ever made. In some ways, all art is a hallucination. Johnson’s idea has to do with the widespread availability and use of psychedelic drugs and the increasingly common understanding of their effects.

This notion has been around for a while. Five years ago, I wrote about a wily show called “Drunk vs. Stoned,” which postulated that “stoned art” is introspective, hypersensitive, detail-oriented, and prone to surprise, spirals, and repetition, while drunk art is outward-looking, impulsive, romantic, and unafraid of messiness and sloppy emotions. Under these criteria, Expressionism is drunk; Pop is stoned. Pollock, Rauschenberg, and Nan Goldin are drunk; Warhol, Johns, and Cindy Sherman are stoned. Johnson’s lens provides an interesting alternative to teleological-stylistic versions of art history. It is experiential rather than detached. Look at John Chamberlain’s crushed-car-part sculptures this way, and you don’t see commentary on consumerism and waste, or formal arrangements of color and line; you see exoskeletal creatures of folded space. Pipilotti Rist’s burning color becomes the morphing of alternative universes, and Matthew Barney’s crawling through Vaseline makes the malleability of space palpable.

The three Charles Ray installations at Matthew Marks right now, all brilliant examples of post-minimalist/conceptual sculpture, each created in the late eighties and new to New York, rattled my perceptions, jangled my faculties, and made me go “Wow!” They exemplify a drug-addled view of the world. Ray’s sculptures, part of a long tradition of minimal installations, are also forerunners to much of the theatrical Festivalism of recent times (e.g., Maurizio Cattelan and Olafur Eliasson). Each piece is nearly invisible and formally economical. Yet each is outrageously labor-intensive. Ink Line, the best and showiest of the three works, is a sculpture/drawing/fountain consisting of a stream of jet-black ink pouring from a dime-size hole in the ceiling into a dime-size hole in the floor. Initially Ink Line looks like a strand of yarn strung the height of the gallery, a pulsating Fred Sandback sculpture, a free-floating Barnett Newman zip, or a disembodied Sol LeWitt. Get close and you’ll realize the line is liquid, glistening, the consistency of syrup, moving fairly fast, fluctuating slightly, and thinner at the bottom than at the top. The ink forms a weird climatological aura around itself, slightly changing the humidity of the room. I was blown away when I was allowed to see the elaborate apparatus that makes

The New York Times art critic Ken Johnson is writing a book saying that “psychedelic drugs and psychedelic culture have had a deeper, less obvious influence on the art of the past 60 years than has generally been acknowledged.” Johnson doesn’t mean that the intermingling of art and drugs is new; they’ve probably been canoodling as long as both have been around. And his idea isn’t about artists who actually use drugs. Sober-looking work is made by stoners and addled-looking art is made by teetotalers. Van Eyck’s hyperreal paintings are among the most hallucinogenic works
this simple effect possible. There was a large, noisy electric motor in the show-
room beneath this gallery, all sorts of wiring, and plastic tubes that go under the
floor, behind the wall, and above the ceiling. A gallery assistant arrives two
hours early each day to drain the ink, "de-gas" it (!?); heat it with lamps to be-
tween 90 and 95 degrees, and put it back into the system. Anyone who looks at Ink
Line can figure out how it works—yet the piece is as much a phenomenological
event and a mystery as it is a work of for-
malist sculpture.

Spinning Spot is a circular section of
floor, 24 inches in diameter, spinning at
33 1/3 revolutions per minute. Never mind
that the section weighs more than a quar-
ter-ton, is more than a foot thick, and is
supported from beneath by a huge motor
strapped to the basement ceiling. The ef-
tect is mesmerizing. Sometimes the spot
seems to be standing still and the room to
be moving, other times the room disap-
pears and all you can see is the spot. Mean-
while, the third piece, MOVING Wire, is a
thin gleaming steel wire whose ends poke
out through a wall into space. Get close
and you see the two halves slowly changing
length, one wire shortening as the other
gets longer, then appearing to reverse.

Since the birth of the avant-garde in
the mid-nineteenth century, art history has
been considered mainly in formal
ways: What led to what, who begat whom.
That approach has a way of shutting out
a basic idea—namely, the visionary, sha-
manic inexplicability of most of what we
see. Johnson's idea brings such an escape
from reason back into the discussion, and
could relegate some major art to the mar-
gins and move marginal (and question-
able) things to the center. Keeping
psychedelia in mind as you look at art
stops it from being just a building block
or part of a stylistic family; it allows re-
cent work to regain some of the value that
art has had over its 50,000-year history.

All three of Ray's pieces, especially Ink
Line (which some New York museum
should buy and install, pronto) and Spin-
ing Spot, are more than Merry Prank-
ster sight gags. Each makes you ultra-aware of spaces outside the one
you're in, of rooms above and below you, the things that make these rooms and ef-
fects possible, and how your own body relates to all of this. They put you back in
the realm of the unknown, of double vi-
sion and oddity. In addition to making
me imagine the gallery was moving, blur-
ing around the edges, turning liq-
uid, spinning, being sucked into itself,
and sprouting shiny metal tentacles, each is a total trip.

PHOTOGRAPH BY MICHAEL STRONG