

BEST OF 2016

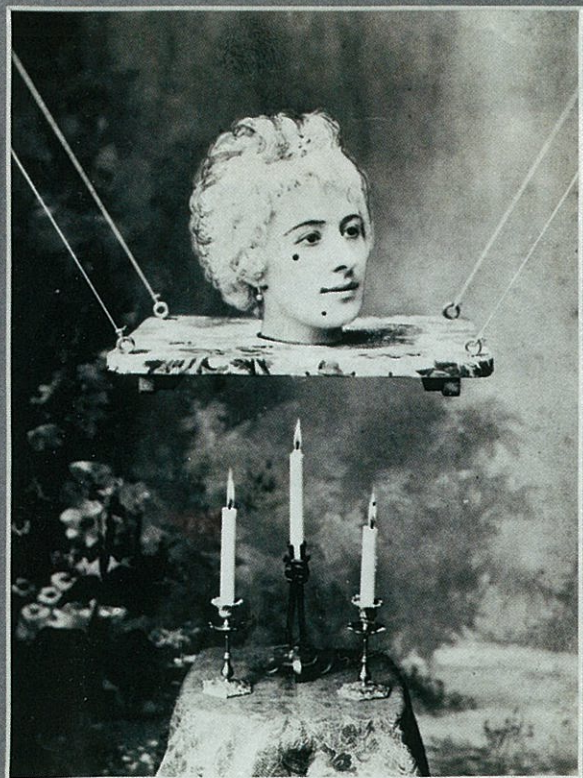
“JIM SHAW: THE END IS HERE”

New Museum, New York

“TONY OURSLER: THE IMPONDERABLE ARCHIVE”

CCS Bard Galleries, Annandale-on-Hudson, NY

HAL FOSTER

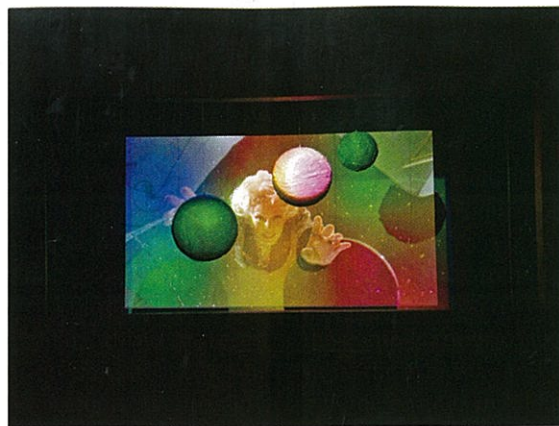


THERE IS SO MUCH about the political culture of this country that, as a pointy-headed intellectual, I don't get. During this election year, then, the two best shows for me—best as in most instructive—were Jim Shaw's "The End Is Here" at the New Museum and Tony Oursler's "The Imponderable Archive" at Bard College. (*Imponderable* is the title of a related book and film; the latter is screening at the Museum of Modern Art in New York through April 16, 2017.) Each exhibition was a wild ride through the fringe worlds of weird belief, occult practice, and conspiracy theory—fringe worlds that appear more and more mainstream by the minute.

Let me focus on the collections assembled by the artists, not on the artwork inspired by them, and, in the case of Shaw, on one archive in particular. "The Hidden World" (as the artist calls it) is his gathering of promotional, pedagogical, and commercial materials—including homemade pamphlets, didactic banners, childish encyclopedias, and record albums—gleaned from evangelical movements, secret societies, and New Age spiritualists. (There is a good cache of Hollywood publicity for Bible movies as well.) Some of these groups, like the Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses, are accepted, even respected, while others are crackpot, such as the evangelical duo of Dr. Jagers and Miss Velma, who interpreted the Bible in a theatrical style that was one part *Wizard of Oz* and one part *Flash Gordon*. (Shaw encountered the pair, who promised a restoration of youth, among other miracles, when he moved to Los Angeles in 1976, the moment cable TV arrived to provide an expanded pulpit to flamboyant preachers.) The title "The Hidden World" is borrowed from a 1940s conspiracy magazine of that name, and what these groups have in common is a self-certified claim on the secret reality that the rest of us, blinded by sin, ignorance, or plain denial, fail to see. The conviction that they are both blessed and slighted leads them to depict the world in stark contrasts



View of "The Hidden World," in "Jim Shaw: The End Is Here," 2016. Photo: Maris Hutchinson/EPW Studio.



Above: Tony Oursler, *My Saturnian Lover(s)*, 2016, 4K video. Installation view. Photo: Chris Kendall.



Right: Jim Shaw, *Not Since Superman Died* (detail), 2014, acrylic on muslin, eight parts, overall 22' 6" x 50'.

of light (we alone behold the truth) and dark (there is a plot to defeat us)—that is, to portray the world in paranoid terms.

In a classic text first published in 1963, the historian Richard Hofstadter addressed "the paranoid style in American politics," which, prompted by the phenomenon of Barry Goldwater, he aimed to understand as a distinctive mentality. First and foremost, the paranoid style is animated by "conspiratorial fantasy"; there is always a diabolical cabal at work, whether it is Freemasons, the "international gold ring," the Elders of Zion, Mormons, the Catholic Church, Communists in government (McCarthyism was not a distant memory then), or, today, the mosque in the next town. According to Hofstadter, this fear stems from a feeling of sociopolitical dispossession, one that these "sufferers from history" overcome with a compensatory sense of spiritual empowerment (again, they alone see the truth). And this tension produces the apocalyptic tenor of paranoid politics: the promise of redemption for them and the threat of damnation for everyone else. "The paranoid is a militant leader," Hofstadter concludes, with the "will to fight things out to a finish."

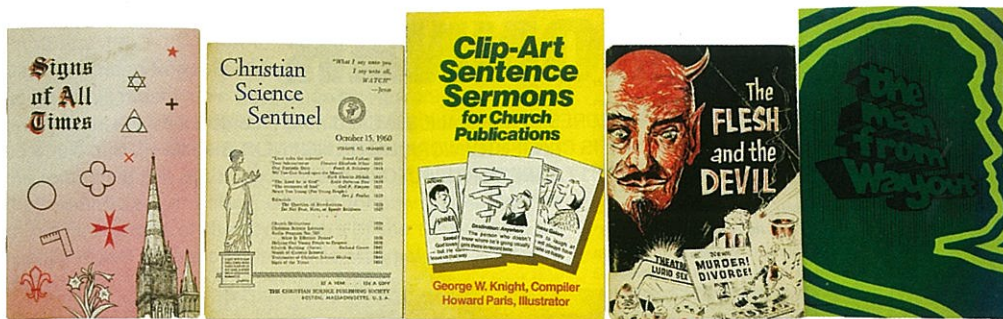
Is there a paranoid style in American religious representation, a pictorial expression of dispossession troped as empowerment, of dark conspiracy at war with revelatory light? Relevant attributes do leap out from "The Hidden World." First, the sentimental manner of mid-nineteenth-century Christian art (think of the Nazarenes or the Pre-Raphaelites) is updated by means of illustration. (Shaw is a master of its techniques too, and it is in his DNA: His grandfather was a commercial artist, his father a package designer.) Such images reprocess the Bible through the idioms of comic books, blockbuster movies, and album covers, in such a way that, for example, the aura of Christ is recharged with the power of the sci-fi superhero or with the glamour of the film idol or rock star. Also evident here is the particular character of the "American Jesus," as Harold Bloom termed it in his 1992 study *The American Religion*. "Solitary and personal," this is the resurrected Christ, not the crucified one, and American salvation is thought to come through a "one-on-one act of confrontation" with this Jesus alone. Accordingly, the religious images in "The Hidden World" place a premium on scenes of transformation; often it is as though the act of representation were one with the event of revelation. This conflation makes the pictorial language always dramatic and sometimes violent; it bespeaks a "doom-eager freedom," Bloom writes, "from nature, time, history, community, other selves." Usually the perspective in these pictures is designed to be personal (the subject and the viewer are targeted for

illumination) or projective (we are about to be carried away in rapture) or both at once. And occasionally there is a strange flipping between first days and last days, Genesis and Apocalypse. (Bloom reminds us that this gnostic version of creation as catastrophe runs deep in the American Religion.)

Hart Crane once wrote of the American desire for "improved infancy," and this wish is also expressed in some of the images in "The Hidden World." One effect is that sexuality becomes almost impossible to represent: If Superman has a black void for genitals (this veiling fascinates Shaw), the American Jesus is even blander below. Yet sometimes in this patriarchal universe the phallus is only displaced, often onto the cross, which thereby becomes an agent of supernatural powers. In one illustration in "The Hidden Order," made by Walter Ohlson for the Bethel Lutheran Church in the mid-'60s, we see a man about to plunge down a great falls to his ruin, only to be saved by a giant white cross that suddenly appears to bridge the awful abyss and to offer a wondrous path to the idyll on the other side (which includes a stairway to heaven in the distance). The parting of the Red Sea in Cecil B. DeMille's *The Ten Commandments* (1956) has nothing over this great escape; here, too, miracle is rendered as special effect.

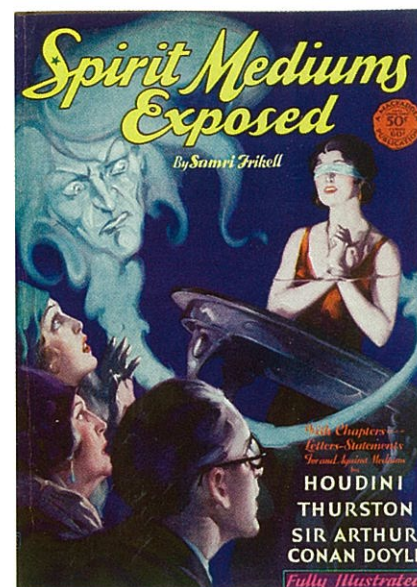
The paranoid dimension of these representations is clearest in the didactic materials, such as the many diagrams that present biblical stories and historical events as either prophetic or conspiratorial. In such schemes *everything* happens for a reason, which might serve as a quick definition of paranoid thought. Yet often this conviction stems from great doubt, which must be overcome, and this insistence can get, well, a little crazy. "The delusion-formation, which we take to be a pathological product," Freud reminds us about paranoid fantasy, "is in reality an attempt at recovery, a process of reconstruction," and usually it fails spectacularly. Sometimes this attempted "reconstruction" of the world is expressed, pictorially and textually, by an overelaboration of a system or an order that, required to mask the complications of history or the differences in faith, easily tips into its opposite—the arbitrary and the disordered.

One banner in "The Hidden World" calls out "false prophets" (it names Emanuel Swedenborg and Joseph Smith, among others), suggesting that, if there is only one truth, prophets must expose one another in order to monopolize it. This relay between belief and debunking is made vivid in Oursler's "Imponderable Archive," which draws from the collection of more than twenty-five hundred photographs, props, souvenirs, publications, and other documents—concerning mesmerism, hypnotism, magic, the occult, thought photography, automatic writing,



Left: Covers of five volumes of Christian literature. From "The Hidden World," in "Jim Shaw: The End is Here."

Right: Cover of Samri Frikell's (Fulton Oursler) *Spirit Mediums Exposed* (Macfadden, 1930). From "Tony Oursler: The Imponderable Archive."



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spirits, and UFOs—sembled by the artist over the past few decades. “This is the true essence of debunking,” Peter Lamont writes in the compendium of these materials published by the LUMA Foundation in 2015; “it is not the rejection of belief. It is the promotion of one belief over another.” Thus, famous exponents of empiricism, such as Arthur Conan Doyle, could be gullible believers, and celebrated practitioners of illusion, such as Houdini, could be assiduous debunkers. Among the skeptics was Fulton Oursler, grandfather of Tony and author of *The Greatest Story Ever Told*, the 1949 book about the life of Jesus that was the basis of the 1965 movie; his papers form the nucleus of the “Imponderable” collection.

Imponderable is the term that eighteenth-century scientists used to describe forces (like magnetism) that they could not quantify, but it also indicates the nebulous zone between fact and fabrication that Oursler explores here. And what emerges, as we range over his archive, is not a clear opposition of truth and falsehood, science and spiritualism, or even honest demonstration and faked act, but a murky dialectic of rationalization and irrationalization whereby the former often abets rather than challenges the latter. Thus an advance in the medium of photography might support a belief in a medium of another sort, as when a photograph seems to capture a blob of ectoplasm emerging from a person in a trance. (As both Karen Beckman and Tom Gunning point out in the LUMA catalogue, this kind of medium was usually a young woman.)

No more than Shaw does Oursler condescend to his material, and that suspension of disbelief is essential to the power of these presentations—which suggests that the artist is often a magician of sorts, too. Yet occasionally Shaw and Oursler seem overly fascinated by their weird stuff, overly admiring of its giant leaps of blind faith, and sometimes they lose sight of how dangerous it can be. One reason why rational argument, not to mention critical demystification, appears largely ineffectual today is that paranoid people believe in their constructions more firmly than we “reality-based” folk trust in things as they are. If convinced enough, they can convince others; in fact, as we see with Donald Trump, that master illusionist of the alt-right, conviction is hardly required to work the trick of obfuscation and outright lie. Etymologically, *bunk* derives from the vapid speech of an early-nineteenth-century congressman from Buncombe County, North Carolina, and debunking—taking the piss out of political bullshit—remains a necessary activity. This is the place where “Imponderable” gives one great pause, for again and again it traces a vicious circle connecting mystification and demystification, bunkers and debunkers. That circle has both expanded and tightened with the internet, which

serves at times to purge repulsive ideologies therapeutically and at other times to proliferate them mimetically.

“THE END IS HERE” and “The Imponderable Archive” left me with three stray thoughts. First, along with Mike Kelley and John Miller, Shaw and Oursler represent a kind of CalArts artist formed in the 1970s distinct from the type of Pictures artist produced in part there too: They set out as open-minded explorers of specific subcultures rather than as ambivalent critics of mass media at large. At the same time, even as Kelley & Co. exhibit none of the critical disdain of some Pictures peers, they also have little of the deep involvement of later “ethnographic” artists, who act almost as fieldworkers in the communities they study. Spelunkers of subcultures like Shaw and Oursler also differ from subsequent “archival” practitioners: Though they are often inspired by their collections, they do not absorb them fully into their work, as archival artists often do.

Second, it is important to ponder why such collections seem so salient now. This pertinence parallels that of Jean Dubuffet, outsider art, folk art, and the art of the insane: It is a *brut* moment—but why? Might this be an art-world version of the anti-establishment wind blowing through the land today? Or, more locally, might it attest to a fatigue with art that is too savvy about inside moves and too mindful of audience participation? Certainly, like outsider art, much of the material in “The Hidden World” and “Imponderable” is not only produced without irony, let alone cynicism, but also driven by a conviction that borders on compulsion.

Finally, both collections underscore a dire aspect of our political culture. As Yeats put it famously, in another apocalyptic moment a century ago, “the best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity.” There is a split deep in this country that, paradoxically, might be fundamental to it, a divide that runs back to the theocratic Puritans on the one side and the rationalist Founders on the other. And these days, Revelation is outgunning Enlightenment. “The End Is Here”? Sometimes, in this election season (I write with a month to go), it seems that it may well be. Or is that *too* paranoid? □

“Tony Oursler: The Imponderable Archive” was organized by Tom Eccles and Beatrix Ruf. “Jim Shaw: The End Is Here” was organized by Massimiliano Gioni and Gary Carrion-Murayari, with Margot Norton.

HAL FOSTER TEACHES AT PRINCETON UNIVERSITY. HIS MOST RECENT BOOK, *BAD NEW DAYS: ART, CRITICISM, EMERGENCY*, WAS PUBLISHED BY VERSO LAST YEAR.

Visit our archive at artforum.com/inprint to see Tony Oursler’s portfolio of images from his *Imponderable Archive* (Summer 2015).