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Spellbound

On mimesis, art and alchemy

BY JAN VERWOERT

Sometimes you learn things when you catch a cab at night. One evening, I was talking to a Russian taxi driver in Berlin. After he told me about his sex life at Moscow State University in the 1980s, he went on to explain that many of the drivers he was friends with were ex-Taliban from Afghanistan. He said that they hated American soldiers for hiding behind high-tech weaponry, but liked him because they had good memories of fighting Russian soldiers face-to-face. Another time, a cabbie talked to me about music because I was carrying my bass guitar. He told me he was from Gambia. I had learned about the strong connection between music and magic in his country by watching Danish artist Gitte Villesen's fantastic video *Juju (White Magic)* (2008). In it, Gambian musician Amadou Sarr gives a matter-of-fact introduction to the supernatural powers of the lute: it is capable of protecting its owner and can communicate with spirits and animals. Curious to know more, I asked the cab driver to elaborate. He explained that a compatriot of his was a musician practicing juju sorcery; when that friend sang, his lute – which was at his home on the other side of Berlin – would start playing of its own accord, so his wife would drive it over to where he was. When strangers talk to you about sex, war, friendship, music or magic, and tell you things that blow your mind while steering the car you sit in, it teaches you that with matters of existential importance, it's irrelevant whether or not you believe in what people say. If their life experiences and passion drive their story, the main question is: are you ready for the ride? And where will it take you? Once you decide to follow the rules of reality that another person's story dictates, your own ideas of what's what quickly disappear. There are no ways of knowing whether you've been taken for a ride or whether life really is stranger than fiction. Objectivity? Forget it. What situations such as these call for is something else: the capacity to recognize likeness in unlikely places. If a stranger tells me that a lute plays by itself because of juju, how is this any different from me telling you that a piece in a gallery talks to me because it's art? One statement is neither more, nor less, factually verifiable than the other. Truth is as precarious in art as it is in sorcery. In this respect, the two practices are tellingly similar.

Recognizing likeness in unlikely places is a particular way of responding to the world. Walter Benjamin relates it to what he calls the 'mimetic faculty' and describes it as 'the gift we possess of seeing similarity'.¹ Indeed, one reason to love Benjamin is that his writing takes you on a trip, making you see strange connections suddenly and clearly. In an essay from 1933 titled 'Doctrine of the Similar', he talks about mimetism as a medium for thinking through the world. The ancient notion of mimesis that Benjamin revives here is a far cry from the flat idea perpetuated by much modern criticism that 'mimetic representation' is about how images create the illusion of depicting reality one-to-one. In its original sense, mimesis has little to do with one thing representing another. Rather, it's about the way forces affect bodies and souls when they connect. Examples abound in ancient medicine. The mimetic relationship between Saturn and black bile predisposes those born under the planet's sign to melancholia. Plants help: red rose petals re-ignite a lust for life. The rich blue of lapis lazuli signals that the stones can relay the quality of bright skies and clear vision. But it's not only painters that have used the ultramarine pigment ground from the stones: it has also been used as an eye medication and as make-up. Mimetic relations enable energy transfers: blue eye shadow boosts your looks with the force of the heavens and gives you the power to pull bodies into your orbit, like stars do when they align. This is why cosmology and cosmetics share the same linguistic root.

'Nature is a language, can't you read?' sang Morrissey. In the ancient tradition that Benjamin unearths, to 'read' nature is to unlock its mimetic potential. The reader delights in whispering 'Open Sesame'. Such 'magical reading', Benjamin contends, is one among many 'mimetic modes of behaviour'², such as play and magic, which engage the world through the use of signs, words, sound, colour and artefacts. The 16th-century German mystic Jakob Böhme wrote that to discover a dormant mimetic link is like hearing a lute that had previously lain mute. The magic lute is a powerful symbol for what it is to know things through art. According to Greek mythology, Orpheus used his lute to emotionally connect with animals, plants and stones. Thus, Sarr and the juju musician from Berlin practice a philosophy that formed the backbone of Western civilization before scientific reason put an end to it. As anthropologists such as Michael Taussig have pointed out, these scientific institutions have violently denied their own legacy by misrepresenting it as the irrationality of 'primitive' cultures.³ Yet, for the longest time, 'artistic knowledge' was synonymous with alchemy.



Christina Mackie's installation at Tate Britain, *The Filters* (2015) – which is on view until 18 October – is a vivid reminder of this heritage. Twelve-metre-long silk hoses, each a different luminescent colour, are suspended from the skylight in the Duveen Hall. A thick crust of crystal dust – residue from the pigments in which the fabric was soaked – has solidified in huge petri dishes beneath the sculptures. A laboratory experiment in making dye, the piece has a scientific air, yet it equally returns science to the alchemist's kitchen in which it was born. In a world beyond the looking glass, this could be Renaissance Florence, when the chemical fumes of painters cooking crystals to form pigments and workers dyeing silks travelled from the workshops to the great *palazzi*.

To recognize mimetism as a practiced philosophy is to understand that you can't do dry runs on a spell. To speak a spell is to cast it. 'To know' is to activate relations that you partake in and let yourself be affected by. To put on make-up is to ask the world to respond to you via your appearance. The body has a tricky role to play, since it acts both as sender and receiver. The sky leaves its marks on your face when you rub its colour onto your eyes. Magic lore organizes energy transfers in rituals, partially to protect the participants' bodies from the mimetic forces they channel. Yet, as Taussig notes, even shamans or witches may be incapacitated by the powers they invoke and, as a result, they might lose their minds or embarrass themselves.⁴



Silke Otto-Knapp, *Trees and Moon*, 2013, watercolour on canvas, 1.3 × 1 m. Courtesy: Galerie Buchholz, Cologne; photograph: Brian Forrest

While traditional practitioners of magic risk falling victim to their own spells, as a modern amateur experimenting with mimetism there's the possibility of people thinking you live in your head or are stuck on a trip. The hippy head-case, caught in a timewarp when the New Age failed to dawn, has become a stock character in sitcoms and movies. Yet, why not employ this ready-made caricature in order to extract a new understanding of mimetism today?

The Californian artist Shana Moulton has taken on this very role in order to test what mimesis can do for her when – in addition to dream catchers and crystals – she also has a green screen, video-editing software and unlimited internet imagery at her fingertips. In a series of video and performance pieces titled 'Whispering Pines' (2002–ongoing), Moulton plays Cynthia, a hypochondriac recluse who surrounds herself at home with peculiar artefacts and sculptural contraptions to help her self-medicate and tap into cosmic forces. Her apartment witchcraft works, the doors of reality pop open and Cynthia travels through computer-generated parallel universes. The astral plane is peppered with Tumblr junk, but it looks amazing. Moulton's use of CGI is as exuberant as her approach to making props and costumes is loving. Her work testifies to the connection between the joy of art and alchemy. It's all about turning shit into gold, whether or not you prefer to employ analogue or digital means to achieve it. Yet, Moulton's forays into websites where cyberdolphins talk to her spirit wouldn't be so hilarious if it weren't for the seriousness of her humour: souls search for medication wherever they can.



Brian
Jungen, *Mother
Tongue*, 2012, steel,
deer hide, VW
fenders, freezer,
256 × 130 × 71 cm.
Courtesy: Catriona
Jeffries Gallery,
Vancouver



Christina Mackie, *The Filters*, 2015, installation view at Tate Britain, London. Courtesy: the artist and Tate, London; photograph: Lucy Dawkins

Finding a cure is not just about individual well-being. It's a common concern and one that AA Bronson is very clear about.⁵ When he lost Felix Partz and Jorge Zontal – his long-term partners in the artist group General Idea – to AIDS in 1994, Bronson looked for something to help him 'deal with people dying'⁶. So, he took courses in massage and rebirthing techniques at the Body Electric School in California. He says it led him 'into a completely different area. Something that was more about life than it was about death, in the end.' Rejecting what he calls the 'moralistic' language around New-Age thinking – i.e. the idea that learning 'is supposed to make you a better person' – Bronson coined his own brand of queer urban shamanism by amalgamating a hands-on approach to alternative medicine and magic with a sense of theatrical humour. Since 1999, he has been practicing as a healer, a role he neither separates from, nor merely identifies with, that of the artist. For him, exhibitions are occasions to conduct rites or exercise forms of mimetic magic, such as Sigil writing. During the opening of his show, 'The Temptation of AA Bronson', at Witte de With, Rotterdam, in 2013, for example, he consecrated the show with his ceremonial performance *Invocation of the Queer Spirits*. While being part of his art, however, these practices always also point beyond what can be represented in an exhibition, towards how Bronson lives his life as a practitioner of alternative methods of healing.

In Vancouver, the presence of nature and spirituality is as tangible as in California. Yet, so too are the politics associated with the violent suppression of the native populations and cultures of North America. Vancouver-based artist Brian Jungen directly addresses this legacy. His work conveys a strong sense of how First Nation cultures – while being transformed by contemporary consumer society – have also asserted their powers to transform the modern via the mimetic. In his iconic series 'Prototypes of New Understanding' (1998–2005), Jungen activated these powers by gluing together the parts of dismantled Air Jordan sneakers in the shape of traditional ceremonial masks. The commodity fetish here speaks not of the Nike brand and of training bodies, but of other gods and different purposes.

Yet, as with Bronson, the iconic dimension of Jungen's work opens out into a sense of life lived in a particular key. *Mother Tongue* (2012) is a sculpture made from deer hide stretched over a car fender and mounted on an industrial freezer. Parallel to this sculpture and its related body of work, Jungen shot the film *Modest Livelihood* (2013) with Duane Linklater. It documents a moose-hunting trip the two artists undertook with Jungen's uncle, Jack Askoty, a huntsman of Dane-zaa ancestry. The title cites the wording of a 1999 legal accord that, after a long struggle, permitted First Nation Canadians to sustain their livelihood by hunting out of season. The silent film communicates both the mundane experience of traversing the endless prairies as well as a dreamlike sense of anticipation. Indeed, traditional mimetic technique, Jungen explained to me, requires the hunter to dream the encounter with the animal in order to meet it in the flesh.

The dream image gives you a sense of how to enter the landscape; to imagine nature is a way of being in it.⁷ It's a possibility articulated in German artist Silke Otto-Knapp's reinvention of landscape painting. Working in watercolours and near-monochromatic shades of silver, white and grey, Otto-Knapp washes her colours off the canvas as she applies them. Water leaves its traces, light is reflected and impressions of landscape form in the pictures like clouds form in a vaporous sky. In *Islands* (2013), white patches rise from grey waters and become land. In *Trees and Moon* (2013), a moonbeam hits the water, while in the foreground bleached out trees rise up. Motifs go through mimetic transmutations: an Edvard Munch-like moon reappears in the white shape of the bass drum in an orchestra above the ballerinas of the Ballets Russes (*Tableau 1 (Braiding)*, 2011) or stitched onto garments worn in dance performances choreographed by Otto-Knapp's frequent collaborator, Flora Wiegmann (*Moondresses*, 2013). As shapes echo each other, they open passages between worlds. That, too, is mimetism.

The works discussed here experiment with reconnecting art to forms of practice and knowledge associated with mimetism. They do so not in order to rescue or redeem mimetism, but rather to show that a bridge exists between that tradition and art, and that it is best to cross it in an everyday fashion. In her recent film, *It Runs About like Ants* (2014), Villesen gives a strong description of how such crossings happen. Having learned that witchcraft and healing are still practiced in Estonia, Villesen went to meet several so-called 'wise women'. The conversation in her film leads from the kitchen to the garden: the power of plants is explained, stories of survival during Soviet times are told, food is served. Then, something miraculous happens. Attracted by the honey in a jar on the table, bees descend on it and lift its lid. The 'wise women' see it, laugh and continue their conversation. It's what they deal with every day: all the things that might happen when forces connect.

1 Walter Benjamin, 'Doctrine of the Similar', 1933, re-published in *New German Critique*, no.17, Spring 1979, pp. 65–69

2 Ibid., p. 65

3 Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity*, Routledge, London & New York, 1993

4 Ibid., p.110

5 Thanks to Dutch artist Jasper Griepink for showing me AA Bronson's recent work.

6 *Butt 7*, May 2003, p. 34–40

7 Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity*, Routledge, London & New York, 1993, p. 56

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