

8. 12. — 5. 2. 2023
(MeetFactory Gallery)



I Went Through That Door and I Never Came Back

Curator:
Tereza Jindrová

The title of the exhibition *I Went Through That Door and I Never Came Back* is a quote from the Dutch artist Melanie Bonajo's film *Night Soil – Fake Paradise*. The film was part of the exhibition *Spiritualities*, which launched, in 2020, the long-term dramaturgical series *Other Knowledge* at MeetFactory, and the current exhibition thus makes a roundabout return to the subject and at the same time caps off the entire long-term series.

Bonajo's statement captured the experience of the ayahuasca ceremony that she underwent and which had a profound effect on her. This subject of limit-experiences associated with altered or expanded states of consciousness and their potential to transform individuals and social structures that sits at the center of this current exhibition.

The symbolism of a door, a portal or a passage into another dimension, is widespread in this context, and is represented, for example, by Aldous Huxley's classic *The Doors of Perception* (1954), which in turn refers to William Blake's prose work *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790), where Blake writes: „If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is, Infinite. For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things thro' narrow chinks of his cavern.“ In his book, Huxley describes the personal experience of a mescaline trip and concludes that it may be a potential way of bettering humanity.

The Czech psychiatrist and founder of transpersonal psychology, Stanislav Grof, refers in this context to a „holotropic experience“. The word holotropic literally means „seeking wholeness“ or “moving towards wholeness” (from the Greek *holos* – whole and *trepein* – moving towards something). The framework to which our consciousness relates is the psychophysical self and the empirically understood space and time. In states of altered or expanded consciousness, a person experiences a kind of detachment from these frames of reference and, most importantly, is freed from ego-centric perception. This leads to an experience of interconnectedness and belonging to something that transcends them and simultaneously forms them.

Currently, there is talk of what has been termed the „third psychedelic wave“, which has been

associated mainly with the renewed interest of science and medicine (especially psychiatry) in the healing and therapeutic properties of psychoactive substances. At the same time, psychoactive substances are increasingly appearing outside the subcultural environment and are making their way into the mainstream. We are witnessing, among other things, the process of commodification of this type of experience – the phenomenon of microdosing, for example, plays into the capitalist system, and the growing interest in the traditional ceremonies of the indigenous peoples of North and South America is unfortunately increasingly intertwined with the processes of neo-colonialism. Thus, this third wave undoubtedly carries with it a number of issues.

However, altered or expanded states of consciousness are certainly not only tied to the use of psychoactive substances. We may also consider them in the context of techniques such as meditation, various ritual practices, as well as limit-experiences or „diagnoses“. The shared element is primarily the experience of the „loss“ or blurring of one's own self and connection with surrounding beings and phenomena. This may subsequently lead to a re-evaluation of how one understands themselves and how they relate to the world. It is in this respect that we can understand altered states of consciousness as important movers on the way to deeper cognition and a more nuanced relationship to the universe.

As the editorial duo Sarah Shin and Ben Vickers summarize in the introduction to the poetry collection *Altered States* (2021): „Changing our worlds depends on changing ourselves through cultivating consciousness – to understand that integrating, like healing or writing, is a process of remembering how to hold things in relation.“

The exhibition *I Went Through That Door and I Never Came Back* presents a wide range of artistic approaches, media, subjects and personal attitudes of exhibitors who themselves base their work on personal experience or even their worldview, and for whom an altered state of consciousness opened doors even within their own work. It's an invitation to open new doors within our lives, regardless of which strategy we use to do so.

The exhibition architecture designed by Jakub Červenka is based on the principles of passing through and mirroring. The entrance to the gallery itself is conceived as a kind of initiation passage and it is combined with a new work by the Hungarian artist **Mark Fridvalszki**, whose monumental op-art wallpaper evoking classics such as Vasarely or Riley gives the impression of movement and dizziness and, according to the author, acts as a kind of take-off runway for the trip that follows. Across the entire wall stretches the text of the *ACID manifesto* by Fridvalszki's close collaborators Zsolt Miklósvölgyi and Márió Z. Nemes, who in a way that is both poetic and uncompromising calls for making the psychedelic experience accessible to all. „Psychonauten aller Länder, vereinigt euch!“ Psychonauts of the world, unite!

In his richly layered work, Fridvalszki has long explored the subject of historical futurism, utopias and echoes of modernism, focusing mainly on the blending of motifs from pop culture, certain subcultures and counter-cultural alternatives – including their relationship to drugs. These motifs are then accompanied by a highly speculative element focused on extraterrestrial life and cosmic dimensions.

Fridvalszki uses the method of media archaeology, where he appropriates and recycles forms of modernist art, advertising and alternative culture, drawing primarily from the region of Central and Eastern Europe. The graphic motifs on the inside of the long gallery wall are detailed scans from acid-house flyers and posters from the 80 s and 90 s (taken mainly from the album *High Flyers* from 1995) and the paintings on canvas created using the technique of acrylic transfer are based on the pop-art tradition found in various printed materials (flyers, posters, fanzines, etc.) from the era of 90 s acid house. These publications adopted various commercial and corporate logos and symbols, turned them inside out and exaggerated or ridiculed their authority. The distinctive „e“ we see on the wallpaper refers to ecstasy – a drug that, from the artist's point of view, gave rise to many utopian moments in the atomized, neoliberal Thatcher-era England of the late 80 s. It is these subversive aspects of subcultures or speculative imagination that are central to Fridvalszki: „Acid, UFO and Jazz are crucial metaphors for me. These vectors want to break out of our late post-modern present and

express the desire to be able to envision a system beyond the actual capitalist hegemony.“ In fact, this „being able to envision“ may nowadays in a way literally demand the testing and construction of a new, expanded consciousness that would allow us to step beyond not only our own subjectivity, but also beyond the disarming feeling of self-sustaining survival at the end of history.

The immersive multimedia installation *Fear of the Unknown* (2016) by the British artist **Haroon Mirza** is strongly anchored in specific historical realities and has a highly psychedelic undertone. In it, the artist examines the differences in perception between noise, sound and light under the influence of psychoactive plants. The video-collage deals with the seismic events that occurred on an international scale in the period between 9/11/2001 (terrorist attack on the World Trade Centre in New York) to 11/9/2016 (US presidential election won by Donald Trump). The work thus verges on a bad trip, touching on the shift from an internationalist ethos to the rise of fervent isolationism and populism in the cultural spheres of the United States and the United Kingdom. At the same time, the installation resonates with the frequencies needed for plant growth – in this case, Mirza refers to what are called entheogens – traditional psychoactive substances of plant origin (e.g., ayahuasca, peyote, magic mushrooms, red toadstool, salvia, etc.), which are used in rituals and religious ceremonies. Mirza reflects: „What's the difference between a drug, a pharmaceutical, a narcotic, an entheogen, and a medicine? How do you categorize them? How do you deal with them? How do you deal with their legal and social status? I think society needs them now more than ever.“ The term „entheogen“ is used primarily in the context of anthropology or ethnobotany and is translated as „that which shows the god on the inside“ or „that which awakens the inner god“. This means that not all psychoactive substances are entheogens – only those which are used with the purpose of achieving states in which it's possible to communicate with higher powers, prophesy, heal or find some sort of spiritual truth. Entheogens were used all around in the world in communities that had access to these substances, although many of these practices were weakened by the influence of monotheistic religions and colonialism. Today, however, ceremonial practices based on the use of entheogens are experiencing

a strong wave of interest from the inhabitants of the Global North, who, in their commodity-saturated environment, are embarking on journeys of self-discovery...

A series of five screen prints from the extensive series *Cathartic Illustrations* (2022) by the Canadian artist **Jeremy Shaw** captures precisely the state of spiritual or religious ecstasy. The work of Jeremy Shaw represents a classic within the subject of altered states of consciousness, which the artist observes and explores from various perspectives and in a wide range of media. The exhibited works are based on found newspaper photographs, which the artist manipulated exclusively through analogue techniques. In a disturbing way, they blur the boundaries between the different contexts in which a cathartic experience can take place – be it churches or sects, dance (personified in one of the prints by the multiplication of the figure of Terpsichore – the ancient muse of dance) or the experience of the club and rave scene. In these cases, the presence of mind-altering substances is far from necessary.

As critic Amy Hale points out in her brilliant text on Tai Shani's oeuvre, the dominant narrative of the psychedelic experience continues to be presented primarily from a white man's perspective, whose position exoticizes other experiences and actors. Hale states: „Current attempts to highlight women's contributions to psychedelic culture and its emergent industry are primarily focused on healing and wellness, creating narratives of wholeness and overcoming trauma rather than a search for enlightenment. Can a symbolic feminist reading of the psychedelic experience disrupt male-centred narratives?“ In her film *The Neon Hieroglyph*, Tai Shani is inspired by the effects and history of ergot, a poisonous and psychoactive mushroom that grows on grain. „For Shani, ergot evokes a different, feminist history of psychedelics. Unlike ayahuasca or peyote, the consumption of ergot is not typically linked with ritual ingestion; it happens more by accident than by design. Within the context of women's health, ergot has been more conventionally described as an abortifacient and a migraine treatment. Its unofficial effects, however, are linked to tales of underworld initiations, witches, astral travel, demons, dances of possession and the communal folding of reality – all themes that are knotted

together in Shani's work.“ The collision of visual and linguistic „information“ in her film may evoke in us a feeling of vertigo as well as joy and unease at the seductive opulence of meanings and nonsense.

The paintings of the Swedish painter **Windy Fur Rundgren** reflect the artist's mental states, dreams, visions or even hallucinations. They represent poetic and surreal views into other dimensions, in which we encounter inhuman beings and mysterious symbols, the exact meaning of which is known only to the author herself. As she describes: „the painting with the cats represents a point between two worlds where fire and water come together. The Sun and the Moon are connected through golden trumpets. It's a metaphor for birth, the beginning of life.“ The painting with St. Francis also represents „phases between two worlds/realities. One must enter the stage from the other side, through one's own body. Crawl through the darkness realizing it is chocolate. Then you see a pyramid containing complex geometry. Catercorner to it, a monkey sits on an egg. The philosophers' stone is inside that egg, but in a mathematical form, requiring you to use both these planes to reveal the wisdom it contains.“ Windy created these paintings during a turbulent personal period early in her art studies when she was partially homeless, and so these paintings also represented a „simultaneous meditation on literature, talking with people and hard physical labor on the boat that I lived on. My mind sailed in and out on a stream of hallucinations. Sound has always been synesthetic to me and, so, during my work on the paintings, I also made recordings of my singing, sounds of trance.“ The last exhibited painting was created in direct connection with the shamanic ceremony that the artist attended during that time at the behest of her then-mentor. „It wasn't a stressful experience, the hallucinations were mainly enriching. It was in 2007 that I had an experience that resulted in post-traumatic stress, which significantly affected my subsequent work. However, all three of these paintings were made before that.“ The early paintings of Windy Fur Rundgren selected for this exhibition are interconnected, but at the same time they reflect to a certain extent a kind of „schizophrenia“ in her way of painting, which the artist is currently purposefully creating through the thorough development of two other creative alter-egos, who have their own personal mythology and who also express themselves through different musical work.

The hallucinatory painting *Trumresa* (Drum Travel) is exhibited alongside two other works, which are also a distinctive expression of the personal experience of their authors. **Veronika Šrek Bromová** is well acquainted with a number of alternative practices that promote self-knowledge and spiritual purification – ranging from holotropic breathwork to meditation and ritual techniques. Her esoteric universe is represented at the exhibition by a bewitching digital photo collage evoking the effect of psilocybin mushrooms and a view of the world that literally comes to life before one's eyes. The painting by **Tomáš King** also shows the spirit of the forest. This is a painting that gradually changed over the course of an entire decade. In a way, the painting is a time-lapse of the author's emotions and Tomáš himself perceives it as part of the process of healing and forgiveness. „I started painting the Deer Man when I was in the first semester of my first year at the Academy of Fine Arts. Already at that time, I had already come into contact with the wisdom and teachings of the Native American Lakota tribe and, especially, the ethnic groups of Mexico, such as the Aztecs, Maya and the Wirarica tribe. This was a time when my life changed quite dramatically and I was going through quite a deep introspection, which wasn't always entirely pleasant. [...] In many cultures, the symbol of the deer carries with it profound healing on both the physical and spiritual level. I finished the painting this year, sometime in mid-September.“

The works of Tomáš's wife **Jana King Kochánková**, situated in the gallery in the adjacent mirrored space, are also a testimony to the process of self-healing and self-acceptance, as well as embracing self-discipline. The woodcut titled *The Guardian* was created as part of a sculpture symposium in 2015 and depicts a phoenix rising from the ashes, representing rebirth. Jana went to the symposium at a time when she was dealing with the end of a relationship and after having attended a multi-day seminar with the Peruvian shaman Thu-Hien. „Peruvian shamans call it Gentle Ayahuasca, as the healing doesn't involve some of the strong cleansing symptoms such as vomiting and the like. This woman works only with energies and their effects on the human body. With what's called the purification of body and mind. She doesn't use any other substances. All you need to do is to be in her presence and open yourself up to that healing flow,

and then things between heaven and hell start happening. It was a really beautiful experience and the energies were beautiful too. Back then, however, I didn't realize that after this encounter, one's supposed to adhere to a certain kind of fast. I went straight to the sculpture symposium, where we obviously drank alcohol and ate mainly meat. That combination ended up making me feel terrible and I had to deal with major side effects. I was vomiting a lot at the time and I felt really bad both physically and mentally. I even left the symposium a bit early. That's why I made this *Guardian* there, the phoenix. Thanks to this experience, I came to understand many things about working with energies, the importance of fasting and the importance of general self-care. Care for both your body and soul.“ The series of watercolors representing the four elements was created at a time when the artist was struggling with health problems and underwent treatment by what is called the medicinal circle and then subsequently in a sweat lodge. „In the sweat lodge, they work with the four elements – Fire, Water, Earth and Air. In that immense heat, one literally just casts off the old self and is reborn. After leaving the sweat lodge, people tend to be in a state of mindfulness, of 'being in the present'. Thoughts are erased and there is absolute peace within the body, mind and soul which lasts several days [...] In that state, I started painting the watercolors at home. This series of elements was created just entirely à propos of nothing, without any planning – since it's impossible to plan in that state. It was as if I was truly painting directly with their aid.“

During her treatment within the medical circle, Jana experienced a connection to her female ancestors. The theme of healing and relationships with deceased loved ones also resonates strongly in **Vladimíra Večeřová's** new work. Her minimalist yet time-intensive installation that works with the contrast of light and shadow, matter and emptiness, was created specifically for this exhibition. For Vladimíra, the merging of opposites is an endless balancing effort, a flow of energies that achieve equilibrium only to quickly fall out of balance again. When creating her new work, the artist was strongly inspired by a recent dream she had of bats, which are a symbol of the unconscious, but also a manifestation of ancestors (Vladimíra's father passed away earlier this year) and the artist also associates them with the symbolism of the Hanged Man

tarot card, which shatters learned patterns in our perception and behavior. Therefore, in order to break these patterns, it is necessary to take a different attitude to life, sometimes by literally turning your world upside down in order to gain a different perspective and see through limiting habits and blocks. A new state of consciousness can be reached when we transcend our ego and believe in the deeper meaning of events. Years ago, Vladimíra also began to learn about indigenous purification ceremonies which changed her view of the world and helped her better realize the interconnectedness of our individual selves with all that surrounds them. The title of the exhibited work refers to the statement of a famous Mazatec shaman and healer, which tries to remind us that the greatest source of healing power is already within all of us.

Lucie Rosenfeldová's work *One Version of Falling Asleep* considers the question of healing and the nature of (un)consciousness from a perspective that is quite different from that of the other exhibited works. In this audio work, the artist tries to deal with her own experience of general anesthesia, which she had to undergo in connection with a gynecological procedure. According to neuroscientists, artificial sleep is the experience that can most be likened to death, because the brain is unable to retrospectively determine the length of time that passed during anesthesia, and consciousness is completely disconnected, with no dreams and no external sensations making their way into it. However, exploring the nature of our consciousness inevitably leads us to questions about the reality around us – as neuroscience communicator Anil Seth put it in one of his TED talks: „We're all hallucinating all the time, even right now. It's just that when we agree about our hallucinations, we call that *reality*.“ But this approach does not diminish the relevance of our consciousness – on the contrary, reality is given to us *through* our consciousness, and as Seth subsequently notes about death, „When the end of consciousness comes, there's nothing to be afraid of, nothing at all.“ Until then, however, we can test, exercise, and expand our consciousness.

In her essay *Psychedelic Feminism: A Radical Interpretation of Psychedelic Consciousness?* (Journal for the Study of Radicalism, 13, 2019, pp. 75–120), Kim Hewitt, a professor of American history, writes: „Psychedelic experiences offer infinite possibilities for libidinous fusion: with other humans, nature, spirits, ancestors, and the cosmos. Altered states of consciousness challenge our culturally constructed concepts of the body, individuality, gender, time, and every other bounded category structured by linear human thought. Discussion of consciousness, like the body, is always mediated by text and yet cannot be contained by it. A foray into expanded consciousness is a plunge into the realm of the symbolic feminine which will always be in excess of language.“ The exhibition *I Went Through That Door and I Never Came Back* is thus an attempt to contribute to this discussion in ways other than exclusively through language, and through individual works of art and their joint effect as the exhibited whole, it tries to at least subtly expand the consciousness of its viewers.

**I Went Through That Door
and I Never Came Back**
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Artists:

**Veronika Šrek Bromová, Mark Fridvalszki,
Jana King Kochánková, Tomáš King,
Haroon Mirza, Lucie Rosenfeldová,
Windy Fur Rundgren, Tai Shani, Jeremy Shaw,
Vladimíra Večeřová**

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