

Woo Woo Workout. The Commodification of Spirituality in Expanded Sculptural Practices

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Woo Woo Workout

The Commodification of Spirituality in Expanded Sculptural Practices

Min Wong

A thesis in the fulfilment of the requirements for the degree
of Master of Fine Art

University of New South Wales

Art and Design

May 2021

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Concepts and practices of spirituality have recently undergone significant shifts as they become increasingly incorporated into the homogenising and commodifying mechanisms of contemporary life. This has coincided with a renewed interest in esoteric practices, institutes, cultural products, and themes in contemporary art, with a range of contemporary artists using expanded sculptural practices to critically engage with the commodification of spirituality. Here, the visual language of 'spirituality' becomes a vehicle for artists to respond to commodification, through diverse approaches, including the adopted practices of shamanism, animism, Zen Buddhism, and the occult, to ritualising spaces and personal spiritual explorations. This research examines how key selected artists adopt and adapt the language of spirituality in contemporary art contexts. Using practice-led research, which resulted in a written thesis and body of artistic practice, this project argues that artists can engage, creatively and critically, with spiritual ways of understanding the world, to offer possible alternatives to the dominant narratives of contemporary life. Furthermore, this project charts how certain artistic strategies and tendencies in this field illustrate a renewed desire, not only for individual spiritual exploration, but also for social and cultural transformations that promote alternative narratives for possible futures.

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ABSTRACT

Concepts and practices of spirituality have recently undergone significant shifts as they become increasingly incorporated into the homogenising and commodifying mechanisms of contemporary life. This has coincided with a renewed interest in esoteric practices, institutes, cultural products, and themes in contemporary art, with a range of contemporary artists using expanded sculptural practices to critically engage with the commodification of spirituality. Here, the visual language of 'spirituality' becomes a vehicle for artists to respond to commodification, through diverse approaches, including the adopted practices of shamanism, animism, Zen Buddhism, and the occult, to ritualising spaces and personal spiritual explorations. This research examines how key selected artists adopt and adapt the language of spirituality in contemporary art contexts. Using practice-led research, which resulted in a written thesis and body of artistic practice, this project argues that artists can engage, creatively and critically, with spiritual ways of understanding the world, to offer possible alternatives to the dominant narratives of contemporary life. Furthermore, this project charts how certain artistic strategies and tendencies in this field illustrate a renewed desire, not only for individual spiritual exploration, but also for social and cultural transformations that promote alternative narratives for possible futures.

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INTRODUCTION

The ghostly presence of the occult and of the spiritual has become increasingly visible in the last ten years in contemporary art, even if its import, function, or consistency may still elude critics and observers.¹

Curator Marco Pasi identifies the esoteric phenomenon that persists in contemporary life. In recent years, the role of spirituality and esoteric traditions in contemporary art and popular culture have re-emerged as a key thematic concern. With a range of artists increasingly engaged in this topic, a number of survey and solo exhibitions in Australia and internationally have been dedicated to the subject. These include *On the spiritual matter of art*, MAXXI, National Museum of 21st Century Arts (2019), Rome; *Second Sight: Witchcraft, Ritual*, University Queensland Art Museum (2019), Brisbane; *Emma Kunz—Visionary Drawings: An exhibition conceived with Christodoulos Panayiotou*, Serpentine Gallery (2019), London; *Group Therapy*, Frye Museum (2018), Washington; *As above, so below*, Irish Museum of Modern Art (2017), Dublin; *Tony Oursler, Imponderable*, Museum of Modern Art (2017), New York; *Believe not every spirit, but try the spirits*, Monash University Museum of Art, Australia (2015), Melbourne; *You Imagine What You Desire*, 19th Biennale of Sydney (2014), Sydney and Massimiliano Gioni's Venice Biennale, *The Encyclopedic Palace* (2013), Venice.

This research project operates within this renewed interest in the relationship between quests for spiritual meaning and contemporary art by addressing the question: How do contemporary artists use expanded sculptural practices to critically engage with the commodification of spirituality? This practice-led research project examines the ways that artists engage with homogenised spirituality to critique its co-option into mainstream cultural, corporate, and Wellness² industries. This project argues that a key artistic strategy

¹ Pasi, M. (2010). A gallery of changing gods: Contemporary art and the cultural fashion of the occult. *Changing Gods: Between Religion and Everyday Life: cyberproceedings CESNUR*. <http://www.cesnur.org/2010/to-pasi.htm>

² 

is the adoption, mimicking, and adaptation of corporate communication tools to subvert conventions and create new meanings in this field of cultural production. In doing so, artists engage creatively and critically with spiritual ways of understanding the world, critiquing the dominant forms of lived experience to offer possible alternatives to the dominant narratives of contemporary life and politics. In examining this topic, this research project investigates artistic engagements with spiritual and metaphysical impulses of today and the recent past. It engages closely with the material and visual cultures associated with the 1960s and 1970s American West Coast counterculture, its subsequent impact on the emergence of New Age³ spirituality in the 1980s, and more recent tendencies toward self-help and therapeutic culture.

This research stems from a childhood spent with a Chinese father, whose beliefs were Buddhist and who practiced ancestral rituals, and an Australian mother, who was heavily involved in the Evangelist movement from the early 1980s. Born Again Christianity has been a continued source of faith for my family and, although I do not participate, these experiences are foundational for my research and art making. The literature, music, and esoteric ideas that were made popular in the 1970s underpin my studio-making because this was an expansive time of alternative thinking, and I respond to these ideas, and relate them to current societal challenges. Drawing on my lived experiences,⁴ this research project experiments with iconographic languages, through graphic and sculptural forms, in order to critically engage with spirituality.

In order to understand the methods and motivations for contemporary artists reinterpreting spirituality,⁵ this project examines the artistic methods of key artists: Mikala Dwyer, Marcus Coates, Dane Mitchell, Ulla Von Brandenburg, and Naomi Blacklock. This project

³ 

⁴ I have also spent years living alternative lifestyles in nature, practicing alternative therapies such as yoga, and travelling to national and international spiritual destinations.

⁵ Writer Suzi Gablik refers to the re-enchantment of postmodern culture where art enables a shift from modern to postmodern spirituality and allows for a return to humans' primordial experiences of the Earth, cosmos, and God.

Gablik, S. (1991). *The re-enchantment of art*. Thames and Hudson.

deliberately focuses on contemporary artists and myself who engage with the language of spirituality to extract alternative narratives to those from dominant political and economic paradigms, such as neoliberalism.⁶ These artists share a common interest in modalities of spirituality, ritual, folkloric practices,⁷ altered states of consciousness, and/or a belief in the possibility of human transformation. In this context, artists such as Timur Si-Qin, The Institute for New Feeling (IfNf), Nicolas Lobo, Shana Moulton, Jeremy Shaw, Verner Panton, and Alejandro Jodorowsky also provide key reference points for this project. Each artist uses a range of approaches to examine esoteric concerns that are similar to the ways that I approach art making. These approaches include: examining the commodification of spirituality in the neoliberalist world, appropriating branding strategies, exploring the materiality of spiritual accoutrement, developing spatial practices that embody the experiential, and desiring renewed connection with nature and/or the human experience.

To help navigate this field of research, I have developed a glossary of key terms in relation to the overarching framework of spirituality. The term spirituality is itself a loaded, and contentious, word that was originally associated with organised religion. The word 'spirit' is derived from the Latin *spiritus*, a translation of the Greek *pneuma*, meaning 'breath'.⁸ The term 'spirituality' was used in early Christianity to refer to a life attuned toward devotion of the Christian Holy Spirit and, during the Late Middle Ages, included the inner mental aspects of life. Around the 13th century, the term became associated with notions of immaterial souls, supernatural beings,⁹ and ghosts.¹⁰ More recently, spirituality is commonly

⁶ Neoliberalism is the ruling governing narrative, guiding Western democracies and their economies for approximately 70 years. Open markets and free trade were set up to protect democracy from Fascism, but it has resulted in destroying welfare programs, devaluing the rights of labour, and bringing benefits to the wealthy minority.

Hardin, C. (2014). Finding the 'Neo' in Neoliberalism. *Cultural Studies*, 28(2), 199–221. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09502386.2012.748815>.




⁸ Woodward, J. (2009). *A Brief History of Spirituality*, by Philip Sheldrake. Review. *Religion & Theology*, 16(4), 610–611. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9418.2009.00441_18.x.



¹⁰ Spirituality acquired other connotations if and when the *spirit* of a thing was its most essential principle. Harris, S. (2017, December 4). *In Defence of "Spiritual."* Sam Harris. <https://samharris.org/a-plea-for-spirituality/>

connected with the inner and intuitive response of the individual, emphasising inherent belief systems based on personal experience of the god within.¹¹ In a broader sense, and relating to my studio practice, the spiritual can be understood as the common yearning to belong to something greater than the self, and the acknowledgment of the intangible forces at work in the universe. It can often include concepts of an alleged immaterial reality.¹²

Under this broader, umbrella term of spirituality, a number of additional key terms that inform my research and art practice are defined in the appendix. This situated at the end of the Introduction (page 15). Terms in the appendix are indicated by the graphic:  denoting their association with spirituality and pointing to a more detailed definition.

The following Introduction establishes a historical context for the explorations of spirituality in contemporary art. To do this, I contextualise and analyse cultural movements in history, to identify a renewed dialogue of spirituality within visual art and material culture.

Underpinning my theoretical framework is my practice-led methodology. The aim of this research is to identify key contemporary artists reinterpreting the occulture in contemporary art. The relevance of this research is to show varying strategies in which artists examine the contemporary Wellness dystopic and their drive to present alternative futures.

Transformative Spiritual Movements

To contextualise the resurgence of spirituality in contemporary art, I examine key cultural movements, such as the countercultures of the 1960s and 1970s, as well as the more recent New Age movement¹³ and the Wellness industry. The popularisation of occult spirituality¹⁴ in the late 20th century was due in part to the American countercultural explosion of the

¹¹ Carrette, J. R., & King, R. (2004). *Selling spirituality: The silent takeover of religion*. Routledge, 41.

¹² Cousins, E. preface to Antoine Faivre and Jacob Needleman. (1992). *Modern esoteric spirituality*. Crossroad Publishing.

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1960s. Coined by the American social critic, Theodore Roszak,¹⁵ 'counterculture'¹⁶ described a mass youth culture whose utopianism and social experimentation critiqued rationalism, technocracy, and established religious and social institutions. This movement transformed social forms, creative production, personal lifestyles, and religious experiences globally, influencing the New Age movement in the 1980s, and the subsequent Wellness industry that is flourishing today. These movements represent significant shifts in cultural thought, and are recognised as supporting the birth of new esoteric ideas. My practice draws a link between 1970s counterculture and current dissatisfaction with neoliberalism. Through sculpture and installation, I attempt to reinvent the spiritual language from this era to describe new pathways of inclusion, interconnectedness and the potential for cultural and societal transformation.

From the perspective of the history of religions, the era of the 1960s and 70s was a fertile period for the discovery and reinvention of alternative, spirituality subcultures. In the 1960s, the dominant context for this was in the reinterpretation, or Westernisation, of Asian concepts and practices, such as Taoism, Tibetan and Zen Buddhism, reincarnation, chakras,¹⁷ yoga,¹⁸ and the I Ching.¹⁹ This counterculture also experimented with an informal cultic milieu,²⁰ which included theosophy, astrology, witchcraft, and studies in natural

¹⁵ Roszak, T. (1969). *The making of a counter culture: Reflections on the technocratic society and its youthful opposition*. Anchor Books.


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¹⁹ Eastern spiritual practices were adopted by Western occultism used by theosophy and the early writings of Aleister Crowley. Crowley was a noted and controversial occultist in Britain in the early 1900s. He wrote extensively, established his own religious order, and designed a set of tarot cards that are still in use today. As an occultist, he made a lasting change in the world, refashioning the occult with his famous dictum to combine the aim of religion with the method of science in his now infamous book, *The book of law*. Crowley has influenced countercultures from the 1970s to punk rock manifestations of 'do what thou wilt.'

Crowley, A., & Crowley R. E. (2004). *The book of law*. Weiser Books.

²⁰  The concept of the cultic milieu, formulated in 1972 by sociologist Colin Campbell, is theorised as an underground or counterculture with a range of ideas that are opposed to conventional beliefs and knowledge. Campbell thought that the cultic milieu was a response to the 'disenchantment of the world' and the loss of transcendent meaning brought about by modernity.

medicines. At the same time, this explosion of interest in the esoteric allowed alternative spiritual structures and identities to flourish in the form of cults and new religions. Cultural writer, Erik Davis, termed this the 'occult milieu,'²¹ an ecology of metaphysical, spiritual, psychological, and esoteric ideas and practices. Davis states that this "psychedelic transformation of esotericism and the occult" gave rise to 'consciousness culture'—an orientation toward "intense, enchanting, and liberating altered states, that both absorbed and transformed more traditional religious modes of heightened subjectivity."²²

The cultic milieu introduced the idea of the 'seeker self', a person wanting to find oneself, or lose oneself, in an alternative reality. By the 1970s, this idea had largely been absorbed into popular culture, and commodified into forms that are familiar today, such as New Age workshops, death metal music, personal growth seminars, rave culture, and music festival circuits.²³ My practice examines the historical proliferation of cults in America at this time, and the subsequent narratives that have been co-opted into the contemporary

These beliefs include heterodox and religious systems, such as fringe political ideologies including neo-Nazism, conspiracy theories, neopaganism, Satanism, theosophy, and ideologies that refuted central aspects of orthodox science. The cultic milieu is the people who are interested in the heterodox beliefs and the "physical spaces and means of communication through which they interact with each other and through which the ideas are spread and diffused." Campbell's insight was that these marginalised beliefs did not exist separately from each other, and were mingled in a social space that accepted and rejected dominant ways of thinking about the world. The boundaries of the cultic milieu are mutable, unlike the fixed and permanent boundaries of the orthodox mainstream. Ideas, symbology, and even ways of life, can move between the mainstream and the counterculture of the cultic milieu.

Campbell, B. C. (1972). The cult, the cultic milieu, and secularisation. In Michael Hill (Ed.) *A sociological yearbook of religion in Britain* No. 5 (pp.119–36). SCM Press.

²¹ Davis, E. (2019). *High weirdness: Drugs, esoterica, and visionary experience in the seventies*. Strange Attractor Press; The MIT Press, 48.

²² Davis, *High weirdness*, 48.

²³ Formed in 1981, Thee Temple ov Psychick Youth (TOPY) was an 'anti-cult' of experimental British artists who created subversive art using ritual magic and formed the band Psychic TV, among other projects. TOPY is recognised as one of the largest, and most organized, DIY networks, creating a global, pre-internet alliance that distributed material directed at informing its membership on sexuality, occultism, altered states, body modification, filmmaking, performance art, graphic design, and fashion. Its lasting influences can be traced, philosophically and aesthetically, throughout counterculture from punk to the industrial music scene, early rave scenes, queer underground, and the formation of the cyberpunk movement.

Simkins, A. (2016, November 16). A punk retelling of the modern witch trial: The first ever film about Thee Temple ov Psychick Youth. *HERO Magazine*. <https://hero-magazine.com/article/77409/the-first-ever-film-about-thee-temple-ov-psychick-youth-a-punk-retelling-of-the-modern-witch-trial/>

Wellness/fitness mainstream. I also investigate the position of the guru and the devotee, and themes including utopia,²⁴ transformation, collective, power, desire, vulnerability, and failure. This research enables me to revisit and appropriate past spiritual teachings as a way to find authenticity, and new meanings, in contemporary society, which is often disassociated from community and interconnectivity.

New Age

By the 1980s, the New Age movement became popularised in the Western world as a new expression of spirituality that envisioned an emerging epoch of consciousness transformation, enabling new forms of secular thinking, and providing a liberating alternative or re-enchantment²⁵ to organised religions, which were seen as repressive.²⁶ Drawing inspiration from traditional belief systems, such as ancient Eastern and pagan²⁷ religions, and scientific theories, and appropriating from psychology and psychotherapy, the New Age movement embraced an ideology of radical changes in culture and consciousness to overcome social inequalities, and formulated a range of meta-theories. These theories are an eclectic mix of isolated and decontextualised parts of large, complex belief systems, reduced to the point that their meanings are over-simplified and homogenised.²⁸ Tibetan Buddhist, Chögyam Trungpa, called this approach 'spiritual materialism'.²⁹ This materialism occurs when people consume spirituality in the same way

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²⁶ Lee, R. L. M. (2003). The re-enchantment of the self: Western spirituality, Asian materialism. *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 18(3), 351–367. doi:10.1080/13537900310001601703

²⁷ 

²⁸ A similar process is associated with developing new products for consumer markets. Jean Baudrillard notes that a confusing tendency exists within commodification processes that simultaneously homogenises and distinguishes human experience.

Baudrillard, J. (1998). *The consumer society*. Sage.

Jennifer Rindfleish argues that New Age spirituality and self-help books create confusing and contradictory narratives when they concurrently coalesce each individual's response to spiritual experiences and differentiate their approach for attaining the promised goals of their packaged theorems.

Rindfleish, J. (2005). Consuming the self: New Age spirituality as "social product." *Consumer Society, Consumption, Markets and Culture*, 8(4), 343–360. doi:10.1080/10253860500241930

²⁹ Trungpa, C. (1973). *Cutting through spiritual materialism*. Shambala.

that they consume goods, collecting teachings, teachers, and spiritual experiences as if they were material objects. Spiritual materialism also relates to co-opting spiritual meanings and practices in the service of the self's material life, and rationalising that one is engaging in spirituality. I appropriate this approach of co-opting spiritual language, objects, and text as a meta-modernist³⁰ methodology in my practice, bricolaging the components of my sculptures and installations. Combining this technique with lived experiences enables me to imbue layers of meaning into the objects that I produce whilst retaining a sense of ambiguity.

Studio Methodology

In examining these recent spiritual trajectories, and how contemporary artists are responding, this project uses a practice-led research methodology, drawing specifically from my own studio-based sculptural practice. This research moves through cycles of planning, action, observation, and reflection, with reciprocity between invention or creation, and drawing upon established knowledge. Additionally, this research pays close attention to the forms of knowledge that emerge through making and exhibiting work, which allows for a reciprocal relationship between material and maker, and unites research and practice, thinking and making, into a framework for inquiry. A key part of my methodology, particularly in relation to my studio research, is co-opted from my practice of Bikram yoga, and its philosophy of care of the self. My yoga practice is a disciplined activity that coexists with my practice. I reflect on my lived experiences of spirituality and draw from these experiences for studio work. I often reproduce the verbal instructions of Bikram yoga to inform text-based works, sculptures, and installations. I use strategies of appropriation to critically reflect on and engage in the recycling of spiritual practices in occulture.³¹ This enables me to assemble and collage opposing objects, materials, and concepts to subvert,

³⁰ Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker's define a meta-modernist approach as one that "oscillates between a modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony, between hope and melancholy, between naiveté and knowingness, empathy and apathy, unity and plurality, totality and fragmentation, purity and ambiguity."

Vermeulen T., & Akker, R. V. D. (2010). Notes on metamodernism, *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture*, (2)1, 1–14. doi:10.3402/jac.v2i0.5677

³¹ 

and engage, in a dialogue about homogenised forms of spirituality that is complex and layered. This methodology sits adjacent to New Age's bricolage approach, where multiple esoteric practices, symbols, and rituals have been reinterpreted for modern life.

Through my studio research, I collect, archive, and repurpose cultural and historical artefacts and languages, including affirmative phrases, guru teachings, videos, and popular culture related to 1970s countercultures, New Age, and corporatised forms of spirituality. These artefacts inform the visual languages for structures and sculptures that I fabricate and repurpose in the studio to embody a new spiritual language that I am developing. Through this studio research process, I reinterpret utopian interiors, and investigate notions of liberated consciousness, through form, colour, and sculpture. My works deliberately utilise corporate strategies, such as branding, to design sigils³² and make visual props, such as curtains, which become components of experiential interiors. These artefacts seek to embody the complexities of occulture through the appropriation of esoteric practices, the slippage of guru and deity, and methods of devotional practices. Throughout this project, my studio practice is framed and informed by my scholarly research, where I critically engage with the key ideas and artists in this field. Underpinning this project is a range of theoretical frameworks from cultural studies in spirituality. These include the analysis of key transformative movements in history, such as the countercultures of 1970s America and its impact on the New Age movement of the 1980's. I use contemporary theories on re-enchantment, and recent analysis of occulture and self-help practices to identify the commodification of spirituality and examine these through key contemporary artists working in this field. From this visual analysis, I am developing a more detailed understanding of how artists employ the visual language of spirituality to critically engage with contemporary life and explore possible new futures.

Chapter Outlines

Chapter One provides an overview of key theories informing my research. I introduce the key contexts for my practice-led research through a historical overview of spirituality in art

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since modernity. Chapter One also discusses the role of countercultures, and analyses key contemporary artistic practices. I introduce and examine the Australian artists Mikala Dwyer and Naomi Blacklock, and international artists Marcus Coates, Dane Mitchell, and Ulla Von Brandenburg, to chart how artists engage with a metaphysical dialogue in their practice, and outline the visual methods and materials that they employ. These investigations are connected with my studio-making, and serve as a basis to express the ineffable. By analysing a diversity of artistic approaches, I identify conceptual themes and approaches similar to making in my practice, and provide an overview of artists working in this field of research.

Chapter Two investigates the recent commodification of occulture and the spiritual marketplace, as well as how artists are responding to these conditions. I analyse artists Timur Si-Qin, The Institute for New Feeling, and Nicolas Lobo to understand how artists engage with corporate branding strategies in their practice in order to critique the contemporary spiritual industry. Through these analyses, I examine my own works, which remix and appropriate branding techniques through sculpture and installation.

In Chapter Three, I extend this examination, focusing specifically on sculptural and installation techniques, in order to critically engage with the commodification of spirituality. In this chapter, I investigate immersive environments that foreground materiality, devotional spaces, and appropriation as key artistic strategies in this field. In this context, I examine my own sculptural practice, as well as Jeremy Shaw's immersive video installations, installation artist Mikala Dwyer, interior designer Verner Panton, and filmmaker, set designer, and artist Alejandro Jodorowsky, to investigate how these artists approach experiential environments in relation to interiors and spatial strategies as a mode of inquiry.

In these ways, this thesis charts my practice-led research and contextualises my studio practice. By examining key historical and social movements that enable the resurgence of alternative spiritual subcultures in the Western world, this project outlines the complex and shifting terrain of spirituality in contemporary art. This project analyses contemporary art practices, including my own, to describe heterogeneous approaches for critically engaging

with the commodification of spirituality. My central findings highlight commonalities among artists who create immersive experiences via spiritual or transformative spaces. These experiences are often developed through unique spiritual languages, which each artist devises. Here, alternative narratives are foregrounded through diverse uses of irony, ambiguity, scepticism, and certainty. I also highlight immersion and materiality as key strategies adopted and adapted by contemporary artists working in this field. In various ways, they use the visual and symbolic tropes of commodified forms of spirituality to animate, evoke, or reveal the metaphysical³³ in contemporary life.



GLOSSARY



Counterculture—Counterculture is an alternative lifestyle, mode of expression, or social system that counters the dominant system, and often triggers dramatic changes to that system. Counterculture can be described as a point of disjuncture between what is represented as dominant or mainstream values, and alternative value systems. This can be articulated through diverse forms of media, such as the creative arts, which amplify the collective opinions of a counterculture's and engender the significance of minority positions. In my research, I examine countercultures in the East and West coast of America in the 1960s and 70s due to their innovations in spiritual movements and changes in cultural thought.



Chakra—Chakra is a Sanskrit word meaning 'wheel of light.' Chakras are defined as centres of energy. The chakra system was written about in the Vedas between 1500 and 500 BC, and is described in Tantric yoga as a way to "awaken the body's dormant psychospiritual power called kundalini-shakti."³⁴ When this conscious energy is aroused in the ascending chakras, Tantra yoga believes that it is suffused with consciousness and extraordinary power that transforms the body.



Cult—A cult is a system or group of people who practice devotion to a belief system, figure, or object led by a charismatic leader. The term is commonly associated with unorthodox religious sects that can be considered as controlling and negative due to violent historical consequences, extreme indoctrination, and authority. Contemporary sociologists now use the term 'new religious movements'³⁵ in lieu of cult to avoid negative connotations from past histories.



Cultic milieu—The cultic milieu refers to groups of loosely organised individuals who test esoteric knowledge that is often forgotten and forbidden. Ideas and allegiances within the milieu change as individuals move between groups, but the larger milieu persists in opposition to the dominant culture.

³⁴ Johari, H. (2000). *Chakras: Energy centres of transformation*. Simon and Schuster.

³⁵ Rubinstein, M. (2019, February 25). New religious movement. *Encyclopedia Britannica*.
<https://www.britannica.com/topic/new-religious-movement>



Energy medicine—Often described as ‘woo woo wellness,’ energy medicine practices aim to heal the human ‘energy body’ by using techniques such as acupuncture, chakra balancing, reiki, and crystal healing. Energy medicine is a field based on the interactions of the human energy field with other energy fields. The Global Wellness Summit Releases In-Depth Report, “The Future of Wellness 2020,”³⁶ states that scientific researchers ascertain that the human body is a intricate biofield of electromagnetic frequencies and light waves that control our mental and physical functioning.



Devotion—loyalty, faith.



Esoteric/arcane—hidden, secret knowledge that is usually understood only by a few people.



Folkloric—traditional belief, customs, traditions, and stories that orally communicate the shared histories of a particular group of people or culture.



Magic—Magic is the implementation of beliefs and rituals to influence natural or supernatural beings and forces.



Metaphysical—P. van Inwagen and M. Sullivan define ‘metaphysical’ as: “Derived from the Greek *meta ta physika* (‘after the things of nature’); referring to an idea, doctrine, or posited reality outside of human sense perception.”³⁷ Metaphysical studies seek to explain inherent or universal elements of reality that are not easily discovered or experienced in our everyday life, and explain aspects of reality that exist beyond our direct senses and physical world.



Mindfulness—Mindfulness is a translation of *sati*, a word in the ancient Pali language that loosely translates as ‘awareness.’ *Sati* is used to describe present-moment awareness.³⁸ It is a form of the rigorous Buddhist meditation called *Vipassana* (‘insight’), or a form of

³⁶ Global Wellness Summit. (2020, January 29). *The future of wellness 2020*. In-Depth Report. <https://www.globalwellnesssummit.com/press/press-releases/gws-releases-in-depth-report-the-future-of-wellness-2020/>

³⁷ van Inwagen, P., & Sullivan M. (2014). Metaphysics. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Stanford University.

³⁸ We see this usage in the seminal text on mindfulness in the Buddhist teachings, the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*. Shulman, E. (2010). Mindful Wisdom: The *Sati-paṭṭhāna-sutta* on mindfulness, memory, and liberation. *History of Religions* 49(4), 393–420. doi:10.1086/649856

another Buddhist meditation known as Anapanasati ('awareness of the breath'). In the 1970s, Jon Kabat-Zinn, a biologist and founding Executive Director of the Centre for Mindfulness, devised a hybrid system of this meditation, removing the original connotations of enlightenment, and redefining it as "the awareness that arises through paying attention on purpose in the present moment, and non-judgmentally."³⁹ Mindfulness has recently been implemented in daily life, where it is shown to have positive physical and mental health benefits. The Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program has been adopted by public institutions and the corporate world.



New Age—In 1970, American theosophist David Spangler⁴⁰ developed the foundations of the New Age movement. His ideas were based on previous theories from Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, co-founder of the Theosophical Society in the late 19th century. He believed that astrological changes, like the movement of the Earth into a new cycle, known as the Age of Aquarius, were precursors to the coming of a 'new age'. The New Age movement predicted that a new age of amplified spiritual awareness and global peace would ensue, and bring an end to war, poverty, sickness and hunger. This social transformation would come from the collective spiritual awakening of the general public. In the 1980s, the increase of people interested in alternative spiritual and therapeutic practices was described by sociologists, such as Paul Heelas,⁴¹ as the 'New Age Movement.' The New Age movement consists of assorted beliefs and practices, including Buddhism, Taoism, psychology, and psychotherapy, paganism, clairvoyance, tarot, and magic. The New Age movement has been characterised as a spiritual supermarket where individuals mix spiritual beliefs and practices that best suits their needs to achieve an inner peace of mind or realise their human potential.



Pagan—Pagan is an umbrella term referring to nature-based religions and spiritual systems, and religious beliefs other than main world religions. Neopaganism (new paganism) is a contemporary interpretation of paganism that is diverse, inclusive, and can

³⁹ Heffernan, V. (2015, April 27). The muddled meaning of 'Mindfulness.' *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/19/magazine/the-muddled-meaning-of-mindfulness.html>

⁴⁰ Spangler D. (1976). *Revelation: The birth of a new age*. Rainbow Bridge Book Co.

⁴¹ Hutchinson, D., & Heelas, P. (2000). The new age movement: The celebration of the self and the sacralization of modernity. *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions*, 3(2), 424–427. doi:10.1525/nr.2000.3.2.424.

include New Age beliefs, such as Wicca and Druidism. Neopaganism is inspired by ancient pre-Christian societies, and is a customised and personal approach to spiritual belief. Pagan re-constructivism is a sub-term of paganism that attempts to re-establish historic polytheistic religions, rituals, and customs in the modern world.



Occulture—Author and scholar Christopher Partridge combined occult and culture to theorise the term 'occulture,' which he characterises as esoteric tendencies in contemporary culture.⁴² Occulture provides a space within which there is an openness to the possibilities of metaphysical interpretations of society, and is an agent of contemporary re-enchantment in the cultural discourse. Partridge states that popular culture is the vehicle that spreads contemporary interpretations of spirituality.



Occult—secret knowledge, practices, rituals, or phenomena involving the action or influence of supernatural or supernormal powers.



Re-enchantment—Theorist Jane Bennett argues for a contemporary re-evaluation of the sense of wonder in the everyday. She attempts to negate the many narratives of modern disenchantment and contemporary postmodern cynicism. Bennett encourages: "one must be enamoured with existence and occasionally even enchanted in the face of it in order to be capable of donating some of one's scarce mortal resources to the service of others."⁴³ She insists "both that the contemporary world retains the power to enchant humans and that humans can cultivate themselves so as to experience more of that effect."⁴⁴ By cultivating everyday moments of enchantment, Bennet argues that people build an ethics of generosity, stimulating the emotional energy to continue to refine behaviours necessary for following new moral codes. These new forms of 'enchantment' can help cultivate renewed forms of ecological habitation, sacramental communion, epistemic humility, wonder, ethical attachment, and care.⁴⁵

⁴² Partridge, C. (March 4, 2005). *The re-enchantment of the West: Volume 1 Alternative spiritualities, sacralization, popular culture and occulture* (1st edn.). T&T Clark.

⁴³ Bennett, J. (2001). *The enchantment of modern life: Attachments, crossings, and ethics*. Princeton University Press. 4. doi:10.2307/j.ctt1ggjkxq

⁴⁴ Bennett. *The enchantment of modern life*, 4.

⁴⁵ Crawford, J. (2020, September 7). The trouble with re-enchantment. *Los Angeles Review of Books*. <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/the-trouble-with-re-enchantment/>



Disenchantment—German theorist Max Weber viewed disenchantment as an expression of the modern condition derived from rationalisation, stating: "One could in principle master everything through calculation. But that means the disenchantment of the world." Academic writer Mohammad Chaudhary proposes an alternative rational for disenchantment in Weber's concept of "losing its magic."⁴⁶ He points to a 'de-magicification,' with early religious origins, that delegitimised practices involving spirits and forced their reclassification as profane magical rituals.⁴⁷ Hence, disenchantment meant the loss of acknowledgment of the supernatural in the world.



Ritual—rites that are used during religious or spiritual ceremonies, or used in places or houses of worship. It can also refer to following a code of conduct during a ceremony.



Sigil—A sigil is a type of pictorial representation that is used to denote specific outcomes, mainly in ritual, occult, and chaos magic.



Supernatural—attributed to some force beyond scientific understanding of the physical laws of nature or an ordinance of existence beyond the visible and recognisable universe.



Spiritualism—Spiritualism is a system of beliefs and a structure to communicate with ancestral spirits. Spiritualists believe that spirits are reincarnated, and the spirits provides psychical comfort to communicate with deceased family members.



Transcendental—Beyond the ordinary, everyday experience, can also be related to spiritual life.



Theosophy—Theosophy is an occult movement originating in the 19th century and with a history tracing back to ancient Gnosticism and Neoplatonism. The term 'theosophy' is generally understood to mean 'divine wisdom.' Theosophical speculation emphasises the 'mystical experience,' in which a deeper, spiritual reality can be established through intuition and meditation that transcends human consciousness. In addition, theosophical writers believe in psychic powers, the supernatural, and extraordinary occurrences, and that

⁴⁶ Chaudhary, M. Y. (2019). Augmented reality, artificial intelligence, and the re-enchantment of the world. *Zygon*, 54(2), 454–478. <https://doi.org/10.1111/zygo.12521>

⁴⁷ Chaudhary. Augmented reality. 458.

through this knowledge there is access to divine wisdom on the mysteries of nature and humankind's inner essence.



Utopia—According to the traditional definition of Sir Thomas Moore,⁴⁸ utopia means both 'nowhere or no-place,' and a good, perfect place. Most commonly, utopia is understood as an idealistic, but unrealistic, vision of the future. Ruth Levitas suggests that utopias are desired, possible worlds⁴⁹—ideal worlds that may exist, at least in imagination. Dystopia means bad places and undesirable. In social psychology of utopian thinking, Levitas postulates that there are a minimum of three functions of utopia: change, criticism, and compensation.⁵⁰ Utopian visions create the highest limits of imagined possible worlds and can function as standards against current reality. While the ideal utopia is universal, particular utopias, utopian images, and movements are influenced by the cultural and civilisational traditions within which they are developed. What is seen as a utopia by one social/cultural group may be considered dystopic by other social and historical contexts and/or by different social and cultural groups. At any given time, there are competing utopian and dystopian visions that are continually being negotiated, locally and globally. Utopia might commonly be thought of in relation to these three areas: literary utopia, utopian ideologies, and communal movements/historical communities.



Wellness—Wellness is an active process of becoming aware of, and making choices toward, a healthy and fulfilling life. Wellness is achieved through balancing and encompassing physical, emotional, intellectual, spiritual, interpersonal, social, and environmental well-being. Halbert L. Dunn, chief of the National Office of Vital Statistics, used this term to express the positive characteristics of health that people could achieve beyond preventing sickness. Dunn described this concept as 'high-level wellness,' and defined Wellness as: "an integrated method of functioning, which is oriented toward

⁴⁸ Moore, T., & Turner, P. (1965). *Utopia*. Penguin Books. 137.

⁴⁹ Professor of Sociology Ruth Levitas views the essential element of utopia as desire, the desire for a better way of living. John Carey similarly states that to view utopia as an imaginary place must be an expression of desire, and therefore dystopia must be an expression of fear.

Levitas, R. (1990). *The concept of utopia*. Allan.

Carey, J. (1999). *The Faber book of utopias*. Faber and Faber.

⁵⁰ Levitas. *The concept of utopia*.

maximising the potential of which the individual is capable."⁵¹ Holistic and wellness-focused and modalities have risen since the 1960s/1970s, influenced by the writings of an informal network of USA physicians and thinkers, such as Don Ardell, Halbert Dunn, , Bill Hettler, Jack Travis, and others. More recently, the wellness industry has informed healthy-living, self-help, self-care, fitness, nutrition, diet, and spiritual practices.



Wicca—Wicca is a predominantly Western movement whose followers practice witchcraft and nature worship. It is derived from northern and western European, pre-Christian traditions. Followers of Wicca worship the Goddess, practice ceremonial magic, honour nature, invoke the help of deities, and celebrate nature's seasons and harvests, such as the summer solstice and the vernal equinox.



Yoga—Yoga is an Indian spiritual and physical discipline that focuses on enabling harmony between mind and body. I. V. Basavaraddi writes: "The word Yoga is derived from the Sanskrit root *Yuj*, meaning 'to join or to yoke or to unite.'"⁵² Yoga is a method of an arranged program or system of practices that can culminate in a radical change or transformation of a person. Yoga can also refer to the state that is the supposed end-point of the method. The Bhagavad Gita describes yoga as the highest state of steadiness of the mind.⁵³ Many yoga practices have been co-opted and hybridised in the Western world, including Bikram yoga, which I practice.

⁵¹ Dunn, H. (1959). What high-level wellness means. *Canadian Journal of Public Health / Revue Canadienne De Sante'e Publique*, 50(11), 447–457.

⁵² Basavaraddi, I. V. (2015, April 23). *Yoga: Its origin, history and development*. Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India.

https://www.mea.gov.in/searchresult.htm?25096/Yoga:_su_origen,_historia_y_desarrollo

⁵³ Joshi, K. S. (1965). On the meaning of yoga. *Philosophy East and West*, 15(1), 53-64. Accessed November 23, 2020. doi:10.2307/1397408.

CHAPTER ONE

Spirituality in Contemporary Artistic Practice


Without the sacred there is no differentiation in space; everything is flat and grey. If we are about to enter cyberspace, the first thing we have to do is plant the divine in it.⁵⁴

In this chapter, I identify and analyse the influence of the cultic milieu in mainstream society. This research argues that there has been a renewed interest, by artists, in adopting the language of homogenised forms of spirituality in their practices. In this context, I locate key artists working in this field of inquiry, analyse their diverse approaches, and find comparisons to my studio practice and research. The shift from religion to spirituality, the turn to the self, and the change of focus from external authority to inner experience has increased the appeal and respectability of esotericism in the contemporary world. The proliferation of esoteric⁵⁵ ideas has been guided by modernisation, technology, the cultural influence of Romanticism and Easternisation, and a shift towards individualist Western capitalist societies have been characterised by unprecedented levels of affluence, and a thriving consumption, where spirituality, therapy, and the pursuit of well-being have become commodified, branded, and invested with economic value. Author and scholar Christopher Partridge states that popular culture has become a reservoir where ideas are circulated, gathered, and disseminated to start new patterns of thought.⁵⁶ Partridge theorises this under the term, occulture.⁵⁷ Occulture refers to the environment, and social processes, through which particular meanings related to the spiritual, esoteric, paranormal, and conspiratorial emerge and become influential in societies and individuals' lives.

⁵⁴ Mark Pesce is a technopagan, a participant in a small subculture of American digital intellectuals who work in emerging the technosphere and practice Paganism. Cultural writer Erik Davis attends to neopaganism and online communities, especially how technology and Paganism have similar, ritualised approaches to creating mystical communities within contemporary society. Davis, E. (2016, March 1). *TechnoPagans*. Techgnosis. <https://techgnosis.com/technopagans/>

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⁵⁶ Partridge, C. (March 4, 2005). *The re-enchantment of the West: Volume 1 Alternative spiritualities, sacralization, popular culture and occulture* (1st edn.). T&T Clark.

⁵⁷  Partridge. *The re-enchantment of the West*.

Occulture provides space within which openness to the possibilities of metaphysical interpretation is an agent of contemporary re-enchantment, aside from cultural discourse. Partridge states:

While including the oppositional and heterogenous assortments of the cultic milieu, occulture is less about particular groups, systems of belief and spiritual practices and more about the conditions within which particular 'lifeworlds' are formed, and plausible structures are shaped.⁵⁸

Occulture refers to the shared meanings in how we relate, reactions to each other, and processes of discovery and creativity. The role of popular culture and the media have contributed to the growth and significance of contemporary occulture, popularising the mundane to the bizarre in esoteric approaches to health and well-being, and conspiratorial theories, which are no longer hidden knowledge but ordinary and everyday.⁵⁹

Spirituality in Contemporary Art

In the past few years, exhibitions have begun to pay attention to how a range of artists are exploring collectivism, self-care, shamanic rites, and the sacred and ineffable aspects of lived experience. Curator Bartolomeo Pietromarchi explains artists' use of the language of spirituality in contemporary art as follows:

On the Spiritual Matter of Art takes its cue from the need of today's artists to reaffirm the centrality of man and its ecosystem, with all its criticalities and

⁵⁸ Philosopher Jürgen Habermas' 'lifeworld' refers to our core values, beliefs, and understanding about who we are, how we relate to each other, what our world is like, and how we fit into it. Baxter, H. (1987). System and life-world in Habermas's "Theory of communicative action." *Theory and Society*, 16(1), 39–86. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/657078>.

⁵⁹ Artist Genesis P-Orridge also described occulture in the 1980's as the influence of esotericism, through the arts and pop music, on changing society's ideas in Western culture. Their views were seen as more oppositional to the mainstream, and as an underground network for disseminating alternative information.

P-Orridge, G. B. (July 23, 1994). *Thee psychick bible. Thee apocryphal scriptures ov Genesis Breyer P-Orridge and Thee Third Mind ov Thee Temple ov Psychick Youth* (7 edn.). Feral House.

complexity, in the search for a spiritual dimension. An attitude which, if in the past was opposed to the idea of spirituality, today becomes the essence.⁶⁰

Curator and art historian Marco Pasi also suggests that aspects of occulture, such as the occult, represent a set of values and behaviours that interrupt the social, political, and psychological liberties of humans from the illusion of reality. Pasi views this as inherently reactionary.⁶¹ On the other hand, he suggests that the occult represents a set of values and behaviours that oppose the establishment, offering alternative ways of understanding society, politics, and the self, and thus can be perceived as inherently revolutionary. Contemporary art presents itself as a space for experimentation through its innovations, and by challenging traditional aesthetic, political, and social norms. In this context, the occult also offers alternatives to mainstream culture through similar experimentation and exploration. Pasi views these similarities in contemporary art and spirituality as a mutual alliance, stating: "In this perspective, the occult can be used by art for its highly charged cultural impact, without necessarily sharing its spiritual beliefs or indulging in emotional participation."⁶²

This project argues that this renewed interest in spirituality demonstrates an inherent disillusionment with the Western way of life and a desire to imagine and enact alternative futures by examining spirituality to reimagine our world.⁶³ Writer Erik Davis suggests that when society becomes more challenging in its cyclical moments of evolving value systems, the metaphysical becomes more appealing because it resonates with a "desire to return to

⁶⁰ Pietromarchi, B. (2019). *Della materia spirituale dell'arte =: On the spiritual matter of art*. Exhibition Catalogue. Museo Nazionale Delle Arti del XXI Secolo. 208

⁶¹ Pasi. A gallery of changing gods.

⁶² Pasi. A gallery of changing gods.

⁶³ Explanations may include the breakdown of society's dominant paradigm under pressure from feminism and multiculturalism, contempt against today's commodification of art and new technologies like AI, and corporate/government surveillance redefining self and society. There is also the widespread recognition that materialism has produced a global climate crisis and may indicate a search for alternatives and a surge of interest in spiritual concerns.

Heartney, E. (2020, January 6). Spirituality has been erased from art history for a long time. Here's why it's having a resurgence today. *Artnet News*. <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/spirituality-and-art-resurgence-1737117>

a kind of utopian imagination.”⁶⁴ The resurgence of spirituality denotes a new social process through which the cultural fabric of life diversifies in a rapid cycle of change.⁶⁵ Some of the primary constructs of spirituality include a rehabilitation of, and reconnection with, nature, through environmentalism and food awareness, values and ethics that promote interconnectivity and community collectivism, and holistic social practices such as compassion, empathy and integration. These ideas are some of the conceptual tropes that I incorporate into the making of my sculptures and installations.

As an overview of the field of contemporary art practice, I examine a number of key artists who use the visual language of spirituality to explore alternative histories and futures by revealing the unseen. Art historian and independent curator Lars Bang Larsen states that contemporary artists adopt an esoteric discourse to create meaning. He writes:

Its new forms renegotiate the visible world through what is felt and intuited, rather than through what is seen and interpreted, and even if their position on the veracity of paranormal phenomena is often elusive, most contemporary artists are not ironic or nostalgic in their use of the occult in art: rather, they see it as a means by which to opt for new ways to communicate and make things happen.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Davis suggests that although seen through a sometimes ambiguous and optimistic lens, this utopian imagination demonstrates an increased sensitivity and empathy to other people's ways of life when the culture in the West is experiencing maximum polarisation.

Kretowicz, S. (2014, February 28). How Erik Davis invented networked mysticism. *Dazed*. <https://www.dazeddigital.com/artsandculture/article/18277/1/how-erik-davis-invented-networked-mysticism>

⁶⁵ In the modern world, strategies materialise and homogenise into collective forms of social life, embodying specific sets of social and political moral sense through which groups and individuals communicate their 'difference' from others who inhabit the same regional and urban spaces. These articulations create a range of ideological positions in which aspects of political, religious, personal taste, sexual, and ethnic identity are imbricated in multiple ways, forming collective identities that resonate with local and global situations.

Bennett, A. (2016) Reappraising « Counterculture ». *Volume!: The French journal of popular music studies*, 9(1), 1–31

⁶⁶ Larsen, L. B. (April 2007). The Other Side. *Frieze*.

I introduce Hilma Af Klint and contemporary artists Marcus Coates, Mikala Dwyer, Dane Mitchell, Ulla Von Brandenburg, and Naomi Blacklock to analyse and compare their diverse approaches to utilising spiritual language. Although Swedish painter Hilma Af Klint is not a contemporary artist, her work is significant in this field of inquiry and has revisited in this era of capitalist high-tech disruption.⁶⁷ Af Klint produced her first major group of radical and largely abstract work, *The Paintings for the Temple*, directly out of her involvement with spiritualism and theosophy.⁶⁸ Klint was a member of a group known as the 'The Five,' who recorded their communications with the 'High Masters' through automatic painting and drawing. Made between 1906 and 1915, the paintings were translated to her through seances that she conducted as a medium and clairvoyant. Stylistically, they incorporate biomorphic and geometric forms, and large and intimate scales, and they approach colour in maximalist and reductivist ways. Af Klint died in 1944, but her work was included in the seminal exhibition, *The Spiritual in Art* (1987), at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Many works represent sigils and symbols intended to provoke psychic insights, and depict metaphors of duality, balance, and connection.



Hilma af Klint: *Paintings for the Future*, 2018–19, installation view, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York. From left: *Group X, No. 2, Altarpiece*, 1915; *Group X, No. 3, Altarpiece*, 1915; *Group X, No. 1, Altarpiece*, 1915. Photo: David Heald.

⁶⁷ Hilma af Klint: *Paintings for the Future* was recently exhibited at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, October 12, 2018–April 22, 2019.

⁶⁸ 

Australian artist Mikala Dwyer employs sigils and symbology in her installations reminiscent of Af Klint's iconography, engaging with animism, the irrational, suppressed, and the occult, and aligning with diverse movements such as Gothic, Dada, Surrealism, and anti-form. Dwyer combines anthropomorphic and totemic objects that suggest ritualistic happenings or seances with adaptations of black-arts accoutrements, such as candles and Ouija boards, and collaborates with Neodadaist Justene Williams to channel past spirits of female convicts. *Drawing Down the Moon* (2012) at the Institute of Modern Art (IMA) in Brisbane was a survey exhibition of Dwyer's work that delved into the psychic realm by investigating avenues of social communication and the visual languages of Constructivism. Twelve installations of contemporary rituals challenged the audience to examine how our invested energy in objects and images acts as a medium for human connectivity.



Mikala Dwyer, *Drawing Down the Moon*, 2012, installation view, Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane.

Spell for a Corner (2017) is another example of Dwyer's exploration of occult Constructivism. The work borrows from Constructivism's utopian energy, and ambiguous

sense of ritual⁶⁹ and magic.⁷⁰ Visually, it consists of a floor-to-ceiling wall painting that is folded into a corner of the gallery walls, and overlapped with a flat-coloured yellow, geometric shapes and a large black crescent.



Mikala Dwyer, *Spell for a corner*, 2015, installation view, *Mikala Dwyer: MCA Collection*, Museum of Contemporary Art. 2016. Photo Jessica Maurer.

Dwyer's approach to making channels unexpected meanings from everyday objects; combining the found with the made and the alchemical transformation of materials. Animism is an organising principle in Dwyer's practice. This is a relational ontology where meaning is not inherent in things but created through the relationships between them. This enables material phenomena to have agency, suggesting that Dwyer is 'listening' to her materials and seeking to understand their place in the world outside the rationalist and economic systems. Curator and writer Wayne Tunncliffe views Dwyer's practice, and exploration of the relationship between objects and the viewer, as "deeply attuned to how materials affect us both overtly and at a subconscious level and her art haunts our imagination and our psyche long after we encounter it."⁷¹

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⁷¹ Tunncliffe. *A shape of thought*, 13.

New Zealand artist Dane Mitchell shares similar conceptual ideas with Dwyer, focusing on the ephemeral manifestation and investigation of invisible phenomena, without specific form. Both artists employ strategies to engage the object at a sensate level in an attempt to coerce the viewer into sensing a deeper, relational connection with existence.⁷² Mitchell's installation, *Dragon, The Purple Forbidden Enclosure*, situated in the old Kallang Airport at the 3rd Singapore Biennale (2011), employed a local medium to identify and channel spirits in the room. The installation used elements of the artist's Chinese astrological sign to present a conversation between cultures and a liminal doorway between worlds. During the 9th Gwangju Biennale (2012), Mitchell created a space based on engaging a Gwangju shaman to charge the space and objects based on a star chart from the Joseon Dynasty in the 14th century. The project unfolded at Mugaksa, a Zen temple in Gwangju city, where it included 52 locked groove records playing the recorded sound of Mitchell repeating the word, 'now.' Moon jars—a type of ceramic vessel from the Joseon Dynasty—were placed upside down on the record player. These ceramics were fired with plant material chosen by the shaman and had star constellation markings. Mitchell's methodology incorporated the communications with the shaman via spiritual letters on the astral plane and using glass blowing to capture the shaman's breath in the glass.⁷³

⁷² Curator Jan Bryant explored the concepts of intuition and otherworldliness through objects, ritual, and the 'thingness of things' in the exhibition, *Light sweet crude: Mikala Dwyer, Daniel Malone, Dane Mitchell, Peter Robinson* (2013).

Bryant, J. P. (2013). *Light sweet crude: Mikala Dwyer, Daniel Malone, Dane Mitchell, Peter Robinson*. Hopkinson Cundy.

⁷³ Mitchell states that he sent the letters in the same way as the shaman did. By doing so, he says that he: "materialised and ritualised the process of communication—these actions become both rites within the work and its material being."

Mitchell, D. (2012). *Spectra to spectre: An art exploration on the margins of the visible*. [Unpublished Master of Philosophy, Art and Design dissertation]. Auckland University of Technology.



Dane Mitchell, *The Dragon, The Purple Forbidden Enclosure*, 2011, installation view, *Singapore Biennale*, Singapore.

Combining scientific and analytic approaches with metaphysical perspectives, Mitchell asks the viewer to become aware of invisible forces. In addition, by intertwining spatial, historical, and cultural contexts in the space, his conceptual approach creates a multi-layered, ambivalent dimension, offering the viewer a sensuous experience with minimal signposts. Installations and objects posit invisible, cognitive, and sometimes spiritual presences that exist between thingness and nothingness. The artist establishes scenarios where nothingness becomes part of the experience and provokes the audience to question what is happening and how they should respond. Empirical systems of thought and conventional expectations are challenged by a strategic privileging of subjectivity and doubt. Mitchell states:

The borders or boundaries of objects are more slippery or blurred than the visible edges would suggest and for me this is an interesting sculptural proposition. I came to this thinking in quite a formal way, considering what kinds of forces extend

objects outward from themselves in space to touch us in ways both real—or physical
—and poetically charged and meaningful”⁷⁴

Mitchell argues that the invisible influences our lives through technology, spirituality, and language.

Ulla Von Brandenburg is a German artist who adopts psychoanalysis, spiritism,⁷⁵ and magic through theatre constructs. Von Brandenburg's practice derives from esoteric rituals, popular ceremonies, and theatre systems to investigate the organisation of social structures. Props, sets, masks, and costumes from different traditions allow her to transgress norms and hierarchies to create an open narration between the interior and the exterior, authenticity and artifice, the natural world and human happenings, and fiction and reality. The materiality of her practice enables her to create new environments within gallery spaces that blur the lines of theatre and the esoteric.



Ulla von Brandenburg, *Innen ist nicht Außen*, installation view, *Secession*, Wien, Vienna 2013. Photo: Wolfgang Thaler.

⁷⁴ Messerschmidt, S. (2019, May 3). Incalculable losses: An interview with Dane Mitchell ahead of the Venice Biennale. *Berlin Art Link*. <https://www.berlinartlink.com/2019/04/17/incalculable-losses-an-interview-with-dane-mitchell/>

⁷⁵ 

Von Brandenburg states:

I use fabrics to create spaces in which we can apparently be elsewhere, in other words, fall into other worlds . . . In a space where curtains have been hung, the separation between the interior and the exterior, or between different worlds, becomes blurred. And that blur makes us wonder where we are”⁷⁶

Von Brandenburg’s works examine historical references that include modern theatre, folk traditions, tableau vivant, and architecture. Motifs appear in different contexts, performances refer to her wall paintings, drawings are studies for films, and the props in her films become sculptural objects. The curtain is a reoccurring motif in her work alongside the tropes of theatre accoutrements that allow her scenes to go from reality to illusion. This confusion between reality and theatre is also described in the carnival as a transgression of social order and the mask as a desire for new identity. Combining song and movement, Von Brandenburg symbolically stages ritualised encounters and explores levels of consciousness, relationships between people, and the viewer response to personal rituals and customs.

Artists employ shamanism as a contemporary trope to communicate with the metaphysical. Marcus Coates is an English artist who stages shamanic performances. He descends into the spirit world to consult with animal spirits and find solutions for the contemporary world. Coates compares the role of the artist to the role of the shaman,⁷⁷ acting as a conduit between the human and animal worlds, and testing the artist's pragmatism and potential

⁷⁶ Ulla von Brandenburg “Le milieu est blu” at Palais de Tokyo, Paris. (2020, May 13). *Mousse Magazine*. <http://moussemagazine.it/ulla-von-brandenburg-le-milieu-est-blu-at-palais-de-tokyo-paris-2020/>

⁷⁷ Author Daniel Pinchbeck writes, the contemporary world looked toward artists as a substitute for “the transformative power of an actual encounter with a supernatural ‘other,’ or the personal experience of an altered state. In the modern world, the artist took over the role of the shaman.” He cites Joseph Beuys and his ritualistic performances, where he famously spent three days in 1974 locked in a New York gallery with a coyote as an example. Pinchbeck D. (2003). *Breaking open the head: A psychedelic journey into the heart of contemporary shamanism*. Crown Publishing Group. 336.

within contemporary society.⁷⁸ He creates mythologies and rituals that explores the role of the imagination and its capabilities for unconscious reasoning, often questioning the relationship between belief and critical rationalism. Throughout his processes, Coates' maintains a constant ambiguity in understanding his position.



Marcus Coates, *Journey to the Lower World (Linosa Close)*, 2004. Archival Inkjet Print, 115 x 115 cm.

Coates' ambiguity is expressed in *Journey to the Lower World* (2004). In this work, Coates documented himself performing a shamanic ritual in a room of a soon to be demolished Liverpool tower block. Covered in a deer skin, spitting water onto the floor and releasing animal sounds, Coates transcended to the 'lower world'. Coates adopts shamanistic traditions in the act of becoming an animal in order to communicate with other species in the spirit world. This replicates the shaman's traditional role to communicate with the spirit world in order to solve a community's problems. In this project, Coates gained the trust of the community affected by a loss of cultural identity through gentrification and, through his performance, implicated himself in an intimate exchange system. While apprehensive about

⁷⁸ Pincheck defines shamanism as a "technology for exploring non-ordinary states of consciousness in order to accomplish specific purposes: healing, divination, and communication with the spirit realm." Pincheck. *Breaking open the head*. 200

taking on the role of artist as problem solver in a public sphere, Coates has said that these performances validate the audience's sense that their concerns are being heard. He enables and escorts people toward a revelatory position that seems to touch a memory of something ancient and mystical within.

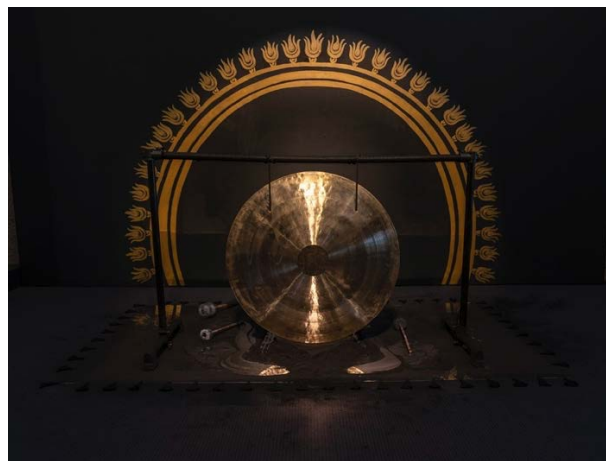
American artist Shana Moulton creates evocatively oblique narratives in her video and performance works to critique contemporary Wellness. Moulton plays a character, called Cynthia, whose interactions in a domestic setting are humorous, sincere, mundane and surreal. Like her protagonist, Moulton navigates her home decor's enigmatic and magical properties, initiating relationships with New Age objects and consumer products. Moulton's intimately autobiographical video alter-ego, Cynthia, addresses the difficulties of self-discovery and fulfillment in a modern, consumer-driven society. Cynthia is on a ceaseless journey to overcome anxiety, isolation, and hypochondria triggered by the digital world and personal development television commercials. A collaboration between artist Shana Moulton and composer Nick Hallett, the 10-part video series, *Whispering Pines* (2018), follows the protagonist's search for perfect health and peace through consumer objects. *Whispering Pines* is a critical exploration of the commercialism of wellness therapies and products. The work is ambivalent because of its vulnerable and sometimes awkwardly uncomfortable character, Cynthia.



Shana Moulton and Nick Hallett, *Whispering Pines* 10, 2018 (still). Digital video and web series in progress. Courtesy the artists.

Moulton says: "My work with Cynthia is the result of modern society and trying to be honest about how contemporary society is affecting my psyche and my behaviour and hopefully that's political, just trying to show that."⁷⁹ Moulton's relationship with Cynthia is similar to meme culture, the artist uses her shapeshifting character to explore her fears and endlessly examine, mock, and find comfort in them.

Australian artist Naomi Blacklock examines mythologies and archetypes of gender and cultural identity in performance art and through intersectional feminism. *Aflame, A Singing Sun* (2019) at the University of Queensland Art Museum, was designed as a healing space for personal power and an acknowledgment of individuals in history searching for self-sovereignty. A ring of fire frames the space and references the Prabhavali, a Hindu motif. These halos of fire are usually depicted with images of deities, symbolising the cyclic representation of creation and destruction. In her performance, Blacklock sits behind a large gong, which symbolises life and death, and uses her body to pound on the gong, activating the sun.



Naomi Blacklock, *Aflame, A Singing Sun*, 2019. Gong, gong stand, acrylic paint, stainless steel, cotton, charcoal, contact microphones, speakers, mixer. Performance commissioned for *Second Sight* opening, UQ Art Museum, Brisbane, 1 March 2019. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Carl Warner.

⁷⁹ Hernanz, C. (2019, September 17). Artist Shana Moulton on creating a surreal, wellness-obsessed alter-ego. *Dazed*. <https://www.dazeddigital.com/art-photography/article/46026/1/artist-shana-moulton-on-creating-a-surreal-wellness-obsessed-alter-ego>

Blacklock's performances explore myths and rituals related to the witch archetype. Using aural screaming, Blacklock re-engages with past histories, embracing the witch as a symbol of female suppression in contemporary societies. Blacklock's ritualised performances include objects such as candles, bells, salt, soil, and mirrors. Blacklock uses the candle wax, bells, salt, and soil, to create soundscapes with effect pedals and contact microphones; mirrors reflect and project her movements as shadows and echoes. By amplifying her body and her voice, and channelling the witch's figure, Blacklock searches for the ineffable in order to open up alternative and unconventional histories.

This overview of contemporary artistic practices demonstrates the ways that artists interpret homogenised forms of spirituality in the modern narrative. The language of spirituality becomes a vehicle for artists to express the ineffable. These approaches range from adopted practices of animism, shamanism, Zen Buddhism, and the occult, to ritualising spaces and personal spiritual explorations. Whether the esoteric discourse of contemporary art uses playfulness, irony, provocation, and/or seriousness of intent, contemporary art allows an explorative space for hidden dimensions of reality that resonates with traditional esotericism and magic. What this recent artistic current might illustrate is a renewed desire, not only for individual spiritual transcendence, but also for cultural and societal transformation, and a belief that such transformation is possible.

CHAPTER TWO

The Spiritual Supermarket

God is dead but has been resurrected as 'Capital'. Shopping malls have become the new altars for worshipping the God of money, and consumerism is the new esoteric knowledge (disguised as 'New Age' spirituality).⁸⁰

Spirituality has recently become a cultural trope, appropriated and commodified by corporate bodies in Western capitalist societies. In this chapter, I contextualise the co-option of spirituality by neoliberalism to understand why contemporary artists use branding and corporate methods to engage critically with the wellness industry. Writers Jeremy Carrette and Richard King argue that the corporate industry's motivation is to exploit the transformative power of traditional spirituality by refocusing its fundamental goals in order to promote efficiency and maintain a leading edge in an information-driven economy.⁸¹ With neoliberalism as a dominant discourse in Western society, and within the context of individualism and loss of community, Carrette argues that "'spirituality' has become a new cultural addiction and panacea for the dystopia of modern living."⁸² New Age spirituality and neoliberal discourses share a focus on the individual, who is thought to be responsible for their destiny in everyday life.⁸³ They also share the ideas of self-autonomy and the promotion of entrepreneurship as ways to achieve personal success in economic and private life.

The self became important in New Age thinking, and this centrality of the self was reapplied in mindfulness.⁸⁴ British sociologist and anthropologist Paul Heelas refers to the New Age

⁸⁰ Carrette, J. R., & King, R. (2005). *Selling spirituality: The silent takeover of religion*. Routledge, 24.

⁸¹ Carrette & King, *Selling spirituality*, 10.

⁸² Carrette & King, *Selling spirituality*, 26.

⁸³ Jennifer Rindfleish says that New Age discourses and practices engage in a process that could be described as "the commodification of the self."

Rindfleish, J. (2005). Consuming the self: New age spirituality as "social product" in consumer society. *Consumption Markets & Culture*, 8(4), 343-360.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/10253860500241930>

⁸⁴ 

focus on individual effort as the 'self-ethic',⁸⁵ which principally involves intuition, alignment, or an inner voice that guides decision-making in everyday life. Similarly, mindfulness views personal unhappiness, and not the political and economic frameworks that we live in, as the cause of human suffering. Writer Barbara Ehrenreich views these ideas of controlling self-improvement and influencing our bodies, minds, and even our deaths, as an epistemological disaster of the 21st century wellness industry.⁸⁶ These mindfulness qualities integrate easily into the workplace, where control takes the forms of optimising attentiveness and resilience for maximum productivity. The Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek argues that mindfulness is: "establishing itself as the hegemonic ideology of global capitalism" by aiding people "to fully participate in the capitalist dynamic while retaining the appearance of mental sanity."⁸⁷ Stress has been pathologised, privatised, and outsourced to individuals.⁸⁸

Corporate business interests utilise the cultural capital of Eastern religious traditions and practice by exploiting the exotic image. Carrette and King argue that Eastern wisdom traditions have been colonised and commodified since the 18th century, producing an individualistic spirituality that does not require real authentic change in lifestyle, and that accommodates society's dominant cultural values. They write:

The result is that the wisdom of diverse ancient civilisations becomes commodified in order to serve the eclectic interests of 'spiritual consumers' in the contemporary

⁸⁵ Heelas, P. (1996). *The new age movement*. Blackwell, 23.

⁸⁶ She argues that this Wellness 'epidemic,' paradoxically surrenders us to the irrational, corporatised, and unscientific aspects of wellness culture. Since the 'self' is at the centre of Wellness, she suggests that by removing the idea of the self this will release us from the relentless and ultimately pointless self-maintenance. She recommends psilocybin to expediate this process. Ehrenreich states that science must initiate "a dystopian view of the body—not as a well-ordered machine, but as a site of ongoing conflict at the cellular level." By acknowledging and acting on these ideas, a paradigm shift will shatter Wellness's illusion of control and allow humans to reconcile our living selves with our inevitable ends.

Ehrenreich, B. (2018). *Natural causes: An epidemic of wellness, the certainty of dying, and killing ourselves to live longer*. Twelve.

⁸⁷ Žižek, S. (2001). *From Western Marxism to Western Buddhism*. *Cabinet*, 2(Spring).

⁸⁸ Since the autonomous individual is the primary focal point for society, social change is achieved via individuals' free market and singular actions.

New Age marketplace of religions. This fragmentation becomes a key part of the marketing strategy for contemporary forms of 'spirituality.'⁸⁹

At its worse, mindfulness is an example of this Western appropriation of Eastern culture. Buddhist teacher and psychotherapist Miles Neale coined the term 'McMindfulness,' which he describes as "a feeding frenzy of spiritual practices that provide immediate nutrition but no long-term sustenance."⁹⁰ Free from ethical commitments or social responsibility, mindfulness has been co-opted by the competitive individualistic ethos of the market and, as Carrette and King suggest, functions by "pacifying feelings of anxiety and disquiet at the individual level, rather than seeking to challenge the social, political and economic inequalities that cause such distress."⁹¹ The emphasis on self-sacrifice, self-discipline, and community engagement in traditional spiritual practices have been usurped and applied to work efficiency and productivity. The spiritual roots of mindfulness have been appropriated by the market to support consumerist interests, rather than facilitate a broader social, ethical framework, or a critical analysis of it. Carrette and King argue that the term spirituality works well in professional efficiency because it is an indeterminate signifier that can carry multiple meanings. The term's ambiguity allows it to operate across many different social and interest groups. And functions to establish a specialised niche in terms of the capitalist market. In their words: "we use symbols belonging to a genuinely religious tradition and transform them into formulas serving the purpose of alienated man."⁹² Utilising this ambiguity, ancient cultural traditions and systems of thought become commodities.

This chapter investigates the practices of visual artists Timur Si-Qin, The Institute for New Feeling (IfNf), and Nicolas Lobo, who adopt the visual language of the heterogeneous

⁸⁹ Carrette & King, *Selling spirituality*, 87.

⁹⁰ Yi, K. S. (2017). Recontextualising "mindfulness:" Considering the phenomenological enactment of clinical, spiritual, and religious realities. *Spirituality in Clinical Practice*, 4(3), 209–215, <https://doi.org/10.1037/scp0000139>

⁹¹ Carrette & King, *Selling spirituality*, 51.

⁹² Carrette & King, *Selling spirituality*, 24

spiritual supermarket and contemporary wellness industry. Under the guise of corporate branding strategies, Si-Qin's practice is a reinterpretation of spirituality where humans and non-human's exist in an inclusive and harmonious possible future.⁹³ IfNf appropriates a corporation-like research centre to create intimate experiences for the audience that promote interconnectedness within the human experience. Lobo's process-driven practice critiques the commodification of spirituality by restaging Wellness tropes through New Materialism. By analysing specific examples of their work, this chapter will compare their conceptual strategies and ways of making with my practice. These artists and I co-opt commodity culture strategies as a methodology for critiquing the contemporary narrative and suggesting possibilities for new futures, temporary utopias, and optimism.

Timur Si-Qin

Life on this planet stands at the cusp of a great threshold. As we awaken for the first time to the full scale of the territory of space and time—something any living thing has only known for a century—we awaken also to our own capacities for altering our planet and ourselves . . . Therefore now more than ever do we need to construct new myths and express a new sense of spirituality. A spiritual relationship with the universe of pattern, matter, and energy we call home.⁹⁴

New York-based artist Timur Si-Qin's practice uses the dynamics of branding and the formation of patterns in commercial imagery as a method to propose a new mysticism and a secular spirituality for the future. Si-Qin's installations evoke corporate window displays and billboards, using advertising and commercial photography tactics to emphasise their

⁹³ Current philosophy argues that we are living in the Anthropocene, where human beings are the central or most significant entities in the world. Anthropocentrism views humans as being separate and superior to nature, and maintains that human life has intrinsic value while other entities—matter, animals, plants, and minerals—are resources that may be exploited for the benefit of humankind. Si-Qin challenges this viewpoint with a return to harmony between humans and nature.

Santana, C. (2019). Waiting for the Anthropocene. *The British Journal for the Philosophy of Science*, 70(4), 1073–1096. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjps/axy022>

⁹⁴ Si-Qin, T. *A New Protocol*. <http://www.newpeace.faith>

own artificiality. The installations focus on the materiality of our globalised and networked society, merging the virtual with the actual to highlight the mass-mediated ecology of consumerism. Si Qin states:

I always think about how we are pervaded with advertisements in our daily lives and think it quite beautiful because they appear for more or less the same principles that leaves on plants do: namely they grow to occupy any viable space which they can source energy from.⁹⁵

Campaign for a New Protocol Pt. III at Spazio Maiocchi, Milan in 2018, is an example of how Si-Qin translates this ideas into exhibition formats. Here, Si Quin's installations merge the natural and the synthetic through digitally rendered landscapes of New Peace advertisements and an immersive virtual reality experience. New Peace is Si-Qin's proposal for a new mysticism for the future. His manifesto was illustrated in three consecutive exhibitions: *Campaign for a New Protocol, Part I*, 2018 at SOCIÉTÉ, Berlin, *Campaign for a New Protocol, Part II*, 2018 at Art Basel, Hong Kong, and *Campaign for a New Protocol, Part III*, 2018 at Spazio Maiocchi. Si-Qin's manifesto is available on his website:⁹⁶ He suggests an ambiguous tranquillity exists in replicated rock formations and landscape images printed onto a backlit fabric display. The works are fantasy landscapes, compiled of artificially constructed pictorial elements and 3D scans of real materials, such as grass or stones. He views biology and culture as inseparable, existing in a reciprocal feedback process through which the two spheres co-constitute one another.

⁹⁵ Davies-Crook, S. (2012, November 14). *Timur Si-Qin. Sleek*. <https://www.sleek-mag.com/article/timur-si-qin/>

⁹⁶ <http://www.newpeace.faith>



Timur Si-Qin, *Campaign for a New Protocol Pt. III*, installation view, Spazio Maiocchi, Milan, 2018.

Si-Qin makes his symbol for New Peace by adopting commercial imagery and branding strategies. The artist combines the sign 'peace,' a term associated with the 1960s and 70s antiwar movement, and the Chinese Taijitu symbol of the Ying and Yang. By merging visual components of the symbols, Si-Qin removes contexts and the corresponding implications, highlighting the lack of essential identity and meaning. Writer Lea Schleiffenbaum states: "This inner contradiction between form and content runs through the artist's entire oeuvre."⁹⁷ Si-Qin's approach to extracting emergent material behaviours from culturally coded symbols enables him to create new contexts for communicating his redefinitions of mysticism and reconnection to nature.⁹⁸

⁹⁷ Schleiffenbaum, L. (2016). Timur Si-Qin, *New Peace*. *Peace—Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt*. <http://www.schirn-peace.org/en/post/timur-si-qin/>

⁹⁸ Si-Qin's 'New Protocol' is an act of social engagement that proposes a new, collective approach to humanity's relationship with nature through spirituality. Arts writer Suzi Gablik believes that creativity and social responsibility are an evolving relationship in postmodernism. Gablik views our present dilemmas as the 'disenchantment of the world' and suggests that to 're-enchant' culture, the task needs to be collective. By transitioning into an alternative experience of the world and developing an active dialogue with the environment, collectively, she states, we can cultivate "the listening self, as principles for a new and more feminine mode of Being based on interdependence and the intertwining of self and other." Si-Qin's uses his position as an artist to express a collective and responsive solution to the disenchantment of modern life unlike other artists in this field who draw from the strategies of spirituality and remain ambiguous in their opinion and finding answers to the contemporary dilemma.



Timur Si-Qin, *Campaign for a New Protocol Pt. III*, installation view, Spazio Maiocchi, 2018.

In his installations, A. Azizi writes that there is a suggestion that the sparse, clinical artificial landscapes refer to some “new orientation to the world,” and a “new sense of spirituality for today and the future.”⁹⁹ His spirituality is based on a reconnection to nature and matter in the Anthropocene as the necessary basis for confronting the material problems of our time.¹⁰⁰ Si-Qin seeks to reconceptualise a spiritual and intellectual approach where material is acknowledged for its fundamental dynamism and creative potentiality. Si-Qin explains:

‘New Peace’ is a new protocol for understanding one’s place in the vastness of time and space. A radically inclusive, secular, faith of the real. A mysticism for the

Gablik, *The reenchantment of art*, 22.

⁹⁹ Azizi, A. (2018, May 22). Rejecting transcendent planes in a mysticism of the modern marketplace via Timur Si-Qin’s *Campaign for a New Protocol Pt. III*. AQNB.

<https://www.aqnb.com/2018/05/21/rejecting-transcendent-planes-in-a-mysticism-of-the-modern-marketplace-via-timur-si-qins-campaign-for-a-new-protocol-pt-iii/>

¹⁰⁰ Through his practice, Si-Qin supports a new future where animals, plants, and other organisms are accepted as being connected to, and equal with, the human, which is in many ways similar to indigenous nations’ cosmologies.

Si-Quin, <http://www.newpeace.faith>.

Anthropocene. One that fosters a spiritual relationship with the infinite creativity of pattern, matter and energy.¹⁰¹

He relates the materiality of branding, and its ability to culturally adapt, to examples in biology, such as 'exaptation,' when a trait evolves for one purpose but ends up being used for another.¹⁰² In his view, this disrupts the notion that biology is predetermined and static.¹⁰³ Furthermore, he states that this notion is similar to the Buddhist idea of emptiness, in that nothing has an immutable essence.¹⁰⁴ Si-Qin employs new materiality as a theoretical framework that underpins his installations and supports his ideas of a new future, based on a reassessed spiritual language and inclusive existence.¹⁰⁵ The dialogue between Si-Qin and a diverse array of materials, whether natural or digitally enhanced, attends to aesthetic forms and considerations, and, as described by Yuan Fuca, also advocates for "an independent, open consideration of culture as an emergent manifestation of matter."¹⁰⁶ By collapsing the dualities of nature and culture, synthetic and organic, subject and object, Si-Qin questions how art can redefine consciousness, subjectivity, and morality within the material. Si-Qin's *New Peace* provides new pathways for humanity to reinvent itself in an age of environmental disaster and change.

The Institute for New Feeling

The Institute for New Feeling (IfNf) is an American collective founded by Scott Andrew, Agnes Bolt, and Nina Sarnelle that, in their words, borrows their aesthetics and language from "wellness and tech industries, market research, speculative design and political

¹⁰¹ Si-Qin, <http://www.newpeace.faith>.

¹⁰² Si-Qin, <http://www.newpeace.faith>.

¹⁰³ Si-Qin, <http://www.newpeace.faith>.

¹⁰⁴ Si-Qin, <http://www.newpeace.faith>.

¹⁰⁵ New materialism embraces the vitality of matter, whether this pertains to corporeal life or material phenomena, including inorganic objects, technologies, and nonhuman organisms and processes. Matter becomes an active force that is formed by and co-productive in influencing and activating social worlds and expression, human life, and experience.

¹⁰⁶ Excerpt from exhibition essay by curator, Yuan Fuca, for Si-Qin's exhibition: *East, South, West, North*, Magician Space, Beijing, 23 November 2018–9 March 2019.

Fuca, Y. (2018). *Timur Si-Qin: East, South, West, North*. 魔金石空间 MAGICIAN SPACE. <http://magician.space/exhibition/tie-mu-er-%C2%B7si-qin-dong-nan-xi-bei-2/>

propaganda"¹⁰⁷ in order to explore new systems of interconnectedness and the shared human experience. IfNf is interested in how consumer-level technology translates and shapes our understanding of the world. They use the Internet, iPads, phones and digital cameras as arbitrators between the user and their experience. By exploring the invisible, back-end processes of value systems, IfNf attempt to resist those that measure personhoods against economic viability. They attempt an ambiguity that is not outrightly critical of the dominant economic value system but invites the viewer to imagine an alternative.

The collective IfNf self-identifies as a 'research clinic' that exhibits products and 'instructionals' intended as self-help for the Internet age, offering ways to disconnect from its constant, nagging, digital demands. IfNf investigates and inverts the normative relationships between users and products to pursue an enigmatic mission: "new ways of feeling, and ways of feeling new."¹⁰⁸ An example of IfNf's conceptual strategies is *Group* (2013), a two-person stage performance with music and audiovisuals. The experiential work leads participants through a series of activities designed to generate energetic connection, intimacy and physicality. The audience participates in breathing exercises, guided meditation, karaoke chanting, aerobic routines, and more as they progress through the seven platforms: AGREE, VOICE, CONTACT, DIGEST, ACT, BREATHE, and RELEASE. The experience is something like being in a cult, with IfNf as its leaders, and the participants engaging in a performative inquiry into the spiritual industry.

The work *Furthering Cream* (year) ("an accelerant for the face and body") is an installation that depicts a potion falling from containers and dripping onto bodies below.¹⁰⁹ The *Furthering Cream* adheres and hardens, building abstract landscapes that reference the earth minerals, from which most of our technology is made, and contemporary fetishes around 'natural' self-care. IfNf's speculative treatments overstate the commoditisation of

¹⁰⁷ IfNf. <http://www.institutefornewfeeling.com/info>

¹⁰⁸ IfNf suggests that these 'new ways of feeling' are strategies that encourage all individuals to actively questioning and invent what is "good" for them.

IfNf, <http://www.institutefornewfeeling.com/info>

¹⁰⁹ <http://www.institutefornewfeeling.com/info>

self-improvement while demonstrating how this phenomenon converges with the labour of maintaining oneself.



Institute for New Feeling, *Furthering Cream*, performance and installation view, *MAXIMUM MINIMUM IN UNUM*, Miller Gallery, Cincinnati, 2016.

IfNf playfully engage with self-care tendencies, presenting a light-hearted and often non-functional approach that contrasts with the corporate efficiency of the spiritual industry. IfNf mocks the commercialisation of the self-care and spirituality industries, aligning them with pseudo-science and shallow consumer culture. Furthermore, IfNf views their practice not only in terms of its objecthood, but also through the possibilities of positive social regroupings. They say: "We took on this corporate structure as a way of collectivising different types of art activity under an elusive 'we'. Anyone can construct a belief system; or

define a new standard of beauty; or decide what is 'good for us.'"¹¹⁰. The experience of going through an IfNf treatment has "the potential to transcend this frame" by engaging the audience in group activities to highlight the corporate marketing of the industry.¹¹¹ They continue: "We're interested in the ways that dark or playful critique can coexist with genuine sincerity, connection, vulnerability, even belief."¹¹²

Firstly, they develop a non-functioning treatment or product that allows participants to reflect on similar treatments or products marketed and disseminated globally. Then they create participatory performances where this treatment or product's physical experience becomes more meaningful, initiating new responses to self-care and spirituality concepts. While their platforms operate at the nexus of consumerism and criticality, IfNf appeals to optimism and authenticity, and maintains an ambiguity between the real and fantasy. Their methodology for examining spirituality as a lifestyle choice is to create and engage with a brand that intersects with art, critical theory, and social marketing. This approach to spirituality allows the collective to enter a rigorous inquiry about the current commodification of the wellness industry, and discuss possible remedies for the present and future human experience.

Nicolas Lobo

Miami-based American artist Nicolas Lobo examines the self-care industry by producing ambiguous experiential installations. Lobo's process-driven practice focuses on friction points within the urban milieu, examining a broad spectrum of topics from fringe subcultures to alternative networks, such as the Raëlian movement, Go-Go dance scene, pirate radio, and illegal drug fabrication sites. He uses everyday consumer materials, such as cough syrup, playdough, terrazzo, Napalm, and a discontinued soft drink with supposed aphrodisiac qualities. Recently, Lobo has focused on how the human body extends into socioeconomic space and the wellness industry.

¹¹⁰ Pangburn, D. J. (2016, August 24). ASMR is a joke (but laughter's still the best medicine). *Vice*. <https://www.vice.com/en/article/pgq5z7/online-art-project-takes-down-wellness-industry>.

¹¹¹ Pangburn, ASMR is a joke.

¹¹² Pangburn, ASMR is a joke.

In developing his works, Lobo visits a range of wellness centres and directly engages with experimental healing techniques for conditions such as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Similarly to IfNf, he is concerned with the tension between labour and leisure. N. Johnson writes, Lobo investigates the desire to:

incorporate therapeutic practices and objects into daily life. Self-care as an industry focuses on purely positive aspects to trigger a healing experience, but beyond that, self-care practiced by individuals is much more nuanced . . . Facing pain by portraying it is also valid. Self-care can be a case of healing undefined psychological pain we feel, identifying the source and how it is exchanged and transmitted across a population.¹¹³

Lobo's practice is a synergy of art, therapy, and social response in which he examines the relevance of Wellness within capitalism. He simultaneously celebrates and laments the unused possibilities of self-care administrations as systems for collective care.

Lobo's exhibition, *Wellness Centre* (2019), located within artist Mike Kelley's project, *Mobile Homestead* (2006–13), took the audience through four experiences. The first step was a one-person, octagonal sauna enclosed in waterproof tie-dyed fabric, with menthol mist pumped into the air.

¹¹³ Johnson, N. (2019, May 19). A dystopian day at the spa with artist Nicolas Lobo. *Nina Johnson*. <https://www.ninajohnson.com/news/a-dystopian-day-at-the-spa-with-artist-nicolas-lobo/>



Nicolas Lobo, *SAUNA SHELF*, 2019. Aluminium shelf, steam generator, waterproof fabric, dimensions variable.
Image courtesy of Nina Johnson. Photo: Tim Johnson.

The next step was drinking orange juice. The installation *Juice Trader* included a fridge containing Tropicana, Welch's, Mountain Dew Kickstart, SunnyD, and other artificial orange beverages. A two-channel video showed drinking glasses being filled with what becomes a foreboding orange fluid. The wall text informs the viewer that Tropicana is a replica juice that is deoxygenated, stripped of flavour through heating and storing it in million-gallon vats, and re-flavoured with orange oils and essences.



Nicolas Lobo, *JUICE TRADER*, 2019. Two-channel colour video (infinite loop), refrigerator unit with bottles of orange juice, dimensions variable. Image courtesy of Nina Johnson. Photo: Nicolas Lobo.

Lobo's 1979 *ASMR MASSAGE SHOWER SHELF* was outside, in the backyard. Based on an *étagère* by mid-century modernist designer Milo Baughman, the shower's aluminium diamond structure had ceramic tablets with indentations based on a tutorial for Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response (ASMR) massage. In this work, Lobo highlights the commodification of individualised, curated, self-care products consumed by people that buy according to the aesthetics of responsibility and sustainability, yet are produced with an undercurrent of pollution and exploitation.



Nicolas Lobo, *1979 ASMR MASSAGE SHOWER SHELF*, 2019. Extruded aluminium, ceramic, plumbing fixtures, ultra-lightweight concrete, dimensions variable. Image courtesy of Nina Johnson. Photo: Nicolas Lobo.

Lobo's Hydrogel Painting series are the final works in *The Wellness Centre* exhibition. Lobo made these works during therapeutic sessions with people in Lobo's studio. Activated charcoal, used hydrogel face masks, cannabis pain creams, , medical-grade honey, and other substances were applied to glass, photographed, and then printed onto aluminium using UV ink. The titles of the works—*NEPHTHYTIS*, *TURMERIC*, and *STEM CELL GOLD PARTICLE*—are reminiscent of a luxury spa menu.

Karma is a Bitch

The work in my exhibition, *Karma is a bitch* (2019), demonstrates my use of spiritual language to critique, and open an alternative narrative to, the disconnection of human experience and nature. The exhibition is site specific to Verge Gallery, consisting of multiple sculptures that hang from the ceiling, floor works and wall mounted prints on painted walls. The installation includes a metal painted sculpture of the same name, *Karma is a bitch*, which takes its colour palette from the sunset in the background curtain, *Happiness is an inside job* (2019). My yoga practice is represented in the acrylic and tie-dye rectangular floor works, which take their form from my yoga mat, and allude to the idea of the guru/teacher's platform generally being located at the front of the yoga studio. *Sad rainbow bhajan* (2019) is a chain, material, and found drum work based on my visit to a rainbow gathering in Queensland.¹¹⁴ The installation also incorporates repurposed sculpture and wall works. By including domestic objects, such as a pot plant, subdued wall colours and framed wall works, I attempted to create a domestic interior as an analogy for my inner spirituality and lived experiences.

¹¹⁴ Rainbow gatherings are loosely connected groups of people, inclusive of any subculture or ethnicity, collectively called the 'Rainbow Family of Living Light' and the 'Rainbow Family'. Members do not live communally; their commonality is expressed only through global and regional meetings called gatherings. Beginning in 1972, their purpose is "to pray for world peace and to demonstrate the viability of a cooperative utopian community living in harmony with the earth." People who identify as 'rainbow' are environmentalist and egalitarian, and draw their ideology and material culture indiscriminately from American Indian traditions, Eastern philosophies, Christianity and Paganism. They are opposed to the capitalism of mainstream culture.

Lemieux, C. M. (1998). Michael Niman. People of the rainbow: A nomadic utopia. Review. *Nova Religio*, 2(1), 163–164. doi:10.1525/nr.1998.2.1.163



Karma is a bitch, dimensions variable, installation view, Verge Gallery, Sydney, 2019. Photography by Zan Wimberley.



Happiness is an inside job (curtain), installation view, *Karma is a bitch*, Verge Gallery, 2019. Photography by Zan Wimberley.

Happiness is an inside job appropriates the symbology of Hindu's seven chakras. Chakras are circular vortexes of energy in seven different points along the spinal column. Each one is connected to specific organs and glands yet together they can be read as a map of the person's spiritual journey. I designed three of my chakras on a Darwinian sunset. These are digitally printed on the curtain. For me, Darwin represents a utopian desire for connection with nature. Printed on sports mesh material, *Happiness is an inside job*, represents the theatre of spirituality and the spectacle of the wellness industry. This work draws from corporate sport brands like Adidas that adopts the Wellness approach to market holistic lifestyles. Furthermore, Wellness sells aspirational lifestyles, from fitness, as a form of religious ritual, to the cult of clean eating,¹¹⁵ detoxing, and fasting. *Happiness is an inside job* highlights these branding strategies in its materialism to examine the dualistic nature of spirituality and authenticity.

The industry seduces consumers by promising the kind of fulfillment and sense of belonging that traditional religions once did. The wellness industry adopts many of the same codes and cues as traditional faiths. They appeal to consumers' yearnings for spiritual transcendence, authentic connection with their community and social responsibility for the environment.

Another trope of spirituality is the guru and the devotee's relationship, which often reaches extreme forms in cults¹¹⁶ and spiritual sub-cultures. My art appropriates from my Bikram yoga practice,¹¹⁷ utilising the structure of the teacher's platform at the front of the yoga

¹¹⁵ Clean eating is a term used in fad diets that refers to eating healthy and unprocessed whole foods.

McCartney M. (2016). Margaret McCartney: Clean eating and the cult of healthism. *BMJ (Clinical research ed.)*, 354, i4095. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.i4095>

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¹¹⁷ The founder of Bikram, Choudhry Bikram, has been accused of multiple sexual misconduct allegations in America and is hiding from creditors in Mexico. He still runs teacher training, has settled with six women out of court, and has split the consensus of the global Bikram community. Allegations such as these have historically been prevalent in many cults and wellness organisations, addressing Evangelist pastors, yoga gurus, the Rajneesh Movement, the CrossFit Gym empire, and, more recently, the NXIVM marketing company.

studio to highlight these hierarchical relationships in spirituality. I repurpose denim and tie-dye to recall the materiality of the 1970s hippie movement, and their utopian ideal of the guru as a guide to spiritual transformation. I juxtapose this with materials, such as chains, to invoke ideas of power, vulnerability, and human failure.¹¹⁸ I embrace a meta-modernist¹¹⁹ position that allows me to oscillate between two oppositional positions without them cancelling each other out, attempting to recall the positivistic aspects of modernism while retaining postmodernism's recognition of context and irony. This approach is illustrated in the sculptural forms I make that reference modernist shapes and colours to describe utopia and connection to nature, and giving the works ironic titles. This meta-modernist approach prioritises my experience by not focusing on oppositional meanings at the expense of either concept.

¹¹⁸ An example of blind devotion is the Heaven's Gate group suicide. On March 26, 1997, the members took phenobarbital mixed with apple sauce and vodka, and secured plastic bags around their heads to cause asphyxiation. Authorities found the dead lying in their own bunk beds, covered by a square, purple cloth on their torsos and heads. Each member had a five-dollar bill and three quarters in their pockets, said to be money for an interplanetary toll. All 39 members were dressed in identical black shirts and track pants, "cult chose health goth", brand new black-and-white Nike Decades, and armband patches reading "Heaven's Gate Away Team," referencing missions in Star Trek.

<https://www.newsweek.com/2017/04/14/how-nikes-decade-became-cult-shoe-wrong-way-571812.html>

¹¹⁹ The central motivation of meta-modernism is to protect subjective experience from the ironic distance of postmodernism, the analytical reductionism of modernism, and the pre-personal apathy of tradition.

Vermeulen & Akker, Notes on metamodernism, 5



Sad rainbow bhajan. Material, leather, chain, brass, rubber, paint, Henry's drum, acrylic, wood, plant, found object, steel, dimensions variable. Installation view, *Karma is a Bitch*, Verge Gallery, 2019.

The work *I'm suffering from realness*¹²⁰ (2018), uses branding methods and divergent materials to replicate boxing equipment, and compare sporting competitiveness with seeking spiritual utopias. As with all of my installations, it includes the Adidas three stripes logo, a globally recognisable brand that promotes competitiveness, productivity, and Wellness. By combining disparate symbols, I subvert their original meaning and repurpose them for a new context. This bricolage process, which cross-references and collages multiple esoteric practices, as well as appropriating corporate logos and branding spiritual environments, allows me to make my own spiritual language.¹²¹ The images and sculptures

¹²⁰ This title of this work is appropriated from the Kanye West and Jay Z song, *Niggas in Paris*, 2017.

¹²¹ Bricolage enables the cross-referencing of technologies, practices, materials, and socio-political contexts, which can be evaluated and reflected on in order to identify and acknowledge complex observations.

of my installations are vehicles to re-contextualise corporate-generated images and tell different stories. My installations critically engage with corporatised forms of spirituality, which purport to allow a reconnection with the self, community and nature, while promoting neoliberalist ideologies of individualism, competitiveness and consumption.



I'm suffering from realness, installation view, Karma is a bitch, Verge Gallery, 2019. Photography by Zan Wimberley.

Si-Qin, IfNf, Lobo and I examine the complexities of the contemporary, esoteric and self-care industries in different ways. Our similarities reside in the dialogue between acknowledging the consumerist orientation of the wellness industry and embracing the spiritual value that it may bring to people, communities, and future societies. In addition, each artist approaches the production of their work by adopting the ubiquitous forms and

Dezeuze, A. (2008). Assemblage, *bricolage*, and the practice of everyday life. *Art Journal*, 67(1), 31–37. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00043249.2008.10791292>

My research of pop culture, via visual art, music and cinema, underpins my practice. Rapper Kanye West is a contemporary example of someone who co-opts spiritual tropes for his brand. West combines music, fashion, and Jesus Christ in his 'Sunday Service,' a curated, exclusive, religious experience for the social media age. Taking place in different locations, Sunday Service features a gospel choir dressed in West's muted, matching, and cult-like clothing line. The events enable West to place himself within the context of religion and connect to his music followers, and, perhaps, to facilitate his guru-like status.

aesthetics of advertising and popular culture to reflect and disassemble, but ultimately re-create, the dominant consumer narrative as something with real transformative possibilities.

CHAPTER THREE

Installation as Spiritual Interiors

One of the critical approaches that I use in my practice, to examine the commodification of spirituality, is to create immersive environments incorporating symbolic languages, materiality and colour. In this chapter, I investigate the sculptural and spatial practices of Canadian artist Jeremy Shaw, Danish designer Verner Panton, filmmaker Alejandro Jodorowsky and Australian artist Mikala Dwyer. Each practitioner uses diverse aesthetic and conceptual strategies to create immersive environments with the potential to transform a viewer's experience. Shaw blurs the lines of reality and fiction to implicate the audience in his scenarios, Panton uses visual systems and colour to induce immersion, Jodorowsky employs cinematic narratives and ancient symbology as a methodology for spiritual transformation, and Dwyer engages an empathetic approach to materials and ritual to examine the sacred and profane. All of these approaches enable the audience to be immersed in an environment that affects and alters their consciousness.

Jeremy Shaw

Berlin-based Canadian artist Jeremy Shaw creates installations that explore altered states of consciousness, drawing on cultural and scientific practices that aspire to describe and elicit transcendental¹²² experiences. Shaw's works combines the artistic strategies of realist filmmaking, esoteric and scientific research, conceptual art, and music video-style editing. He mimics documentary films, contrasting and combining diverse belief systems and histories are contrasted and combined to create believable narratives.

Shaw uses multisensory cognitive dissonance, manipulation, and subliminal messaging in his video installations to evoke particular feelings in his audiences. An example of these techniques is seen in *Quantification Trilogy* (2018) an immersive installation that consists of three fictional short films: *Quickeners* (2014), *Liminals* (2017), and *I Can See Forever* (2018). This trilogy explores marginalised societies of the future; it presents interconnected stories about individuals attempting to reach transcendence in a community where rational

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thought has superseded traditional belief systems. The *Quantification Trilogy* examines esotericism, representations of the sublime, virtual reality, theories of evolution, and neurotheology through fringe culture, dance, and notions of transcendence.



Jeremy Shaw, *Quickeners*, The Store X, London, 2014.



Jeremy Shaw, *Liminals*, The Store X, London, 2017.

Set 500 years in the future, *Quickeners* tells the story of Quantum Humans, who have replaced the human race. Quantum Humans have attained immortality and divine omniscience via a wireless connection to a human history database called, 'The Hive'. Some

Quantum Humans malfunction, losing connection to The Hive. This results in a 'Human Atavism Syndrome,' which affects both their speech and lowers their social position in mainstream society. Importantly, *Quickeners* is created from archival material. A Pentecostal Christian gathering in the 1950s is re-narrated to be set in the future. This documentary-style video uses sermons, prayers, indecipherable testimonials, speaking-in-tongues, convulsive dancing, serpent handling, and ecstatic states, described as 'Quickenings' by the artist. Shaw's artistic strategy in combining satire and history to produce a disorienting effect somewhat resembles science-fiction. Shaw explains:

I saw *Quickeners* as an opportunity to alchemically combine many of my influences. Under the banner of science fiction, I flattened them into the same space without hierarchy—or, at least, the hierarchy became a debated element within the piece. Each film happens in the wake of some landmark event, whether it's the "Quantification" or the "Announcement" or the "Acknowledgement."¹²³

The second film in the trilogy, *Liminals*, employs a 1970s *cinéma vérité* aesthetic and is also set in the future. The narrative follows eight subjects as they engage in ritualistic behaviours, from whirling and kundalini meditation to modern dance and head-banging, in an attempt to cleanse and save humanity from extinction. By injecting themselves with the Machine DNA and re-engaging abandoned spiritual rituals, they imagine they will gain access to 'The Liminal', a para-space between the physical and virtual worlds.¹²⁴ They believe The Liminal will rupture their current reality, allowing a new phase of evolution that will save humanity.

The final work in the *Quantification Trilogy*, *I Can See Forever* is set approximately 40 years from now. It is presented as an episode of a television documentary series, *The Singularity Project*, using 1990s VHS footage. The documentary investigates a failed government

¹²³ Alderwick, W. (2020, March 23). What's the value of time that don't end?: Jeremy Shaw's *PHASE SHIFTING INDEX*. O32c. <https://032c.com/phase-shifting-index>

¹²⁴ This group of people discover that the past notions of faith have biologically evolved to become an essential aspect of human survival and that, by augmenting their brains with machine DNA, they can access The Liminal.

experiment that tried to create a harmonious synthesis of humans and machines. The documentary uses audio, aspect ratio, and tempo changes to create a feeling that something significant has taken place. However, the viewer is never quite sure what that may be. It is narrated by the only survivor of the experiment, Roderick Dale. His DNA is 8.7% machine and, by dedicating his life to dance, he can transcend to a cyber plane of oneness while simultaneously maintaining a physical presence.

Quantification Trilogy manipulates time and perceptions of history to place the viewer within a paradoxical, temporary space. In using archival material and presenting the work in outmoded media, such as VHS, Shaw wants the viewer to experience his videos both as historical realities and participatory narratives. He refers to this as 'collective effervescence,' which he believes implies a more ambiguous audience experience than offered by traditional documentary.¹²⁵ Shaw says: "The manipulation becomes more difficult to decipher. That is a huge part of the strategy with all these films: gaining a comfort and trust from the viewer that can then be subverted."¹²⁶ This strategy tries to maintain audiences' suspension of disbelief for as long as possible, and enhances the installations' immersive qualities.

Additionally, Shaw's trilogy can be located in a transhuman discourse that "hybridises the religious with the secular, in effect 're-enchanting' the secular while simultaneously aligning with Enlightenment rationality over religious belief."¹²⁷ Professor and historian Hava Tirosh-Samuelson identifies techno-scientific posthumanism as an approach that adopts religious symbology in an attempt to "endow technology with salvific power," and futurist transhumanism as an apocalyptic narrative, "saturated with religious themes," that drives

¹²⁵ Collective effervescence is a term that French sociologist David Émile Durkheim used to describe the emotionality of the religious experience. It represents the joyful intoxication of togetherness that makes you feel deeply connected to others.

Durkheim, E., (1933). *Émile Durkheim on The division of labor in society*. (G. Simpson, Trans.) Macmillan. (Original work published 1933).

¹²⁶ Alderwick, *What's the value of time that don't end?*

¹²⁷ Chaudhary, M. Y. (2019). Augmented reality, artificial intelligence, and the re-enchantment of the world. *Zygon®*, 54(2), page. <https://doi.org/10.1111/zygo.12521>

the process toward a transcendent posthuman future. Cultural writer Mohammad Chaudhary states that these ideas of salvation concerning technology evoke a secular re-enchantment through posthumanism and transhumanism.¹²⁸

Verner Panton

The mid-century Danish furniture designer Verner Panton generated psychedelic interiors and sculptural furniture using colour theory, interlocking systems for furniture, and sensory perception. Unlike interiors that produce unconscious habitation, Panton created immersive environments that transformed perception. I use similar strategies in my studio-making in an attempt to make hybrid spiritual interiors and immersive environments that question the functionality of sculpture. In line with modernist approaches to architecture in the 1960s and 70s, Panton aspired to create objects and spaces that promoted social connection. Writer Ida Engholm describe the designer's vision as a "new systematic for experiencing life."¹²⁹ They state that his Neo-avant-guardism provoked limitless imagination and fostered a new experience-based dialogue with consumers.

Panton's design, *Visiona II*, for the chemical corporation Bayer's pleasure boat, during the Cologne Furniture Fair in 1970, exemplified his vision.¹³⁰ The boat was a showroom for avant-garde, collaborative tendencies in design. *Visiona II* was designed as a holistic environment, consisting of organically soft structures suitable for sitting and lying on. The design included lighting, textiles, and wall and ceiling coverings arranged in systematic and psychedelic compositions. The cave-like spaces allowed colour to become the forefront strategy for immersion, as participants lounged in different positions on multiple forms, and

¹²⁸ Another form of enchantment functions through AI simulation of digitally embodied forces in AR. Chaudhary states this represents a key characteristic of a new enchanted world, a world present with spirits—"loci of spiritual power"—that have the ability to influence human beings. He suggests that the 'inner self,' externally manifested in the form of digital supernatural beings and AI, and made visible through AR, will be the agents of a re-enchanted world. Chaudhary, *Augmented reality*, 466.

¹²⁹ This systematic constituted an expanding industry, offering new materials, technology, and ways of production in a welfare society.

Engholm, I. (2005). *Verner Panton*. Aschehoug, 12.

¹³⁰ From 1968 to 1972, Bayer rented a boat during Cologne Furniture Fair, which was used as temporary exhibition space by well-known designers. This space examined the theme of contemporary living and new innovations in textiles.

offered visitors a contemporary environment for re-evaluating traditional notions of living.¹³¹ Ceilings, floors, and walls were indistinct and dominated by a labyrinth of intricate curves and soft textiles. An interior without windows, saturated in multi-coloured light, created the illusion of a futuristic landscape. Referring to *Visiona II*, writer Mads Folkmann observes that “design with this kind of intensified ambience seeks to attract attention and thus both engages the users or the audience in the process of creating ambience and reflectively points to itself as a place of meaning making.”¹³²



Verner Panton, *Phantasy Landscape, Visiona II*, 1970, partial reconstruction, Vitra Design Museum, Weil am Rhein, 2000.

Described as a fantasy landscape, the installation placed the audience inside colour fields, rather than have them sit on, or near, them. It was an attempt to render an artificial environment using, as Ida Engholm states, “a self-organised, a Burroughish environment where perception was changed and the world was accordingly changed.”¹³³

¹³¹ American artist James Turrell physically immerses audiences in an abstract, immaterial, and sensory way by using light to heighten the viewer’s perceptions. Turrell’s work diminishes the viewer’s sense of perspective by emphasising space, and its physical demarcations, and then expanding the boundaries of a space through light. He also uses colours that act as an emotional directive and are associative, such as using white to suggest innocence. This is present in Turrell’s skyscapes: chambers with an aperture in the ceiling that is open to the sky. He uses the colours of natural phenomena, like a blue sky and red sunset, to conjure emotive responses from the audience.

¹³² Folkmann, M. N. (2013). *The aesthetics of imagination in design*. MIT Press, 41.

¹³³ For Panton, modern design was an entire living space turned into an organic reverie, a dreamscape of playful shapes and charged chromaticism. Panton’s environments were marked by

Panton was interested in the psychology of colour, and utilised colour to imbue his space with emotion. His approach to chromaticism parallels a range of artists in the 1960s who used colour to function as the agent of content.¹³⁴ His sense of colour was strong, and he was not afraid to cover large surfaces. In his commissioned corporate spaces, he used saturated colours to eliminate the distance between objects and immerse the audience. Additionally, he used complicated combinations of colour and pattern to produce hypnotic oscillations that stimulated the viewer's eye. And he strictly controlled his palette, using analogous colour schemes that avoided complementary shades. Panton explained: "I myself work normally with parallel colours whose tones follow consecutively according to the order of the spectrum . . . In this way, I can control the character of the room in terms of warmth and coolness and thereby create the desired atmosphere."¹³⁵

Panton believed that an individuals' social experience in his designs were of great importance. His creations can be regarded as environments—colours, systems, and patterns that play with society's possibilities for experiencing life.¹³⁶ This utopian expansion of

characters and materials, red shaggy carpet, oversized plastic mushrooms, aluminium panels for walls, and modular furniture. *Visiona II* was intended as a concrete vision of the future home environment, however, through its conceptual attention to debating the boundaries of design, it was, instead, an exploration of how form and objects are used by the consumer. Engholm, *Verner Panton*, 159.

¹³⁴ The 1960s, LA-based, 'Finish Fetish' artists included Craig Kauffman, Billy Al Bengston, Larry Bell, John McCracken, Helen Pashgian, and De Wain Valentine. Their colours were pristine surfaces that used new resins, paints and plastics, and adopted fabrication processes from the industrial world. They created seamless, bright objects, blurring the boundaries between 2D and 3D, painting and sculpture, handcrafted and commercially-produced objects, inspired by California culture.

¹³⁵ This encouraged the viewer to 'become' the chroma they were experiencing.

Vegeasack, A., & Remmele, M. (Eds.) (2000). *Verner Panton: The collected works*. Exhibition Catalogue. Vitra Design Museum, 173.

¹³⁶ Panton was interested in how new environments enable experiences as distinctive sensations, how a 'social aesthetic' could be elicited through colour, and how systems could be utilised as a methodology for patterning and making. In Panton's world, users are seated in situational contexts, in systems and relationships, on the floor, in mid-air, with the body positioned any way.

Michelsen, A., & Tygstrup, F. (Eds). *Socioaesthetics: Ambience—Imaginary*. Brill. (2015). 237 p. (Social and Critical Theory).

possibility is a unifying principle in Panton's approach to complete environments.¹³⁷ Art theorist Bazon Brock emphasised Panton's effort to develop a sensitive and creative alternative to totalitarian limits, writing: "Panton developed a world that was the opposite of totalitarian hardness and functionality, driven by calculations of the adding machine . . . a world that was soft, round and artificial."¹³⁸ Brock states that Panton designed spaces that re-created primordial, natural phenomena in an artificial way, and remade inner worlds in a new visual dimension. These strategies align with my process of making *Inner workout*, which attempted to create a visual language for expressing my inner spiritual concerns.

Alejandro Jodorowsky

Chilean director and filmmaker Alejandro Jodorowsky's cinematic work is a hybrid mix of mysticism, religious provocation, and violence. Jodorowsky's use of imagery, colour, Surrealist visions, and reconfigurations of old Hollywood tropes are provocative, transgressive, and hallucinatory. His films examine the material culture of countercultures,¹³⁹ from drug culture and free love to Eastern spiritualism, reinterpretations of Christianity, New Age practices, and the spiritual quest. Writer Adam Breckenridge argues that while Jodorowsky embraced counterculture ideology, he was also critical of it.¹⁴⁰ Jodorowsky expressed these ideas in his two films, *El Topo* (1971) and *The Holy Mountain* (1973), through his rich use of symbology from multiple cultures and depictions of faith that reject mainstream religious and societal practices. *El Topo*, Spanish for 'The Mole', is a low-budget Mexican production filled with bizarre characters in extravagant Western-style costuming, novice actors, and a plot that is imitative of the Spaghetti Western. Jodorowsky stars as El Topo, the vengeful hero who kills, seduces, and entertains his way into eternity.

¹³⁷ Panton's focus on environments and colours as non-objective, but relational, entities was part of his understanding that system elements create variable situations. Panton's practice used systems where elements and features connect with interacting and interdependent groups of items. These elements repeat constantly, and continuously express minor or major changes within a system. This creates a holistic approach that allowed his systems to become series. Objects were treated as components within systems rather than individual forms.

¹³⁸ Vegesack & Remmele, *Verner Panton*, 32.

¹³⁹ 

¹⁴⁰ Breckenridge, A. (2015). A path less traveled: Rethinking spirituality in the films of Alejandro Jodorowsky. *The Journal of Religion and Film*, 19(2), 0_1.

The Holy Mountain centres around a group of characters from different astrological signs who learn to re-evaluate their capitalist ideologies and discover their higher selves, a journey that ends on a mountaintop. In the final scene, the camera zooms out to reveal the film crew, suggesting that the journey, and enlightenment, is all staged. Through a clear vision of symbolic meaning, and the impact of colour on the audience, Jodorowsky's films utilise a shared cultural vocabulary. Film critic and writer Roger Ebert writes of *El Topo*: "[Jodorowsky] lifts his symbols and mythologies from everywhere: Christianity, Zen, discount-store black magic, you name it. He makes not the slightest attempt to use them so they sort out into a single logical significance."¹⁴¹

Jodorowsky's view on spiritual fulfillment and the quest for transformation incorporates a dualistic approach. On the one hand, he references the positive symbolism of multiple religions, and on the other, he points to futile and failed attempts at enlightenment. In *El Topo*, the struggle for enlightenment ends in failure. Similarly, in *The Holy Mountain*, enlightenment only becomes possible after rejecting every conventional idea of spirituality, and even then its validity is left in doubt.¹⁴² This ambiguity is consistent with my investigations into spirituality as explored in my sculptures and installations.

¹⁴¹ Wilkins, B. (2020, August 8). Interview: Alejandro Jodorowsky on psychomagic, the theater of cruelty, and more. *Slant*. <https://www.slantmagazine.com/film/interview-alejandro-jodorowsky-on-psychomagic-the-theater-of-cruelty-and-more/>

¹⁴² Cultural writer Adam Breckenridge suggests the audience can understand Jodorowsky's work via Slavoj Žižek's sadistic trap. Žižek based this idea on Lacan's definition of sadism, which he appropriates for film analysis, using Hitchcock as an example of how a director can hold the audience in a sadistic trap. A sadistic trap is when the director arouses in the viewer the 'sadistic' desire to see the hero annihilate the bad guy. The viewer is possessed by this will, and is ultimately manipulated by the only true sadist, the director.

Breckenridge, A path less traveled, 3.

Žižek, S. (Ed.). (1992). *Everything you always wanted to know about Lacan: (but were afraid to ask Hitchcock)*. Verso, 222–223.



Alejandro Jodorowsky, *Holy Mountain*, 1973 (movie still).



Alejandro Jodorowsky, *Holy Mountain*, 1973 (movie still).

Jodorowsky's approach to the spiritual goal of transcendence is to use a bombardment of archetypal symbols to delve into a collective unconscious.¹⁴³ "Everyday life is surrealistic," says Jodorowsky, "made of miracles, weird and inexplicable events. There is no borderline

¹⁴³ Jodorowsky's films often feature himself and his sons in central acting roles, reflecting his own spiritual journey, as documented in his many written books.

between reality and magic.”¹⁴⁴ Borrowing cues from French dramatist Antonin Artaud’s ideas about transforming the spectator, Jodorowsky believes that films can induce spiritual illumination.¹⁴⁵ During a 1971 interview, Jodorowsky said:

I believe that the only end of all human activity—whether it be politics, art, science, etc.— is to find enlightenment, to reach the state of enlightenment. I ask of film what most North Americans ask of psychedelic drugs . . . With every new picture, I must change myself, I must kill myself, and I must be born . . . And then the audiences, the audiences who go to the movies, must be assassinated, killed, destroyed, and they must leave the theatre as new people.¹⁴⁶

Using the filmmaking process as a journey to find spiritual illumination, Jodorowsky shoots his films in sequence from beginning to end. He uses violence (believing that art must be violent) at the beginnings of his films to symbolically indicate an initiation ritual, and sequentially moves toward enlightenment.¹⁴⁷ Themes such as enlightenment run throughout Jodorowsky’s films. In another of his films, *Fando y Lis* (1968), the key to illumination (Tar) lies within oneself. *El Topo* explores Jodorowsky’s interests in Zen Buddhism; *The Holy Mountain* is founded in Sufism and the writings of G. I. Gurdjieff; *Tusk* (1980) examines Hinduism and Tantrism, and *Santa Sangre* (1990) investigates Jodorowsky’s personal spiritual beliefs in psychomagic.

¹⁴⁴ Lewis, C. S. (2013, January 1). Alexandro Jodorowsky, “For a Mutation of the Human Consciousness.” Interviews & Variations. *Prism Escape*. Scribd. <https://www.scribd.com/document/167693731/Alexandro-Jodorowsky-for-a-Mutation-of-the-Human-Consciousness-PRISM-ESCAPE-Interviews-Variations>

¹⁴⁵ The Theatre of Cruelty is based on a philosophy and discipline. Artaud wanted to interfere with the relationship between the audience and performer. The ‘cruelty’ in Artaud’s thesis relates to the sensory. He believed that shocking and confronting the audience, through gesture and movement, was a more powerful method for connecting with emotions than through words. He believed that theatre should be an act of ‘organised anarchy,’ and argued that the audience should be placed at the centre of a piece of performance. Artaud, A. (1994). *The theater and its double*. (M. C. Richard, Trans.). Grove Press. (Original work published 1938).

¹⁴⁶ Guida, J. (2015). Producing and explaining charisma: A case study of the films of Alejandro Jodorowsky. *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 83(2). <https://doi.org/10.1093/jaarel/lfv001>

¹⁴⁷ This is not the usual approach to filmmaking. Due to production and budget constraints, films are normally shot in varying sequences.

Film writer David Church suggests that in Jodorowsky's films, organised religion's discourses of tradition and political power are attacked and subverted.¹⁴⁸ In their place, he presents a hybrid mysticism, drawing upon a universal concept of spirituality that underlies all religious and occult beliefs. Interviews with Jodorowsky suggest that he mixes belief systems to construct a mythology from spiritual raw material. Jodorowsky has repeatedly stated that he is not interested in the political revolution but rather in the personal spiritual revolution. In his words: "We can only change our oppressors. It is impossible for people to liberate themselves from oppressors" and "People have to change themselves."¹⁴⁹ Through the medium of cinema, Jodorowsky wants the audience to re-evaluate their beliefs and transform spiritually.

While on a hiatus from filmmaking in the 1980s, Jodorowsky created a practice of personal therapy called psychomagic, which combined insights from Jungian psychology with the tarot.¹⁵⁰ A key aspect of psychomagic involves the participant re-enacting a metaphorical situation to solve their emotional problems. Jodorowsky outlined these ideas in the book *Psychomagic: The Transformative Power of Shamanic Psychotherapy* (2010), and the documentary *Psychomagic, A Healing Art* (2019). He combined the language of dreams, art, theatre, and shamanic practices to help people heal from their dysfunctionality

¹⁴⁸ Church, D. (2018, October 18). Jodorowsky, Alejandro. *Sense of Cinema*.
<https://www.sensesofcinema.com/2007/great-directors/jodorowsky/>

¹⁴⁹ In *El Topo*, the eponymous mole metaphor involves a search for "the blinding light" of spiritual enlightenment. According to Jodorowsky in *El Topo: The Book of the Film*, this can be taken either negatively (i.e. "when you find your ideas, your life is over,") or positively (i.e. becoming blind means no longer needing to see the light, thus collapsing the duality).

Jodorowsky, A. (1972). *El Topo: A Book of the Film*. Putnam Pub Group.

¹⁵⁰ Jodorowsky has been an avid tarot reader for many years and has performed weekly mass readings.

Jodorowsky reports that he first encountered the foundation of psychomagic by watching the 'folk healers' in Mexico City. He reports that they can 'convince clients that material reality obeys that of the spirit.' According to Jodorowsky, shamans use honourable tricks to get their clients to that point. However, his psycho-shamanism is a practice that brings the client to self-understanding primarily through their efforts, guided by Jodorowsky's imposition of absurdist tasks. This is the crux of psychomagic practice, liberation through a fundamental transformation. Transformation can only occur when the unconscious takes control of the psyche.

Jodorowsky, A. (2010). *Psychomagic: The Transformative Power of Shamanic Psychotherapy*. Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 7.

and connect to a deeper, transformative meaning.¹⁵¹ Elements of Jodorowsky's lived experiences and psychomagic can be recognised throughout his vast and varied artistic career.¹⁵² He says about his work:

It's a kind of literature, but at the same time you're reading, I'm giving you exercises. It's mixing a lecture with exercises to inspire what you do, the impact of having a trance . . . I am saying do the same thing I do in movies. In movies, in a century of fake feelings, I am making real feelings.¹⁵³

In my practice, I draw on universal symbolic imagery, appropriated from the material culture of the 1970s and my own lived experiences, to reimagine a new spiritual language that allows transformation and reconnection. Although I remain more ambiguous in my approach to art making than Jodorowsky, I identify similarities with his praxis of materiality and ritualised performance.

Mikala Dwyer

Australian artist, Mikala Dwyer's innovative, sculptural practice is recognisable by her sympathetic approach to the physical properties of materials. This approach results in experiential environments through which relationships between elements are often blurred, and distinctions between audience and art become unclear. Dwyer makes her artworks for the locations that they inhabit, and carefully considers the exchange between object, audience, and architecture. Her art practice is cumulative and iterative, building on the cultural, historical, and emotional meanings that surround the architecture, audience, and objects. Previous works are adapted and reinvented as new works in new spaces and exhibitions, while retaining their titles and forms from the past. The artist explains: "Childhood pieces of furniture accrue an emotional investment over time. It becomes difficult to define the boundary between self and object. Object and buildings become

¹⁵¹ He has described psychomagic as: "liberating the bird of spirit from the rational cage." Jodorowsky, *Psychomagic*, 15.

¹⁵² Jodorowsky, *Psychomagic*,

¹⁵³ Wilkins, *Interview: Alejandro Jodorowsky*.

extensions of us and extensions of them.”¹⁵⁴ The relationship between objects and the viewer is a trope in Dwyer’s approach that is key to understanding her engagement with modern architectural and gallery spaces. In several works, including *Sad Songs* (1995), Dwyer opens up the building by cutting 11 small circles in the gallery wall, “revealing a cavity between it and the ‘real’ wall and windows of the building”.¹⁵⁵ This allows daylight to stream in through the holes, opening up the gallery space to the outside, creating in-between spaces and new spaces for exploration. These spacial interventions are illustrated again in Dwyer’s repeated exploration of the cubbyhouse as a personal space for refuge and independence. Her cubbyhouses are temporal and adaptive and present an alternative to the fixed architecture of the gallery space. Michael writes: “Here the cubby has become a model for a sculpture that can survive architectural and design constraints and one that encourages an inventive use of pre-existing structure and materials.”¹⁵⁶ Dwyer’s practice repeatedly mingles materials, forms, and objects to symbolise the sacred, the primitive childhood, and secular modernity.

Dwyer’s installations combine found objects and materials made in her studio to elicit unexpected meanings from everyday objects and forms. She is attuned to how materials affect us both overtly and at an unconscious level. In exploring the relationship between objects, and between objects and viewers, Dwyer engages aesthetic and conceptual ideas, as well as irrational, suppressed, animistic, and occult ones. She approaches her works with a view to finding their shape and to understanding their place in the world. There is a clear sense of purpose in her alchemical transformation of everyday materials and objects through cultural connections. Her long-term engagement with materials and methodologies allows her to draw on material empathy and intuition. As Dwyer has explained:

I think all matter is conscious to some degree. Everything has a frequency.

Sometimes, it takes a while for material to warm up to you so you can actually sense

¹⁵⁴ Dwyer as cited in Michael, L. (2000). *The little temple of love for the dead things*. Exhibition catalogue. Museum of Contemporary Art, 9.

¹⁵⁵ Michael, *The little temple of love for the dead things*, 9

¹⁵⁶ Michael, *The little temple of love for the dead things*, 9.

it. You have to be in an attentive state. I try to get to a point where things can speak for themselves rather than having me impose my voice upon them.¹⁵⁷



Mikala Dwyer, *The Additions and the Subtractions*, from the series *The Additions and Subtractions*, 2007. Mixed media. Installation view, *A shape of thought*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, 2017. Photo: Mim Stirling.

Dwyer uses geometrical borders such as the circle to hold her installations in an ambiguous ritualised space. Since 2007, Dwyer has produced several installations that use assorted sculptures, arranged in a circle on the floor, to create an implied boundary. The configuration of potentially totemic objects and charged symbols to suggest scenarios of unknown ritual purpose. Dwyer's circle works create spaces that acknowledge the reimagination of forms, materials, and sculptural processes.¹⁵⁸ In Mikala Dwyer's ongoing and constantly evolving *Additions and Subtractions* series (from 2007 to the present), objects are remade and reconfigured in complex assemblages of varying scale, form, and

¹⁵⁷ Dwyer as cited in Tunncliffe, W. (2018). *A shape of thought*. Exhibition Catalogue. Art Gallery of New South Wales, 18.

The exhibition ran from 26 August 2017 to 4 February 2018.

¹⁵⁸ Dane Mitchell's use of materiality and demarcation of spaces is similar to Dwyer's approach in activating the spaces between images, substances, and the body. Elements synthesise between the work and the viewer, revealing a complex network of potential interactions. He states that this is why he employs liminal, almost invisible, materials that are sometimes unknowable, because the experience of these materials heightens awareness, analysis, and the viewer's disposition for inquiry about what we see, know, and experience. In conversation with curator Zara Stanhope, Mitchell describes his practice as being concerned with the "physical properties of the intangible as well as the visible manifestations of unseen structures of many kinds." Mitchell wants to draw out the possibilities for objects and ideas to appear and disappear.

Stanhope, Z. (2020, January 10). Dane Mitchell: Entanglements occur in a state of reciprocity. *Ocula*. <https://ocula.com/magazine/conversations/dane-mitchell/>

art-historical provenance. These installations evoke multiple meanings, employing memories of other sculptures, different art movements, epochs, and cultural sources, in an eccentric disorder. Disorder as an organising principle enables multiple possibilities from deceptively simple propositions, unsettling ontological boundaries and distinctions. Dwyer plays on the contradictions suggested in evoking religious rituals while embracing unpredictable action. When considering a gathering of her objects, the overall impression is of excessive heterogeneity and contrast—chaos and disorder, barely contained within a circle or a right-angled corner. This may suggest faith, scepticism, and the visceral, combined together in equal measures. Dwyer's restaging of her sculptures informs the presentation of my installations and the methodology for repurposing older work, which maintains its meaning and elicits new responses in new configurations.

There is a sense of mystery that continually reasserts itself in Dwyer's effort to apprehend an elusive reality. She sets up situations in which she seems to be forever circling something intangible yet material. She states that she is interested in occult rituals because "they articulate or frame voids," and because what happens in those voids "keeps me on edge—they offer the poetic possibility that just maybe something will appear."¹⁵⁹ Dwyer explains that the circle, which is central to such 'organising systems,' is valuable as "a tight form of geometry, a completely closed system—a psychic fortress that can hold together disparate thoughts and objects."¹⁶⁰ In Dwyer's work, circles become 'holding patterns,' zones of possibility, but also of delay.¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁹ Byrt, A. (2012, March 15). Mikala Dwyer discusses her current show. *Artforum International*. <https://www.artforum.com/interviews/mikala-dwyer-discusses-her-current-show-30502>

¹⁶⁰ Byrt, Mikala Dwyer.

¹⁶¹ Byrt, Mikala Dwyer.

Inner Workout

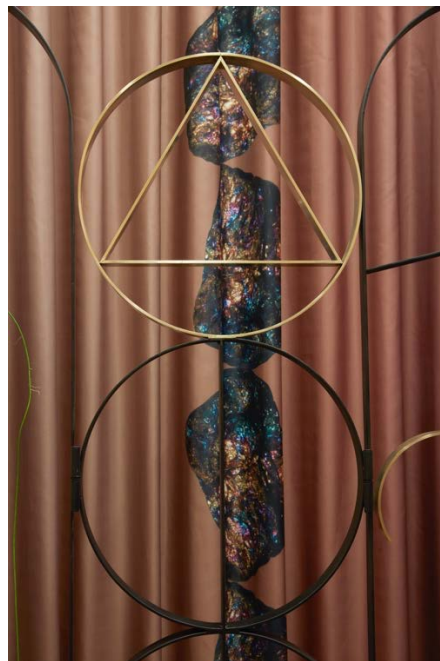
In this chapter, I also examine my exhibition at Artspace's Ideas Platform, *Inner workout* (2020). Drawing on multiple reference points, including 1970's countercultures, New Age practices, and the complexities of homogenised spirituality, the exhibition offered a space for intuition, ritual, and meditation. The installation included *Fools gold* (2020), a steel and brass sculpture with components of crystals, found books, and a plant; *woo woo* (2020), a digitally printed curtain that enveloped the space; plus further plants, crystals and a cast bronze work. In the window was a repurposed neon work, *Hotmess 2015*, rotated 90 degrees from its previous showing.



Inner workout, 2020. Material, steel, brass, pyrite and haematite crystal, plants, bronze, found books, dimensions variable. Installation view, Ideas Platform, Artspace, Sydney. Photography by Zan Wimberley.

This exhibition was my first attempt at creating functional sculpture. I imagined the audience using the installation as their personal meditative space. I endeavoured to replicate and disrupt a domestic interior, and create a hybrid spiritual space in the gallery. I attempted to inject the domestic space with different layers of materiality and objects to generate new meanings. Drawing on my own experience of spiritual symbolic language, I appropriated the domestic aesthetic of curtains, plants, windows and room dividers. The brass and steel decorative screen *Fool's gold* (2020), can also be used as a personal altar. It incorporates shapes, forms, and symbology from modernist interiors, astrology, the I-Ching,

and Hinduism. The appropriated sigils of the screen are bricolaged with objects that refer to devotion and ritual. This sculpture attempts to bring acts of ritual and spirituality into the everyday by presenting a furniture-like object that incorporates reinterpreted spiritual language.¹⁶² As a functional element, it includes movable, hinged components, and can shape shift to better suit the viewer's body and house their personal collection of spiritual accoutrements.

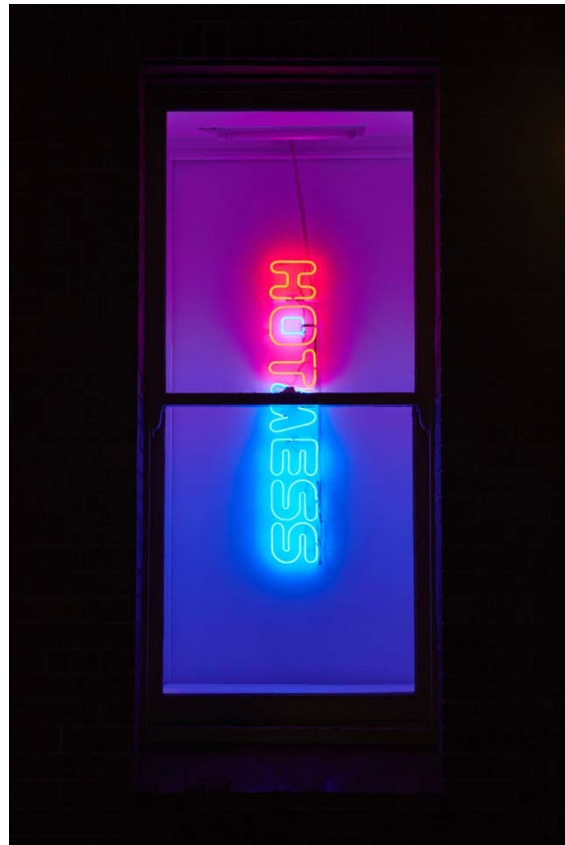


Fool's gold, 2020 (detail). Steel, brass, pyrite crystal, plant, dimensions variable. Installation view, *Inner workout*, Ideas Platform. Photography by Zan Wimberley.

The neon's title—*Hotmess*—acknowledges the word's meaning—dysfunctional yet appealing—while also referencing the hot yoga of Bikram and the media's objectification of high performance, female bodies as 'hot.' The materiality of neon, and the vertical install, also reference the sleazy signage of red-light districts, suggesting the problematic sexual behaviours that plague yoga and spiritual industries. In this work, I reconstruct the meaning

¹⁶² In my sculptural practice, I have always engaged with architecture. While making this work, I was interested in Andrea Zittel's practice. This work is informed by her *A-Z West* project, which functions as a continuing testing space for living, "a place in which spaces, objects, and acts of living all intertwine into a single ongoing investigation into what it means to exist and participate in our culture today." Her practice responds to her surroundings and everyday routines. The first *Living units* were a practical response to constantly moving her studio in New York. Zittel, Andrea. <https://www.zittel.org>

of the word by joining disparate elements into new configurations. Rather than seeing those elements as competing against one another, taking them out of their original context enables me to simultaneously convey opposing meanings.¹⁶³



Hotmess, 2019. Neon. Installation view, *Inner workout*, Ideas Platform. Photography by Zan Wimberley.

When making *Hotmess*, I examined Panton's creation of functional, sculptural objects in interiors that surrounded and responded to participants. Design historian Mark Mussari notes that Panton's interiors *Visiona 0*, *Visiona I* and *Visiona II* were the most successful of his environments as they erased the dichotomy between furniture and sculpture.¹⁶⁴ According to Lewin, Heider and Heider, Panton expanded the sculptural approach to furniture, producing abstract shapes to sit, lounge and lie on.¹⁶⁵ Further, his use of the total

¹⁶³ I identify this as a meta-modernist approach, allowing layers of multiple meaning from the oscillation between romantic sensibility and irony, rather than validating only one or the other.

¹⁶⁴ Mussari, M. (2016). *Danish modern: Between art and design*. Bloomsbury. 119.

¹⁶⁵ Panton expressed these ideas in environments such as *Visiona II*, where every act of sitting on a piece of furniture is related to the concept of seating furniture as a multiplicity of ways of sitting. Lewin, K., Heider, F., & Heider, G. M. (1936). *Principles of topological psychology* (1st ed.). McGraw-Hill book company, inc, 139.

environment aspired to what gestalt psychologist Kurt Lewin's called 'hodological space:' the space that surrounds us as our lifeworld, interacting physically, socially and mentally with their environment to produce directional, perceptual meaning.¹⁶⁶ Panton's designs used this principle, in a way that had a function. The unique event/interior could be mass produced as individualised pieces for everyday use. Such approaches informed the making of *Inner workout* by attempting to create a psychological inner space in the gallery that included my personal objects that have been used in ritualised acts and meditation. These ideas will be developed further in my future practice where I will expand on immersive spiritual interiors that will be participatory through sensed music components and lighting.

Woo woo is a printed curtain that surrounded Artspace's Ideas Platform, creating a contemplative space representative of one's internal psyche. Using the form, texture, and colours of 1970s design, the work references the retreat-like spaces of wellness centres. Images of rocks and crystals are printed on the curtain, digitally collaged with my own symbolic language of spiritual ambiguity. Plants in the space provide an interior design element, and even more so, examples of nature both contained and cared for. The ambiguous functions of these objects help to destabilise the viewer's perception of the physical interior and therefore their own psychic interior.

¹⁶⁶ Lewin, Heider, & Heider, *Principles of topological psychology*, 138.



Woo woo (detail), (2020), Digital print on material, steel, rivets. Installation view, *Inner workout*, Ideas Platform. Photography by Zan Wimberley.

In materiality and form, *Inner workout* adopts interior design strategies to reimagine the visual language of contemporary spirituality. It hybridises iconography to combine symbols of consumerism and spirituality, for example, transforming the I-Ching water sign and reconfiguring it to include the Adidas three stripes logo. It also borrows visual symbols from energy medicines¹⁶⁷—such as crystal healing, chakra balancing, and astrology—practices that are largely transactional, commodifying human interactions with the natural world and its elements. Such mixing and reconfiguration prompts viewers to re-examine their assumptions about holistic practices, interconnected consciousness, and their relationship with nature.

The installation for my MFA examination, *Purple haze*, is part of an ongoing investigation into acts of ritual, set within a disrupted, domestic interior. It is a conceptual progression from *Inner workout*, installed in Artspace's Ideas Platform in 2020. Esoteric books, plants, and crystals are placed on a movable steel and brass sculpture that sits on a tiled platform, as an altar-like form. The installation includes a hanging, leather soft sculpture and a neon text-based work, *The struggle is real*. This installation investigates the functionality of

sculpture, turning sculpture into spiritual décor. The sculptures include aspects of my horoscope and personal library. I developed the main sculpture with the intention of its forms being flexible, using hinges and allowing the audience to include their own esoteric objects.



Purple haze, in development in the studio, 2021.

Colour plays an important role in this installation. Purple hues represent Sahasrara, the seventh primary chakra in Tantric yoga.¹⁶⁸ This colour is associated with pure consciousness and other attributes including wealth, extravagance, grandeur, and devotion. The tiled platform symbolises a hierarchical form, suggesting the archetype of the guru/teacher who

¹⁶⁸ Sahasrara is the Sanskrit name for the seventh chakra located at the crown of the head. In some Hinduism, Sahasrara, meaning a thousand petals of a lotus, is believed to be a connection with the Divine or higher consciousness.

Tausiet, M. (2020). Chakras: The symbolic body in yoga. In Carmen Escobado de Patia & Alejandra Moreno-Álvarez (Eds.), *Spiritual and Corporeal Selves in India: Approaches in a Global World*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 169.

sits in front of, and often above, the devotee. Traditionally, the guru and disciple relationship embraces devotion, altruism, vulnerability, aspiration, and faithfulness. However, this relationship is susceptible to abuses of power, in the form of undue influence, manipulation, and deception.¹⁶⁹ Popular culture references, including appropriated language, literature, and happenings from 1970s cult leaders, such as Jim Jones and Rajneesh guru, Bhagwan Shri Rajneesh, and contemporary gurus, such as Bikram Choudhury, and NXIVM leader, Keith Raniere, underpin the studio-making. These narratives are described in the materiality of the sculptures, using commercial materials like tiles, brass, and neon.



Purple haze, in development in the studio, 2021.

This chapter analysed the works of Jeremy Shaw, Verner Panton, Alejandro Jodorowsky, and Mikala Dwyer to describe the diverse strategies that artists employ to create an immersive or transformative space. Each artist uses their unique spiritual language to create

¹⁶⁹ Goldberg, L. (1997). A psychoanalytic look at recovered memories, therapists, cult leaders, and undue influence. *Clinical Social Work Journal*, 25(1), 71–86.
<https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1025733927536>

an experience, whether in a gallery, cinema, or commercial interior. There is a commonality among these practices, where spiritual attributes are used to tease out the physical properties of the intangible and encourage the unseen through the synergies of materiality. This approach aligns with my aim to create meditative or ritual spaces infused with my own spiritual language, where participants can reflect upon, and reconnect with, nature and community.

CONCLUSION

Spirituality has recently undergone significant shifts as an emergent cultural category in contemporary life, including a renewed interest in esoteric practices, institutes, cultural products, health, and fitness. The shift from religion to spirituality, the turn to the inner self, and a change in focus from external authority to inner experience, have increased esotericism's appeal in the contemporary world. Spirituality has become a cultural trope that has been appropriated and commodified by corporate bodies in Western capitalist societies. This practice-led research examines how contemporary artists use expanded sculptural practices to critically engage with the commodification of contemporary spirituality. The project has argued that artists co-opt corporate communication strategies to destabilise context and create new meanings in this field of inquiry. Through diverse approaches, contemporary artists engage critically and aesthetically with occulture and spiritual ways of interpreting the world to critique dominant political and social ideas. These approaches demonstrate a disillusionment with the Western way of life, and a desire to imagine and enact alternative futures, examining tradition to reimagine our world.

The aim of this research has been to identify key contemporary artists adopting the language of spirituality in contemporary art. This thesis began by identifying key terms and locating definitions of spirituality since the 1960s. I analysed cultural movements, such as 1970s counterculture in America and the subsequent New Age, to establish a renewed dialogue with occulture in contemporary art. I then charted diverse artistic strategies for examining the contemporary Wellness dystopic and presenting alternative futures. In Chapter One, I introduced and analysed key contemporary Australian artists, Mikala Dwyer, and Naomi Blacklock, and international artists, Marcus Coates, Dane Mitchell, and Ulla Von Brandenburg, to provide an overview of how artists employ a metaphysical dialogue in their practice with attention to their visual strategies and materiality. These investigations are associated with my methodologies of studio-making, and serve as a basis for identifying concurrent, conceptual themes and approaches to making in my practice. Chapter Two examined the commodification of occulture, the spiritual marketplace, 'New Age,' and the self-care industry. My research analysed how artists respond to this commodification, and the intermingling of societal, artistic, and spiritual constructs. I examined artists Timur Si-

Qin, Nicolas Lobo, and The Institute for New Feelings to understand how artists engage with corporate branding strategies in their practice in order to critique the contemporary spiritual industry. Through these analyses, I also investigated my sculptural and installation practice, which appropriates branding techniques through form, text and inject lived experience into my art. In Chapter Three, I analysed heterogeneous approaches to creating immersive environments in contemporary art, through materiality, cultural and symbolic appropriation, transformative audience strategies, and psychological theories. In this context, I examined artists who engage in experiential strategies, including artist Jeremy Shaw, Mikala Dwyer, interior designer Verner Panton and film maker Alejandro Jodorowsky, investigating how these immersive strategies transform spaces and critically engage the audience.

This research has informed my studio practice and inflected ongoing investigations into the complexities of contemporary spirituality. My artistic methodologies draw on lived experience, popular culture, materiality, and a desire to find alternate responses to the current, mainstream, neoliberalist view. A key part of my studio-making methodology is co-opted from my practice of Bikram yoga and its philosophy of self-care. Using strategies of appropriation has enabled me to assemble and collage oppositional objects, materials, and concepts to critically and creatively engage in dialogues with homogenised forms of spirituality. My artistic methodologies have allowed me to devise my own spiritual language, which cross-references multiple esoteric practices, and draws on corporate branding strategies and installation practices, to create hybrid, spiritual environments.

By examining contemporary artists working in this field of inquiry, I have discovered points of connection with my practice. I intend to extend my research into collective experiences in spirituality in my future practice. The experiential strategies Shaw and Jodorowsky's practices are particular influences for my planned, future works. In those works, I aim to develop a reconnection with nature, and the collective experience, through esoteric languages. These concepts will be developed in future exhibitions, in which I aim to create large, experiential interiors through installation strategies, building on the knowledge and experiences gained through this practice-led research project. This will open up new

possibilities for collaborating with sound and video artists to create future, immersive installations.

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