they had levitated the Pentagon."[31] Another participant, Sam Leff, affirmed that the laws of gravity had been

28. Allen Ginsberg, "Demonstration as March as Spectacle as Theatre," as reproduced in "OUT, DEMONS, OUT!: The 1967 Exorcism of the Pentagon and the Birth of Yippie!," oral history conducted by Larry "Ratso" Sloman, Michael Simmons, and Jay Babcock, *Arthur*, no. 13 (November 2004), available at https://arthurmag.com/2011/04/13/out-demons-out-the-1967-exorcism-of-the-pentagon-and-the-birth-of-yippie-arthur-no-13nov-2004/.
29. Kenneth Anger, in "OUT, DEMONS OUT!"
30. Jennifer Seaman Cook, "Still Happening: A Conversation with Ed Sanders," *Los Angeles Review of Books* (July 18, 2018).
31. Robin Palmer, in "OUT, DEMONS, OUT!"

temporarily suspended and that he had photographs to prove it: "All I have is a grainy picture of the Pentagon risen maybe 36 inches off the ground.... I know Abbie had one that was higher, just don't know what happened to it."[32] Beyond the physical building rising in the air, Ginsberg perceived that the act shifted something crucial in the US consciousness: "The levitation of the Pentagon was a happening that demystified the authority of the military. The Pentagon was symbolically levitated in people's minds in the sense that it lost its authority which had been unquestioned and unchallenged until then."[33] Ginsberg grasped that this imaginative act of protest was not simply funny or foolish, but provided a new way to think about unseen forces and the pull of desire to reshape both the mind and the body politic.

It was this political notion of the wish, this investment in the idea that if we all desire something enough it can happen, that motivated Yoko Ono and John Lennon's 1969 graphic campaign, *WAR IS OVER!* Their exuberant declaration appeared followed by these words, smaller but still in all caps: *IF YOU WANT IT* (fig. 18). On the one hand, the statement seems basic enough—if everyone united to demand that the war end, it would happen. It also suggests the transformative potential of both individual and collective imagination. Ono is, of course, one of the most important foremothers for mystical art activities, an undisputed pioneer across music, art, and performance who moved between US and Japanese experimental networks. Her early instruction paintings provide the most extensive exploration of how the artist can provide suggestive prompts that spark the viewer's imagination beyond

32. Sam Leff, in "OUT, DEMONS, OUT!"
33. Allen Ginsberg, in "OUT, DEMONS, OUT!"

(fig. 18) Yoko Ono and John Lennon, *WAR IS OVER! (IF YOU WANT IT)*, 1969

the realm of the physical plane. For example, *CLOUD PIECE* (1963, fig. 19) asks the viewer to: "Imagine the clouds dripping. / Dig a hole in your garden / to put them in." Many of Ono's scores, such as *FLY PIECE* (1963, fig. 20), with its one-word imperative/noun, "Fly," traffic in the potentially impossible. *FLY PIECE* is so deceptively simple that it is easy to overlook as one of the most consequential works of the twentieth century. Its iterability and immateriality pose more of a challenge to the status of the art object, the authority of the artist, and art's dependence on institutions than do most cherished modernist masterpieces. Containing only three letters yet flowering via association into a bouquet of thoughts and actions, it is the artist's densest proposition. What is Ono asking us to do with this word? Picture the insect?[34] Check our pants' zippers? Go try with a ladder? Fantasize about air travel? Will ourselves to float? Consider the velocity of time? Yes, and yes, and yes, and yes; and many other things also. Ono illuminates how images can function as a brake on the mind's capacity for multiplicity, for the open-endedness of her instructions leaves room for endless variation on the part of the viewer.

Despite her foundational contributions to discourses of conceptualisms, Ono was, for many decades, marginalized as a minor figure in art history. All women artists suffer from the grotesque sexism of the art world, and in Ono's case this has been compounded in the West by her racialization as an Orientalized

34. I discuss Ono's fly-as-bug—a pesky institutional infiltrator and a model for multifaceted perspectives with compound eyes—in my essay "For Posterity: Yoko Ono," in *Yoko Ono: One Woman Show, 1960–1971* (Museum of Modern Art, 2015), 21–30.

(fig. 19) Yoko Ono, *CLOUD PIECE*, 1963

(fig. 20) Yoko Ono, *FLY PIECE*, 1963

Japanese other. After her marriage to Lennon, she was demonized as a witch, that ancient, feminized figure feared for her ability to illegitimately seize power, cruelly pervert minds, and conjure visions. Thus arrives another meaning of Ono's command "Fly": it is a call to mount our broomsticks. For it is the witch, above all, who takes flight.

Fluxus scholar Kristine Stiles has observed that Yoko Ono's experiments with telepathy and psychic powers (alongside those by feminist artist Carolee Schneemann) were initially met with derision—a patriarchal response to their embrace of the irrational. Telepathic investigations by women were seen not as an extension of the post-Cagean play of chance and indeterminacy, but as womanly, emotional, excessive, even "crazy."[35] (No wonder Ono invited us to "Scream. 1. against the wind / 2. against the wall / 3. against the sky."[36]) Artist and telepathy theorist Jacquelene Drinkall writes: "Women artists such as Yoko Ono who have worked with conscious femininity and/or feminism in collaborative art practice stemming from Fluxus have been quick to acknowledge the pitfalls of working with telepathy."[37]

The inherently collective, and nonrational, aspects of telepathy have long been gendered female, including the idea that the female nervous system is uniquely suited to electrically conduct missives from the dead. In the spiritualist Victorian era, women were understood as the primary empty vessels through which the channeling of spirits could take place, providing them, according to historians, a way of wielding power by giving them new ways to use their voices. As feminist historian of the nineteenth century Molly McGarry has observed, the séance was

35. Kristine Stiles, "Anomaly, Sky, Sex, and Psi in Fluxus," in *Critical Mass: Happenings, Fluxus, Performance, Intermedia and Rutgers University 1958–1972*, ed. Geoffrey Hendricks (Rutgers University Press, 2003), 60–88.

36. Yoko Ono, *Voice Piece for Soprano*, 1961. Soprano voices are conventionally coded female.

37. Jacquelene Drinkall, "Human and Non-Human Telepathic Collaborations from Fluxus to Now," *COLLOQUY text theory critique* 22 (2011): 146.

a demonstration of female volition *and* violation, one that was further coded as sexually queer due to the fact that bodies were penetrated in erotic and unruly configurations.[38]

Given how inseparable feminist and queer valences are from histories of telepathy, it is significant that experimental composer Pauline Oliveros, a Chicana lesbian who lived and worked in California, also engaged with collective impulses in her *Telepathic Improvisation* (fig. 21), first published in her book *Sonic Meditations* (1974) and written for the ♀ Ensemble. Oliveros's piece is not merely theoretical, existing as a think-piece on paper, but has been practiced and performed, and resonates with Mieko Shiomi's earlier piece in which listening becomes a device that nourishes interpersonal connectivity. The score begins:

> To the musicians with varied or like instruments:
> Tuning—each musician in turn sits or stands in front of the audience for a few minutes. The audience is asked to observe the musician carefully and try to imagine the sound of his or her instrument. The audience is instructed to close eyes and attempt to visualize the musician, then send a sound to the musician by hearing it mentally. The musician waits until he or she receives an impression of a sound mentally, then he or she produces the sound. Members of the audience who have successfully "hit the target" raise their hands as feedback to the musician.[39]

38. Molly McGarry, *The Ghosts of Futures Past: Spiritualism and Cultural Politics of Nineteenth-Century America* (University of California Press, 2008).
39. Pauline Oliveros, score for *Telepathic Improvisation*, in *Sonic Meditations* (Smith Publications, 1974), n.p.

Telepathic Improvisation

To the musicians with varied or like instruments:

Tuning – each musician in turn sits or stands in front of the audience for a few minutes. The audience is asked to observe the musician carefully and try to imagine the sound of his or her instrument. The audience is instructed to close eyes and attempt to visualize the musician, then send a sound to the musician by hearing it mentally. The musician waits until he or she receives an impression of a sound mentally, then he or she produces the sound. Members of the audience who have successfully "hit the target" raise their hands as feedback to the musician.

After the tuning exercise the musicians distribute themselves throughout the space among the audience members and utilize the following instructions:

Play only long sustained tones
Play only when you are actually hearing a pitch, or pitches, mentally
Assume you are either sending or receiving

If you are sending, try to visualize the person to whom you are sending. If you are receiving, listen for the sound and visualize the sender. The quality and dynamics of the tones you play may be influenced by your feelings, emotional or body sensations, or even impressions of colors, which might come from the audience members. Continue until it seems "time" to stop.

To the observers: Try mentally to influence the musicians by wishing for one or more of the following elements: (the musicians are instructed to play only long sustained tones)

A. *Focus mentally on a specific pitch. If you are sending, visualize the musician to whom you are sending. If you are receiving, listen for the sound which matches yours. Also visualize the musician.*
B. *Focus mentally on stopping or starting a sound at a particular time.*
C. *Focus mentally on loudness or softness of tone production.*
D. *Focus mentally on the quality of the tone.*
E. *Focus mentally on an emotional character for the tone.*

This meditation is best done in very low illumination, or with eyes closed.

(fig. 21) Pauline Oliveros, *Telepathic Improvisation*, 1974

(fig. 22) Pauline Oliveros (on accordion) and the ♀ Ensemble performing *Teach Yourself to Fly*, Rancho Santa Fe, California, 1970

In this work, the audience first conjures the sound, molding the contours of this experience of group attunement that can happen despite great distances (i.e., "thousands of miles or lightyears"). Oliveros writes about "receivers" and "senders," encouraging the piece to be performed in very low light, with eyes closed. It is a vision of a profoundly reciprocal dialogue that also pulses with the rhythms of the ecosystem. Later, Oliveros would expand on her ideal of a communal, shared experience around what she called "deep listening"—a practice synced not only to musical conventions of rhythm and melody, but also to the space of the performance, the receptive qualities of your own skin, and the extra-musical noise of bodies together. Such active listening can be a way of paying attention to, and even occupying, two spaces simultaneously; elaborating on the feminized dynamic

of this acute sensitivity, Oliveros commented that "mothers do this."[40]

As Oliveros saw it, sonic meditations and telepathic improvisations are not only distinctly feminist but also political, as a direct result of the brutal cacophonies of the moment. Her life partner and collaborator, the author and artist IONE, writes that Oliveros established her modalities "in response to the Vietnam War and what she called the general 'atmosphere of war, of protest, of resistance.' . . . Deeply affected by conflict and war, she began to describe her music-making as being intended for expanding consciousness and for 'humanitarian purposes, specifically healing.'"[41] A photograph of the ♀ Ensemble performing Oliveros's composition *Teach Yourself To Fly* (1970, fig. 22) shows women outdoors on a grassy field, some seated in chairs with instruments (cello, violin), some on a plaid blanket with their legs crossed and facing each other. In the picture, Oliveros is there with her accordion, a signature instrument in the Tejano music of her childhood in Houston (its blend of Mexican and immigrant Polish/Czech influences forged a distinctly Chicanx genre). The score for *Teach Yourself to Fly* invites participants to stay alert and observe vibrations as their communal vocalizations arise, intensify, and then go quiet. I believe Ono's *FLY PIECE* furnished a precedent for Oliveros's project. Both offer a dream of the transformative suspension of divisions between artist and audience—a leap of feminist faith so great that it is akin to defying gravity.[42]

40. Oliveros, "Quantum Listening: From Practice to Theory (to Practice Practice)," in *Sounding the Margins: Collected Writings*, 1992–2009, ed. Lawton Hall (Deep Listening Publications, 2011), 30. First published in *MusicWorks* no. 75 (Fall 2000).
41. IONE, "Introduction: As I Write, I Listen," in *Quantum Listening*, 20–21.
42. In a 1987 essay, Adrian Piper recounts dreams of flying among spirits while herself being "invisible, disembodied, pure sexual desire." Piper, "Flying," in *Out of Order*, vol. 1, 224.

Oliveros's work is sometimes framed within the much-scoffed-at grab bag of appropriationist cultural products that might fall under the umbrella category known as New Age. But experimental artist Adam Overton notes that Oliveros's revolutionary approach extends well beyond her immersion in Asian-influenced practices of meditation. He writes: "Rather than furthering the modernist view of the composer and performer as virtuosic geniuses delivering work from on high, she reimagined them as humble acoustic observers—sharing more in common with their audience—whose mission was to facilitate a consciousness-expanding group-listening experience."[43] In Oliveros's handling, telepathy becomes a queer feminist method of music making and of community building, a way to move beyond standard directional vectors of input and output to consider a more porous body and planetary sensorium, open to many stimuli and in communion with the environment in ways that cannot be contained or commodified. Her artistic acts of imagination merge close and careful observation with the mobilization of collective thought to reshape the self and world with gestures that presume the urgency of human agency and the power of artistic belief.

Adrian Piper was steeped in her aforementioned "mystical streak" around this moment. For her 1971 performance *Food for the Spirit* (fig. 23), Piper shot a series of apparition-like photos of herself during a summer in which she was undertaking a rigorous study of Immanuel Kant, practicing yoga, and fasting as a way to question her own attachment to the

43. Adam Overton, "New Music for a New Age: Return to Nature!," *East of Borneo* (August 22, 2013), https://eastofborneo.org/articles/new-music-for-a-new-age-return-to-nature.

(fig. 23) Adrian Piper, *Food for the Spirit #2*, 1971

(fig. 24) From Theresa Hak Kyung Cha,
audience distant relative, 1977

material world. Perhaps among all US artists at this moment, Piper most fully grasped and articulated the connections between conceptualism and realms of the unknown that can only be reached by way of intuition, writing, "Only the intuitive is truly unlimited. I see all art as basically an intuitive process, regardless of how obliquely it has been dealt with in the past. Within this context, I think 'conceptual art' is the most adequate way of liberating the creative process so that the artist may approach and realize his work—or himself—on the purest possible level."[44]

Piper turned to mysticism while grounded in philosophical readings as well as a bodily immersion into non-Western spiritual practices. Her serious engagement with these legacies places her at a remove from the despiritualized conceptualism of Robert Barry, for whom the mystical was foreclosed, or of Sol LeWitt, whose nod to mysticism was confined to his statement about "leap[ing] to conclusions that logic cannot reach." Unlike Piper, LeWitt did not acknowledge that he might be indebted to actual mystics or otherwise immaterial practitioners who come with their own cultural narratives and historical antecedents.

Another telepathy-inspired work of feminist conceptual art is Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *audience distant relative* (1977, fig. 24), a thought experiment in the form of a handmade artist's book. Made of multiple printed cards, the piece addresses an audience that is invoked as a "distant relative." One passage reads: "neither you nor i / are visible to each other / i can only assume that you hear me / i can only hope that you hear me." Cha tries

44. Piper, "A Defense of the 'Conceptual' Process in Art" (1967), first published in *Out of Order, Out of Sight*, vol. 2, *Selected Writings in Art Criticism, 1967–1992* (MIT Press, 1996), 3–4.

to imagine the voice of her audience, and we are asked to do the same, to hear without sounds, in an act of attempted interchange. Cha's melancholic meditation on communication scrambles, as she intended, the subject/object divide with brief phrases about sending and receiving messages.

These women (Ono, Oliveros, Piper, and Cha) occupied the rich terrain of feminist conceptualism in the 1960s and 1970s. Ono sought a fluid and mutual energetic flow of images with her viewers, for instance, and Oliveros did something similar with sounds; both emphasized that making art and music need not require specialized skill or education. This was meant as an act of inclusive leveling, in which the reified category of the artist would no longer be the dominant agent of imagination. To varying degrees, these women embraced radical openness and reciprocity in order to disrupt patriarchal conventions of hierarchical communication, seeking to undo the primacy of the individual. The efforts of these artists thus differed sharply from the masculinist experiments of Robert Barry and James Lee Byars, neither of whom wanted to decenter themselves; they instead asserted that their ideas might unidirectionally penetrate a viewer's mind.

I am such a shitty caster of spells. Sometimes they exactly backfire, like when I tried to create a forcefield to protect myself against V, whispering "KEEP AWAY KEEP AWAY KEEP AWAY." Not twenty minutes later, there she was, texting me, despite never having done so before. Surely she could feel my desire to repel her. Did that feeling compel her to communicate? Was I too reliant on clumsy, imprecise language in my incantation? Should I have used some other tool?

The castigation of Yoko Ono in racist and sexist terms as a wicked sorceress, as well as the unearthly eco-feminist interventions of Pauline Oliveros, can be fruitfully placed next to the socialist group WITCH, or Women's International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell (one of many versions of the acronym). For their inaugural action on Halloween 1968, they donned black dresses and joined hands in a circle to hex Wall Street in New York City (fig. 25). Unlike the men who had coordinated the levitation of the Pentagon one year prior, the Witches had a decidedly feminist bent as they protested the interlocking systems of patriarchy and capitalism. Their chosen name refers to long traditions of punishing aberrant or outspoken women, and their manifesto calls on every woman to discover their inner witch: "If you are a woman and dare to look within yourself, you are a Witch. You make your own rules. You are free and beautiful.... You are a Witch by being female, untamed, angry, joyous, and immortal."

As with the feminist conceptual artists of this moment, WITCH grasped the incendiary potential of collective creative thought. Their manifesto explains:

(fig. 25) Women's International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell (WITCH), Wall Street Hex, October 31, 1968, New York

> Your weapons are theater, satire, explosions, magic, herbs, music, costumes, cameras, masks, chants, stickers, stencils and paint, films, tambourines, bricks, brooms, guns, voodoo dolls, cats, candles, bells, chalk, nail clippings, hand grenades, poison rings, fuses, tape recorders, incense—your own boundless imagination. Your power comes from your own self as a woman, and it is activated by working in concert with your sisters.[45]

45. "W.I.T.C.H. Manifesto" (1968), reprinted in Breanne Fahs, ed., *Burn it Down! Feminist Manifestos for the Revolution* (Verso, 2020), 441–42.

Reclaiming this identity by owning its negative valences, in 1974 Ono defiantly declared in song: "Yes, I'm a Witch." Accompanied by a funky rock beat, her sharp words ring out: "My voice is real / My voice is truth / I don't fit in your ways." In the five decades since, she has continued to affirm that she is a witch. Why not take her at her word?[46]

Unlike the more gender-neutral category of the mystic, the witch is an outlawed and despised figure whose vast repository of feminized peasant-healing traditions—especially around midwifery and the administering of herbal abortions—has been systematically criminalized. As Italian theorist Silvia Federici writes, the witch is "the embodiment of a world of female subjects that capitalism had to destroy: the heretic, the healer, the disobedient wife, the woman who dared to live alone." Federici speculates that, historically, witch hunts and purges against practitioners of magic erupted at moments of political and economic transition, especially around formations of labor. "Aimed at controlling nature, the capitalist organization of work must refuse the unpredictability implicit in the practice of magic. . . . Magic was also an obstacle to the rationalization of the work process, and a threat to the establishment of the principle of individual responsibility. Above all, magic seemed a form of refusal of work, of insubordination, and an instrument of grassroots resistance to power. The world had to be

46. Ono recorded "Yes, I'm a Witch" in 1974 for her unreleased album *A Story*. A grainy black-and-white video (available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jLtobPloDuI) shows her performing the song live in Japan that same year. The original recording can be found on *Onobox* (1992). In 2007, Ono released a remix album entitled *Yes, I'm a Witch* (Apple Records and Astralwerks); its sequel, *Yes, I'm a Witch, Too* (Manimal Vinyl), came out in 2016.

'disenchanted' in order to be dominated."[47] It is no accident that the formation of WITCH occurred in the late 1960s, a moment of the convulsive and devastating reorganization of labor globally that has come to be known, in shorthand, as the transition into late capitalism. Magical thinking can fall easily into the realm of personal empowerment, defanging collective action, but that is not the driving force behind WITCH's act of marshaling discredited histories.

This feminist history of witches, aimed to empower the old woman, the single woman, the woman who needs no man, is connected to queer histories as well. *Weird Ways of Witchcraft* (1969), by queer activist Leo Louis Martello, who in 1970 staged the first witch-in at New York's Central Park, discusses the bisexuality of mystics and calls upon practitioners of what he terms the "Old Religion" to join him in a discrimination suit against the Catholic Church for years of persecution. He explicitly connects witchery with parapsychology: "Telepathy and extrasensory perception play a considerable part in modern white witchcraft, as in the use of a thought-cone to contact individuals or to work as a coven for a common goal."[48]

Arthur Evans's book *Witchcraft and the Gay Counterculture* (1978, fig. 26) proposes that capitalism, heterosexism, and patriarchy collude to repress and contain folkoric, precolonial forms of knowledge and their matrilineal transmission. The book's subtitle, *A Radical View of Western Civilization and Some of the People It Has Tried to Destroy,* crystallizes Evan's take (a somewhat unsubtle

47. Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body, and Primitive Accumulation* (Autonomedia, 2004), 11, 174.
48. Leo Louis Martello, *Weird Ways of Witchcraft* (Red Wheel, 2011), 9. First published in 1969 by HC Publishers.

(fig. 26) Cover of Arthur Evans's, *Witchcraft and the Gay Counterculture*, 1978

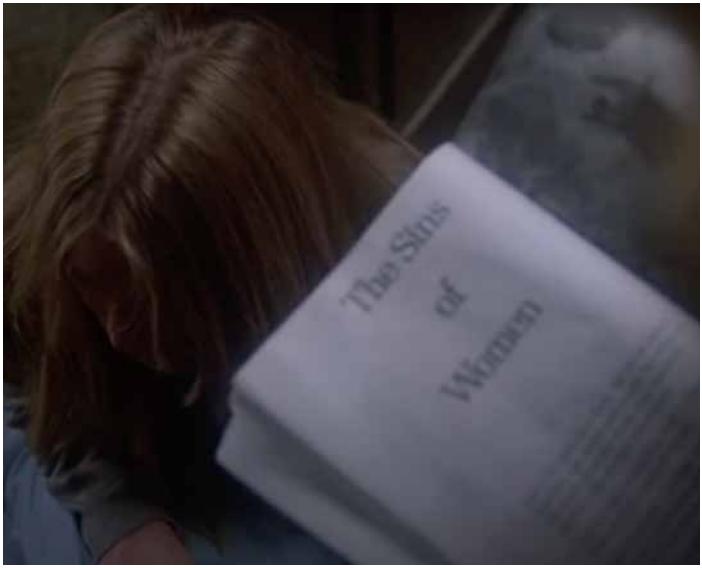
one) on how queer, trans, and female subjects have been vilified in order to expel us from the economic and social order. At the heart of Evans's critique is a queer feminist anti-racist argument, summed up in his assessment, as relevant in the present as in 1978, that "the United States today is a corrupt garrison society, living off the exploited labor of non-white people throughout the world and violently repressive within its own borders of Gay people, women, Blacks, poor people, Indians, and Mother Earth."[49] According to

49. Arthur Evans, *Witchcraft and the Gay Counterculture: A Radical View of Western Civilization and Some of the People it Has Tried to Destroy* (Fag Rag Press, 1978), 135–36.

Evans, who was an OG radical faerie, tapping into new forms of magical communication, along with a back-to-the-land approach to communal living, will move us away from industrialist teleologies and into a sunnier, more enchanted realm of non-alienation.

As I have outlined, from within the grip of the Cold War, artists and activists alike were mobilizing the liberatory potentials of ESP and thought transmission. At the same time, darker and more destructive visions of telepathy and telekinesis were being produced by filmmakers. David Cronenberg's so-serious-it-becomes-camp debut feature *Stereo* (1969) follows six young students who participate in a parapsychological experiment: they undergo brain surgery that endows them with telepathic abilities but robs them of speech, producing dire dependencies. Cronenberg's stylized lab-noir ends in insanity and suicidal ruin, with a smattering of self-trepanation and gratuitously topless women thrown in along the way. William Friedkin's *The Exorcist* (1973) features a demonically possessed twelve-year-old girl, Regan, whose head spins all the way around, among other bizarre strengths and threatening mobilities. At the cusp of puberty, Regan's femininity is pathologized but ultimately contained by the Catholic Church.

As these examples illustrate, the broad uptake of telepathy, clairvoyance, and premonition stretched across the spurious high/low division, revealing that a deep and significant vein of 1960s and 1970s cultural production was riveted by questions of the unknown and the unseen. What is more, such cultural production was frequently charged around issues of sex and gender. Brian De Palma's 1976 film adaptation (fig. 27) of Stephen King's 1974 novel *Carrie* is a nightmarish take on parapsychology and the mad powers harnessed by the menstruating body: after being ruthlessly bullied for getting her period, a teenage girl uses



(fig. 27) Still from *Carrie*, 1976, directed by Brian De Palma

telekinesis to crucify her mother with knives and burn down her high school, murdering everyone inside. Much like *The Exorcist* and Roman Polanski's *Rosemary's Baby* (1968), *Carrie* reads as an obvious reaction-formation to the women's liberation movement and the feminist push for greater bodily autonomy around menstruation, sexuality, and childbirth in the years around the legalization of abortion through *Roe v. Wade* (1973).

Recall how Yutaka Matsuzawa's experiments around marshalling telepathy occurred within the bombed and irradiated landscape of post-atomic Japan. If his turn to invisible forces was partly motored by a desire to relinquish the strictures of individualistic civilization, it also functioned as a critique of the instrumentalization of energy. Indeed, Matsuzawa's concept of psi power was not fringe weirdness but a provocation embedded within wider scientific pursuits, often state-funded, that were flourishing around the world. What was probably not known to Matsuzawa when he began his project was that it was contemporaneous with highly classified, well-funded Cold War military experiments regarding psychic espionage. The CIA's covert and illegal MK-Ultra program, which lasted from 1953 to 1973, included brainwashing techniques and morally suspect experiments around mind control with psychedelic drugs. These had lasting deleterious effects for some of the program's unwitting human guinea pigs (one such subject was none other than Allen Ginsberg).[50] Much that falls under this branch of investigation is what is known today as "psyops."

Of all the artists working with thought transmission at this time, James Lee Byars takes us directly to the simultaneously titillating and chilling aspects of telepathy with regards to warcraft. He mingled mystical artistic gestures with very real connections to institutions of military strategy, desiring entrance into an

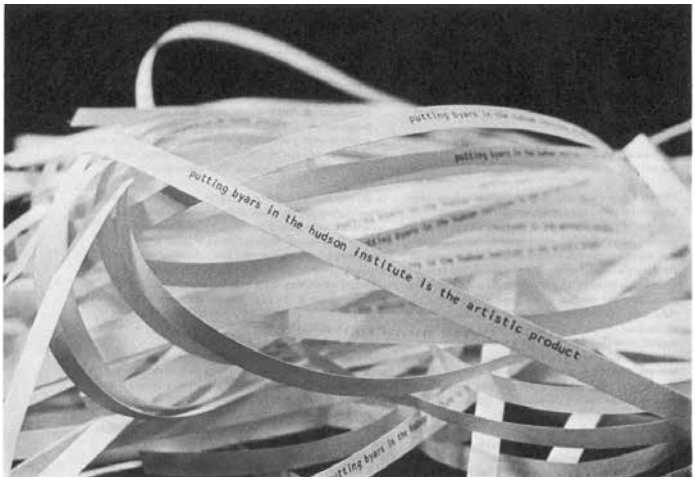
50. Joint hearing proceedings, "Project MK-Ultra, the CIA's Program of Research in Behavioral Modification," Select Committee on Intelligence and Committee on Human Resources, US Senate, August 3, 1977. See also Stephen Kinzer, *Poisoner in Chief: Sidney Gottlieb and the CIA Search for Mind Control* (Henry Holt and Company, 2019).

alliance with the war machine rather than articulating a critical or oppositional stance toward it, as did the Pentagon levitators. Through the Art and Technology (A&T) initiative of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), Byars was an artist in residence at the conservative think tank the Hudson Institute in 1969.[51] For him, the sheer fact of his embedment was its own outcome; "putting byars in the hudson institute is the artistic product," he proclaimed on ribbons of telex tape (fig. 28).

While in residence, Byars had frequent conversations with Herman Kahn, the Institute's founder, an eminent right-wing Cold War nuclear war game theorist who was one of the developers of the hydrogen bomb. After attending a meeting with Kahn at the Pentagon, Byars asked to be named the artist in residence there; however, since this position did not exist, he was told no. Despite that frank rejection, he had cards made up that read "Mr. Byars is the Artist of the Pentagon," leading some to suspect that he secretly worked for the CIA. According to curator James Elliot, that rumor was "a misunderstanding that caused a degree of difficulty for him among European artists for some years."[52] In 1970, he sent a tourist postcard featuring a bird's-eye view of the Pentagon to a friend in Brussels with the hand-lettered statement "Byars is the Artist in the Pentagon" (fig. 29). These declarations raise the question of the artist's naivete—many have understood Byars to have been an almost childlike aesthete in fussy pursuit of gold-dust beauty and with a

51. See Maurice Tuchman, *A Report on the Art and Technology Program of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1967–1971* (Viking, 1971).

52. James Elliot, "Notes Towards a Biography," in *The Perfect Thought: Works by James Lee Byars* (University Art Museum, 1990), 94. In Japan, Byars was also rumored to be a CIA spy because of his frequent travel between continents; see Sakagami Shinobu, *James Lee Byars: Days in Japan* (Floating World, 2017),139.

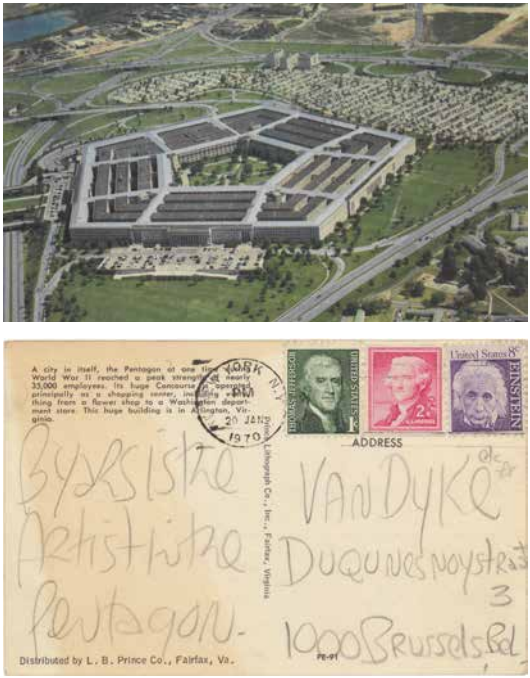


(fig. 28) James Lee Byars, *Putting Byars in the Hudson Institute is the Artistic Project*, 1969

gee-whiz fascination for dissolving spy paper; for instance, Dave Hickey named "innocence" one of the artist's "key concepts."[53] But his sincere yearnings for Kahn's approval and his intent to be the Pentagon's Artist tell a different story: that of someone who wanted a seat at the table of the men who were making history and for whom geopolitical power became the ultimate transmutational substance.

Byars's example demonstrates that a history of telepathy-as-art and a history of telepathy-as-weapon are not easily pried apart. Many thinkers, including Fred Turner, have traced how certain strands of a countercultural individualist ethos blossomed in concert with the growth of Silicon Valley, surveillance technologies,

53. Dave Hickey, "Detroit Dharma Diva," in *James Lee Byars: Works from the Sixties* (Michael Werner Gallery, 1993), n.p.



(fig. 29a–b) Postcard from James Lee Byars to Walter Van Dyck, January 20, 1970

and Big Data.[54] The mystical so often leads to the martial. I have been enumerating artistic and popular sites where telepathy and telekinesis were utilized in the long 1960s, and Byars's narrative demonstrates his willingness to plant his flag firmly among those who scholars John Beck and Ryan Bishop term "technocrats of

54. Fred Turner, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture: Stewart Brand, the Whole Earth Network, and the Rise of Digital Utopianism* (University of Chicago Press, 2006).

the imagination."[55] He did not interrogate or launch an analysis of the implications of telepathy within mechanisms of coercion; discipline; or hierarchized, gendered, and racialized power. While many artists were working on what seem to have been similar projects related to psychic or unseen energies, and some were pursuing feminist and/or anti-capitalist visions, Byars was in direct dialogue with the weaponization of telepathy and with the very architects of the Cold War.

Earlier in this essay, I mention the experiments shepherded by J. B. Rhine, who, from his position within the academy, pursued explorations with specially designed Zener cards meant to test ESP capabilities. Such pursuits were not limited to campus labs. Beyond MK-Ultra, the CIA and the US Department of Defense sponsored extensive programs around precognition and telepathy; they were compelled to do so after learning about Soviet experiments in parapsychology from the 1970 book *Psychic Discoveries Behind the Iron Curtain*.[56] A Defense Department program code-named Stargate probed a parapsychological phenomenon deemed of particular worth: clairvoyant spying known as "remote viewing," which surveilled military installations or distant geographical features from afar (fig. 30).[57]

Before the invention of aerial drones, this mode of visioning would have been especially valuable for military strategy.

55. John Beck and Ryan Bishop, *Technocrats of the Imagination: Art, Technology and the Military-Industrial Avant-Garde* (Duke University Press, 2020); their skeptical account of the A&T program is essential.
56. Sheila Ostrander and Lynn Schroeder, *Psychic Discoveries Behind the Iron Curtain* (Prentice-Hall, 1970).
57. Axel Balthasar, ed., *Project Stargate and Remote Viewing Technology: The CIA's Files on Psychic Spying* (Adventures Unlimited Press, 2018). See also Michael E. Zarbo, "Remote Viewing: Parapsychological Potential for Information Collection" (Master's thesis, Defense Intelligence College, US Army, 1992).

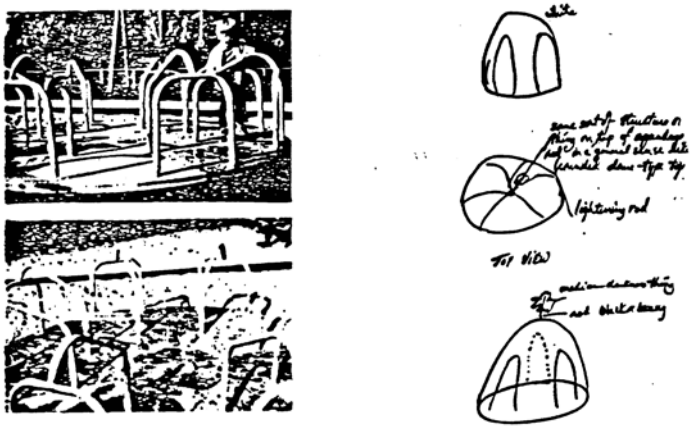


Figure 5: Subject drawing of merry-go-round target.

Source: Puthoff and Targ, "A Perceptual Channel for Information Transfer Over Kilometer Distances: Historical Perspective and Recent Research," Proceedings of the IEEE, 64, no. 3, March 1976.

(fig. 30) CIA documentation of remote sensing military experiments

It would enable a person sitting in the Pentagon to precisely pinpoint on a map a nuclear arsenal in the USSR, collapsing all intervening space at no risk to any human. The Stanford Research Institute (SRI) in Menlo Park, California, carried out some of these experiments beginning in the early 1970s, right as telepathic artworks were also having a heyday. Serious experiments with mass mind control, psychic intelligence

gathering, and telekinetic assassination were being actively pursued by the US military for their tactical deployment. Journalist Jon Ronson's nonfiction account *The Men Who Stare at Goats* (2004) describes US Army experiments starting in the late 1970s in which a special elite force trained to make animals' hearts stops, killing them just by looking at them.[58] The fact that this foray into minting lethal "psychic warriors" was made into a satirical comedy starring George Clooney does not diminish the deeply disturbing—horrific—implications of such taxpayer-funded research.

To burnish his reputation, pop mind reader Uri Geller collaborated with researchers at the SRI; we now know through declassified documents that this Institute's multimillion-dollar psi research was sponsored by the CIA.[59] In 1974, two of its scientists published a laudatory article in the respected journal *Nature* asserting that Geller was able to telepathically send and receive information via some "as yet unidentified perceptual modality."[60] Geller reported that he was often summoned by national security agents when he traveled, and questioned about the significant and "potential danger" that the "Geller effect" might pose to, say, defense equipment, army intelligence, and

58. Jon Ronson, *The Men Who Stare at Goats* (Picador, 2004).
59. Harold Putoff, "CIA-Initiated Remote Viewing at Stanford Research Institute," 1996, https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/CIA-Initiated-Remote-Viewing-Program-at-Stanford-Puthoff/5326d58231f3d00802 49d82d83006 1c116bf7931. See also declassified CIA documents on Geller labeled "Stargate," available at the CIA Freedom of Information Act Reading Room: cia.gov/readingroom.
60. Russell Targ and Harold Putoff, "Information transmission under conditions of sensory shielding," *Nature* 251 (October 18, 1974): 602–7. The publication of this article unleashed a storm of controversy; see Boyce Rensberger, "Physicists Test Telepathy in a 'Cheat-Proof' Setting," *The New York Times*, October 22, 1974.

(fig. 31) Uri Geller on *The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson*, August 1, 1973

telecommunications systems.[61] Geller served his compulsory years in the Israeli Defense Forces during the 1967 Six-Day War; a 2013 documentary alleged that his relationship with the military never ended and that he was a "psychic spy" trafficking between the CIA and the Mossad.[62] (This film was made with the full endorsement and participation of Geller, who has an obvious interest in perpetuating his own mystique.)

However, despite Geller's proclamations that his powers have been definitively proven, he was not taken seriously by most. In 1973, he famously appeared on *The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson* and was utterly unable to bend the spoons

61. Geller, *My Story*, 20.
62. *The Secret Life of Uri Geller: Psychic Spy?*, directed by Vikram Jayanti (Springfilms Limited, 2013). It features a disturbingly chipper interview with Benjamin Netanyahu, hailed as a "friend of Uri."

provided by the show's host (fig. 31). After this much-watched humiliation, some felt his paranormal abilities had been definitively revealed as a hoax. Others believed the opposite: that his failures confirmed him as an authentic mentalist. Carson, in the guise of the turbaned Carnac the Magnificent, "a mystic from the East," often made predictions and practiced a comedic version of psychic divination by providing answers to sealed cards that he read with his mind. This was an exoticizing cosplay, complete with a South Asian–inspired soundtrack and "Middle Eastern" curses. The ridiculousness of Carnac the Magnificent belies the fact that Carson, an accomplished magician, was invested in promoting trained experts who were skilled at sleight of hand. He despised those who he felt were grifters and opportunists, and he reveled in unmasking Geller as a fraud and con man. That public shaming is now in the distant past, and Geller continues to be a minor celebrity; in 2021, with a showman's flair, he claimed responsibility for dislodging the cargo ship that clogged the Suez Canal.[63]

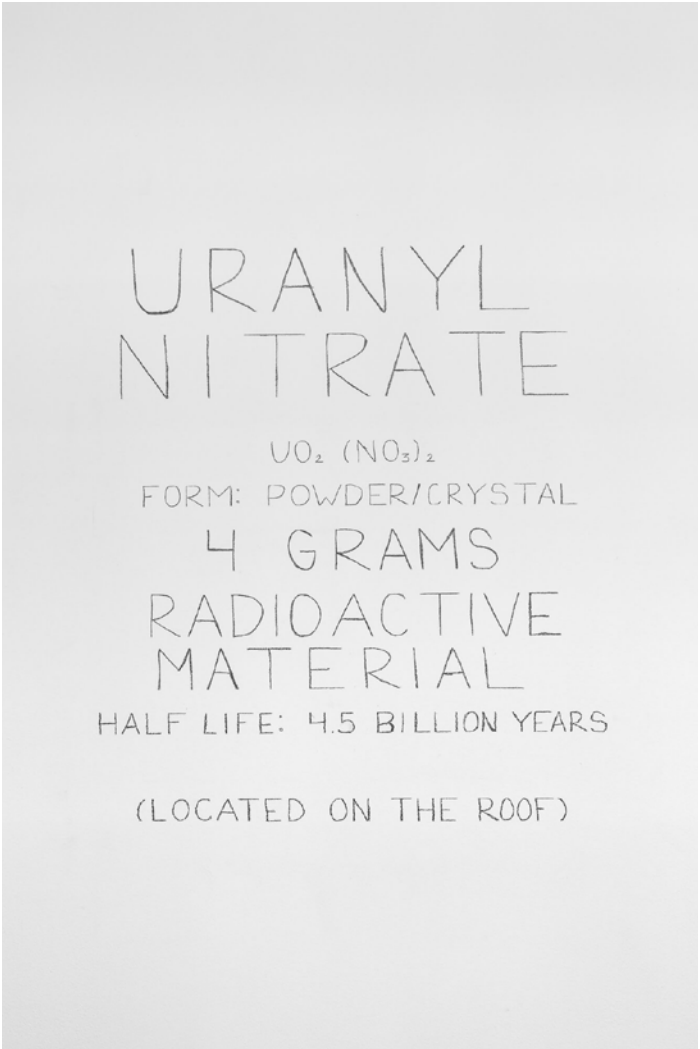
63. Yolande Knell, "Israeli 'psychic' Uri Geller still baffling fans at 75," BBC News, Jaffa (December 25, 2021).

Radioactivity

In his quest to explore the edges of art's perceptibility in the 1960s, Robert Barry moved between using telepathy and working with radioactive elements. Riffing on his own last name, his first such piece utilized a vial of barium that he purchased via a mail-order catalogue for scientific supplies. This jump from mind reading to chemical elements indicates a further nexus to be traced: the odd arc sparked between conceptual art's leap towards invisibility and the decisively real, yet optically undetectable, substance of radioactive matter.

Barry embedded radioactive isotopes in various art institutions, including for Szeemann's *Live in Your Head: When Attitudes Become Form*, and marked each with laconic plaques. *Uranyl Nitrate* (fig. 32) was installed at the Kunsthalle Bern in March 1969. According to the typed insurance form listing the works in the exhibition, the size of this piece is "0.5 microcuries" and its duration is "4.5 X 109 years."[64] "I carried the capsule in my pocket on the plane to Switzerland," Barry told me in 2017. After a small pause, he conceded, "Yes, it seems unlikely."[65] As with his telepathy piece, there is very little to photograph here, aside from a shot of the building's roof looking no different than if the artist had not installed his piece (fig. 33). No less than the telepathic works, Barry's radioactive art is always subject to a leap of faith on the part of the art historian. Did he genuinely try to telepathically transmit thoughts, and was "something" actually received by the audience? Did he really place radioactive

64. Insurance form, "Works on Exhibit," *Live in Your Head: When Attitudes Become Form*, Kunsthalle Bern archives, Switzerland.
65. Barry, telephone interview, 2017.



(fig. 32) Robert Barry, *Uranyl Nitrate ($UO_2(NO_3)_2$)*, Kunsthalle Bern, 1969

elements in museums? Or did he just claim to do so? The art world has never been that keen on "debunking" ala Johnny Carson, so I have never felt that it mattered much one way or another; but in our conversation, Barry insisted that he always did what he said he was doing.

Radioactive substances are the most potent Cold War force, at the core of its looming atomic threat. Though they do not register to human senses, they have undeniably physical effects that include death, genetic disorders, and thyroid disease. They can both harm and heal, deforming tissue and causing cancers but also blasting away malignant cells; Japanese theorist Sabu Kohso calls this the Janus-faced nature of nuclear energy.[66] In US pop cultural lore, from comic books to monster movies starting in the 1950s, psychic abilities, invisibility, and other extraordinary powers are yoked to radioactive-substance exposure. There are dozens of examples of radiation poisoning having miraculous effects within the pantheon of superheroes, from Bruce Banner's transformation into the (radioactive) green Hulk to Spiderman to the Fantastic Four. "Radiation-induced superpowers" is such a standard trope that the brief documentary *A Brief History of: The Atomic Man* (2020) plainly states that "comic books have made us believe that contact with radioactive elements creates some kind of superhuman."[67]

Geller's memoir describes one test performed on him with a Geiger counter and decisively conjoins his psychic abilities with radioactivity: "There is always a little bit of background radiation in every place on earth. But when I held the counter

66. Sabu Kohso, *Radiation and Revolution* (Duke University Press, 2020).
67. *A Brief History of: The Atomic Man*, video posted by Plainly Difficult, February 6, 2020, 7:49 min., https://www.youtube.com watch?app=desktop&v=20DlJlVyVwM.

(fig. 33) Kunsthalle Bern, 1967

and concentrated on it, the machine clicked very fast, indicating up to 500 times the normal radiation in the background." He claims that he could actually change the molecular structure of some minerals, and that, for instance, in the laboratory he was presented with a substance that "had actually dematerialized in the controlled test."[68] Geller uses the contested conceptual art buzzword "dematerialization" in this context, suggesting that his mind can perform the actual disintegration of matter.

But the much-vaunted dematerialization of art taking place in the 1960s was rarely entirely ephemeral. Barry's isotope pieces, like his telepathic thought experiments and inert gas releases, flirt with the limits of perception and our methods of evidencing. They also demonstrate both the many failures around documenting this kind of art and our anxieties around the insufficiency of

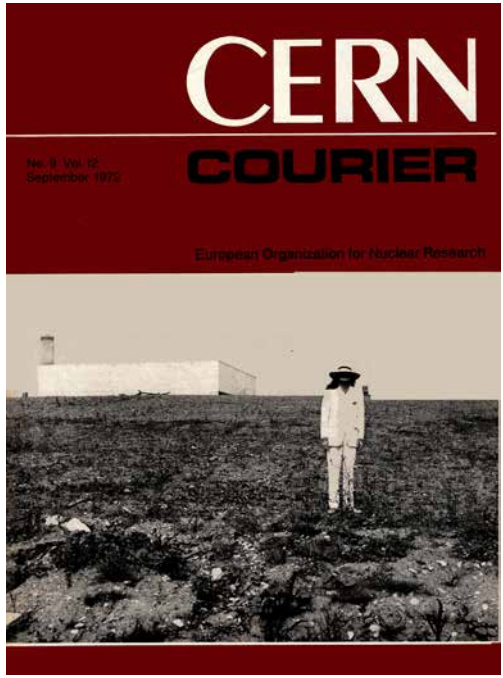
68. Geller, *My Story* , 79, 86.

the photograph to make ephemeral work like this feel potent, legible, and vivid. Hence, many photos of Barry's radioactive works were taken even when there was not much to look at; thus, ostensibly invisible or disappearing conceptualism is actually a machine for generating visibility, a perpetual machine for creating archives.

In a related manner, the photographs that accompany Geller's autobiography are filled with unintentionally humorous examples of the extreme unreliability of photography to provide proof of his abilities. Take, for instance, a picture of him after having stopped a cable car in midair (see fig. 14), or at the top of an escalator that he has frozen with his power of concentration. What the respective photos capture is Gellar standing *next to* a cable car or *on* an escalator, but the still photo cannot convey the arresting of motion, much less demonstrate how these figures are linked through any causality.

Byars, like Barry, was drawn into the magnetic orbit of atomic energy, and in the early 1970s he was introduced to the European Organization for Nuclear Research (CERN) in Geneva, where he spent time over summers (they now have an artist-in-residence program, unlike the Pentagon, but they did not when he started visiting). In 1972, when Byars appeared on the cover of their magazine wearing his trademark monochromatic outfit with a hat obscuring his face (fig. 34), he was writing notes on CERN letterhead.[69] Despite art historian Thomas McEvilley's assertion that Byars's presence within such

69. This issue of the *CERN Courier* is classified by some museums, including the Berkeley Art Museum, as a work on paper by Byars. For his use of CERN letterhead, complete with his embellished, hard-to-read penmanship, see object 2003.80.26 in the Harvard Art Museum archives.



(fig. 34) James Lee Byars on the cover of the *CERN Courier*, September 1972

organizations as the Hudson Institute and CERN was "subversive," I look at the artist's approving citations of J. Robert Oppenheimer, the scientific mastermind of the atomic bomb, or his desire to coordinate a satellite with NASA, and have more questions than I do answers.

Byars's lust for moments of military-industrial collaboration circles us back to the Japanese artists' formative experiments with the invisible that were forged in a post–World War II context. In an article on Yoko Ono's landmark *Cut Piece* (1964), I speculate that her work was in dialogue with atomic afterimages, and the

same might be said of Yutaka Matsuzawa and Mieko Shiomi.[70] Does not an awareness of radioactivity recalibrate our understanding of why these artists were compelled by the problem of how something undetectable to the naked eye can have real, lasting effects? In postwar Japan, radioactivity is not fodder for hypothetical lab exercises (Geller) or an artistic substance in the service of institutional critique (Barry), but a lived reality, a dreadfully ongoing condition of immediate catastrophe and persistent aftereffects unleashed by the atomic bomb. It is telling that the widespread comic book motif of the nuked superhero with specialized individual powers that can be used to do good is not prevalent in Japan, where instead the radioactivity-charged Godzilla emerges from the ocean to crush civilization.

For his part, Byars had a long-standing connection to Japan: he lived there on-and-off for about a decade, during 1958 to 1967, and was compelled by many religious and cultural customs that Western critics have simultaneously claimed and disavowed around Shintoism, calligraphy, tea ceremonies, Zen Buddhism, and Noh theater. For instance, Byars frequently mentioned that he was the reincarnation of a famous Japanese Noh playwright; McEvilley writes: "The Shinto ritual style was converted into Noh theater by Ze-ami (1363–1443), whom Byars regards, in the spirit of Shinto ancestor worship, as a former self."[71] How are we to understand Byars's relationship to Eastern practices? What happens when a privileged Western subject takes a detour into non-Western epistemologies?

70. Julia Bryan-Wilson, "Remembering Yoko Ono's 'Cut Piece,'" *Oxford Art Journal* 26, no. 1 (2003): 101–23.

71. Thomas McEvilley, "James Lee Byars and the Atmosphere of Question," *Artforum* 19, no. 10 (Summer 1981): 54.

We must ask, of Byars no less than his hero Joseph Beuys, who also grounded his legend in a mythologized version of native magic: What version of mysticism is this? One culture's vaguely defined mysticism around, say, mind reading is often drawn directly from another's religious traditions; these "borrowings" are fraught with colonial inequities and imperial dilutions. Historian Roger Luckhurst's book *The Invention of Telepathy* (2002) includes a chapter called "Phantasmal Empire," about how the Euro-American embrace of telepathy in the nineteenth century was implicated in the simultaneous fascination with, and obscuring of, Asian spiritual practices.[72] A century later, Byars's stripped-down "perfect" objects, props, and costumes bear a clear relation to Japanese aesthetics—his frequent deployment of the circle, for example, resonates with the Zen notion of the circular window in the mind as "a symbol of absolute truth."[73] The long-standing erasure of Eastern lineages when discussing these topics compels me to emphasize that the British nineteenth-century Society for Psychical Research was hardly the first to explore telepathic visioning. M. Srinivasan, former associate director of the Bhabha Atomic Research Centre in Mumbai, summarizes the state of the current literature around clairvoyant spying and places it in conversation with the ancient notion of *divya drishti*: "Aphorism 3.26 of Patanjali's classic work Yoga Sutras (400 B.C.) describes the first of the ashta-siddhis (or psychic powers) that a serious practitioner of Yoga can acquire as 'obtaining knowledge of the small, the hidden or distant by

72. Roger Luckhurst, *The Invention of Telepathy* (Oxford University Press, 2002).
73. Shinobu, "Performances in Zen Temples," in *James Lee Byars: Days in Japan*, 83.

directing the light of superphysical faculty.'"[74] Srinivasan concludes by urging Western science and practitioners of yoga (itself a branch of Vedic knowledge that is intertwined with the science of Ayurveda) to coordinate efforts.

This returns us to Adrian Piper—a lifelong student of yoga—and artists such as Pauline Oliveros, whose understanding of the so-called mystical realm was rooted in a range of non-Western genealogies about blurring boundaries of self/other rather than a masculinist imperative to control. Such practices are especially striking given the ease with which the white male artists absented their body from their works. In the work of some of the female artists I have mentioned, including Yoko Ono, reverberatory techniques such as screams create vibrations inside of and between vessels/bodies; this involves both embodiment and generosity.

74. M. Srinivasan, "Clairvoyant Remote Viewing: The US Sponsored Psychic Spying," *Strategic Analysis: A Monthly Journal of the IDSA* 26, no. 1 (January–March 2002), https://ciaotest.cc.columbia.edu/olj/sa/sa_jan02srm01.html.

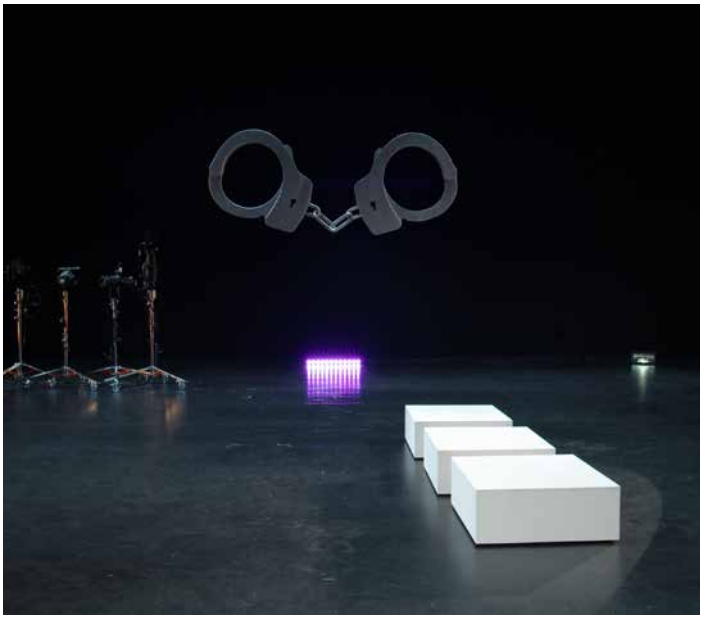
Coda

I've presented this research as a talk several times, and it often is met with scorn. Do I actually believe in telepathy: Yes or no? Why would I put Uri Geller (kitsch) next to Robert Barry (canon)? Do I identify as a witch: Yes or no? Can we respect you if we don't have answers to these questions? Yes or no?

In recent years, fresh covens have convened to revitalize the urgent calls put out in 1968 by WITCH. In 2017, Witches cast spells on the Trump Administration and hexed plans for a US/Mexico border wall, attracting the consternation of fascist pundits on Fox News.[75] This rebirth demonstrates the lasting power of the 1960s feminist group in the slyly wicked use of irrationality as a strategy to counter the grimness of authoritarian certainties. Reactivating the legacy of disobedient women feels especially pertinent in the current moment, given the ongoing misogyny that is intent on regulating access to abortion and gender-affirming health care. The next-generation Witches are trans-inclusive and multigendered as they pointedly draw from, and update, the iconography of woman-hating, transphobic, and homophobic cultural myths.

Along with activist Witches mobilizing against Trump, queer art duo Pauline Boudry/Renate Lorenz revisited a formative feminist collaboration from the 1960s/1970s in 2017. At the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, they premiered the multimedia installation *Telepathic Improvisation* (fig. 35), a direct homage to Oliveros's wish for greater communion among beings. The

75. "Witches cast spells against 'wicked' Trump," *Tucker Carlson Tonight*, September 26, 2017, https://www.foxnews.com/video/5581455324001.



(fig. 35) Pauline Bourdy/Renate Lorenz,
Telepathic Improvisation, 2017

potential of objects, humans, actors, and viewers to think and move together without words became an act of what Boudry/Lorenz call "radical solidarity" across borders and nations in a time of enforced separations and heightened security measures. The piece expanded beyond the realm of the human by inviting audiences to communicate relationally with a host of elements, including the lights of the stage and motorized white boxes that move uncannily, driven by their own logic, across the theatrical space. "What seems important," Lorenz has commented, "is not only that a box might move, but that it might move us."[76] Boudry/Lorenz's project underscores how, if wielded with care rather than control, telepathy and telekinesis can be queer ways of feeling and being, for the boundary around the self is shattered to allow in others of all kinds.

If humans are so incredibly powerful, able not only to disfigure nails with our minds but to reconfigure atoms into radioactive poison, where does that leave other kinds of matter, namely, the nonhuman, the so-called inert, or plants and animals, or soil, or the Earth itself? Is the role of the inanimate simply to bend, like one of Geller's spoons, to our will? What hubris, what dominating logic! Boudry/Lorenz's *Telepathic Improvisation*, with its vision of mutuality and desirous solidarity across the animate/inanimate hierarchy, is a definitive rejoinder to that arrogance. Boudry/Lorenz's work builds upon legacies of queer feminist exchange as they attempt to communicate beyond the material realm, and to activate powers that might be invisible or imperceptible to the eye in the service of catalyzing change.

76. "Pauline Boudry and Renate Lorenz with Dean Daderko and Lia Gangitano: A Conversation," in *Pauline Bourdy/Renate Lorenz: Telepathic Improvisation*, ed. Rose D'Amora (Contemporary Arts Museum, 2017), 34.

"Close your eyes and send an action," begins Boudry/Lorenz's moving-image narration. Can you hear me, distant reader? Are you receiving my messages?

About This Text

In 2016, I agreed to give a talk at the Kunsthalle Bern in Switzerland for a symposium about that institution's storied history. It was a congenial and scholarly gathering convened by Peter J. Schneemann and featured academic papers about various initiatives at the Kunsthalle, particularly those spearheaded by visionary curator Harald Szeemann, who helmed the institution from 1961 to 1969. I was especially interested in how Robert Barry and James Lee Byars, who both exhibited under Szeemann, experimented with telepathic projects in the 1960s and 1970s. From this kernel of connection, I kept adding and adding layers of rumination, like an irritated oyster.

As I veered further into artistic uses of invisible transmissions, my research led to other avenues of exploration around militarism, mind control, and radioactivity, until the original purpose of an essay about the Kunsthalle was obscured. I hoped that greater clarity would come if I kept turning these issues over in my mind; instead, it all got murkier and messier. Now, many years later, I have spent many hours chasing rabbits down holes related to declassified CIA programs and laboratory reports about remote sensing.

After all my time with this subject, this is what I have learned: there are women, queer/trans folks, and others from the margins who are operating on alternative frequencies that Western science cannot account for. I try to tune into their coded transmissions, whether they be unseen energies or muted cackles. In this, I am firmly on the side of levitating the Pentagon, listening to objects, and trying to fly.

For Trevor.

List of Illustrations

Page 6: Mieko (Chieko) Shiomi, *‹ music for two players II ›*, 1963. Ink on paper. The Museum of Modern Art, New York, The Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection Gift. © Mieko (Chieko) Shiomi. Digital image © The Museum of Modern Art / Licensed by SCALA / Art Resource, NY. Page 11 (top): Bruce Nauman, *The True Artist Helps the World by Revealing Mystic Truths (Window or Wall Sign)*, 1967. Edition of 3. Neon tubing with clear glass tubing suspension frame. Philadelphia Museum of Art, Purchased with the generous support of The Annenberg Fund for Major Acquisitions, the Henry P. McIlhenny Fund, the bequest (by exchange) of Henrietta Meyers Miller, the gift (by exchange) of Philip L. Goodwin, and funds contributed by Edna Andrade. © 2025 Bruce Nauman / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Page 11 (bottom): James Riddle, *E.S.P. Fluxkit*, late 1960s, published by Fluxus. Manila envelope with offset-printed label, containing five colored cards. Harvard Art Museums / Fogg Museum, Barbara and Peter Moore Fluxus Collection, Margaret Fisher Fund and gift of Barbara Moore / Bound & Unbound. © James Riddle. Photo © President and Fellows of Harvard College. Page 14: "Thought-Transference in Boston," *Science: An Illustrated Journal* 6, no. 126 (July–December 1885). Courtesy Smithsonian Library and Archives. Page 17: Matsuzawa Yutaka, *Vanishing of Matter: Seeing Anti-Civilization Exhibition*, 1965. Letterpress from a portfolio of 71 prints. Private collection. © Yutaka Matsuzawa. Page 18: Matsuzawa Yutaka, *My Own Death (Paintings Existing Only in Time)*, 1970. Ink and typewriting on transparentized paper. Private collection, on long-term loan to the Nagano Prefectural Art Museum. © Yutaka Matsuzawa. Page 21: James Lee Byars in front of *The Door of Innocence*, 1986–87. Photo: Elio Montanari, Courtesy Castello di Rivoli Museo d'Arte Contemporanea, Turin. Page 23: "Choices: Making an Art of Everyday Life," press release. Courtesy New Museum, New York. Page 25: Robert Barry, *Telepathic Piece*, 1969. Courtesy Centre for Communications and the Arts, Simon Fraser University. © Robert Barry. Page 29: *Science Fiction* exhibition publication, Kunsthalle Bern, 1967. Courtesy Kunsthalle Bern. Page 30: James Lee Byars, *Breathe (Two in a Hat)*, 1968. Performance. © The Estate of the James Lee Byars, Courtesy Michael Werner Gallery, New York, London, and Berlin. Page 31: Uri Geller, 1974. Photo: Getty Images / Evening Standard. Page 33 (top): From Uri Geller's *My Story*, 1975. Courtesy Praeger Publishing. Page 33 (bottom, from left): From Uri Geller's *My Story*, 1975. Photos: Bernhard Rudolph / BILD, Voigt Joachim Voigt / BILD, Hans Heer, Courtesy Praeger Publishing. Page 35: Veterans for Peace, Public Reactions: The March on the Pentagon, October 21, 1967. Johnson White House Photo Office Collection, Courtesy National Archives and Records Administration. Page 36: Creator unknown, Levitating the Pentagon pin. Courtesy Collectors Weekly. Page 37: Ed Sanders, *A Magic Rite to Exorcize the Pentagon*, 1967. Courtesy Boo-Hooray. Page 38: John Lennon and Yoko Ono, *WAR IS OVER! (IF YOU WANT IT)*, 1969. Offset lithograph. © John Lennon and Yoko Ono. Page 42: Yoko Ono, *CLOUD PIECE*,

1963. Published in *Grapefruit* by Yoko Ono, Tokyo, 1964. © Yoko Ono. Page 43: Yoko Ono, *FLY PIECE*, 1964. Published in *Grapefruit* by Yoko Ono, Tokyo, 1964. © Yoko Ono. Page 47: Pauline Oliveros, *Telepathic Improvisations*, 1974. Published in *Sonic Meditations* by Pauline Oliveros, Smith Publications, 1974. Courtesy Special Collections & Archives, UC San Diego. Page 48: ♀ Ensemble performing *Teach Yourself to Fly* by Pauline Oliveros, 1970. Courtesy Pauline Oliveros papers, MSS 102, Special Collections & Archives, UC San Diego. Page 51: Adrian Piper, *Food for the Spirit*, 1971. Fourteen gelatin silver prints (reprinted 1997). Detail: #2 of 14. Collection of The Museum of Modern Art, New York. The Family of Man Fund. © Adrian Piper Research Archive (APRA) Foundation Berlin. Page 52: Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, *Audience Distant Relative*, 1977. Artist's book: black print on 7 sheets of white paper, printed on both sides (3 copies). University of California, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive; Gift of the Theresa Hak Kyung Cha Memorial Foundation. © Theresa Hak Kyung Cha. Image courtesy University of California, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive. Page 56: Women's International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell (WITCH), Wall Street Hex, October 31, 1968. Photo © Bev Grant. Page 59: Cover of Arthur Evans, *Witchcraft and the Gay Counterculture: A Radical View of Western Civilization and Some of the People It Has Tried to Destroy*, 1978. Courtesy Fag Rag Books. Page 61: *Carrie*, 1976. Directed by Brian De Palma. Courtesy Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Pictures. Page 64: James Lee Byars, *Putting Byars in the Hudson Institute is the Artistic Product*, 1969. © The Estate of James Lee Byars, Courtesy Michael Werner Gallery, New York, London, and Berlin. Photo © Ed Cornachio. Page 65: Postcard from James Lee Byars to Walter Van Dyck, January 20, 1970. © The Estate of the James Lee Byars, Courtesy Michael Werner Gallery, New York, London, and Berlin. Courtesy Walter Van Dyck, scan M HKA. Page 67: Documentation courtesy Central Intelligence Agency. Page 69: Uri Geller and Johnny Carson. Courtesy NBC. Pages 72 and 74 (above): Robert Barry, *Uranyl Nitrate ($UO_2(NO_3)_2$)*, 1969. © Robert Barry. Page 76: Cover of *CERN Courier*, September 1972. © CERN. Page 81: Pauline Boudry / Renate Lorenz, *Telepathic Improvisation*, 2017. Installation with HD. Performance: Marwa Arsanios, MPA, Ginger Brooks Takahashi, Werner Hirsch. © Pauline Boudry / Renate Lorenz. Courtesy of Ellen de Bruijne Projects Amsterdam and Marcelle Alix Paris.

Cookie Jar 2
Published by The Andy Warhol Foundation Arts Writers Grant, New York
Edition of 2,000

Editors: Pradeep Dalal and Shiv Kotecha
Project Coordinator: Julie Evanoff
Copy Editor: Deirdre O'Dwyer
Image Clearance: Peter Goldberg
Design: Studio Remco van Bladel

This book is typeset in Eldorado Text Light and printed on Arena, 100 gsm. Printed and bound by De Raddraaier SSP, Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

The Andy Warhol Foundation Arts Writers Grant
15 Maiden Lane, 18th Floor
New York, NY 10038
cookiejar.artswriters.org

Julia Bryan-Wilson teaches art history at Columbia University and is curator-at-large at the Museu de Arte de São Paulo (MASP), where she most recently co-organized the international exhibition *Histórias LGBTQIA+* (2024–25). Her books include *Art Workers: Radical Practice in the Vietnam War Era* (2009), *Fray: Art and Textile Politics* (2017), and *Louise Nevelson's Sculpture: Drag, Color, Join, Face* (2023). She is the recipient of awards including an ASAP Book Prize, a Frank Jewett Mather Award, a Guggenheim Fellowship, and a Robert Motherwell Book Award.

Andy Warhol, Color Polaroid

How does art fit into the life of a writer, as an object of study or as an object of desire? The four pamphlets that comprise *Cookie Jar 2* offer a range of possibilities: in the diary pages of an art critic hitting the road with her punk band, looking to check out *Las Meninas* at the Prado; in conversations about Vietnamese socialist realism amid romantic entanglement; in the relay of telepathic artworks by women considered peripheral, and men now canonized; and in a reckoning with the dehumanization of black and indigenous people by the early American circus industry. "Every encounter, no matter how strange or new, eventually reveals the patterns of possibility innate to the life before it," writes Hannah Black in her essay for this volume, on the life and work of the artist Joseph Yoakum.

Cookie Jar is a pamphlet series of long-format arts writing produced by the Andy Warhol Foundation Arts Writers Grant. The series is named after Warhol's vast and weird collection of cookie jars scoured from flea markets, thrift stores, and estate sales. Each volume of the series highlights various ways through which writing may yet encounter art.

Cookie Jar is free to read in all formats. Order or download all the pamphlets at cookiejar.artswriters.org.

—Pradeep Dalal and Shiv Kotecha, Editors

The Andy Warhol Foundation Arts Writers Grant