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Hypnotic Art

A few months ago, I was invited to give an introductory talk to an art history lecture series for a group of people who professionally have nothing to do with the arts. I decided not to talk about chronology and history but called the lecture “What Does Art Do” and explained several of the functions art can have.

I talked about one of the earliest drawings we know of, a bull from Altamira, and explained how there are different theories about the functions of these images. They are interesting because we know very little about the people who made them, so we are necessarily projecting our own ideas of what a drawing on a wall might be. All the functions we can think of in relation to a mural from a prehistoric cave are function that art had, and still has, in more recent times.

There are explanations that claim the drawings had a ritual function that enabled the hunters to be more successful during the next hunt. As western art history is strongly connected to Christianity, this is not a surprising interpretation. We can, of course, also imagine that the bull of Altamira was only a depiction of the world those people lived in. Maybe someone just wanted to share something they have seen. It is also conceivable that someone was telling a story and wanted to illustrate what they were saying and made these drawings as an element in the narrative. Maybe this narrative was a part of something people were telling their children and it had an educational purpose. It is possible that someone was simply really good at drawing bulls and they were showing off their skills and it is also conceivable that the people who were living in the cave asked the skilful person to make the drawings so that their cave felt like their own and gave them a sense of identification within their group.

All these functions can be traced throughout art history and can still be seen in contemporary art. Art teaches, depicts reality and shows things that would perhaps otherwise go unnoticed. It shows off what artists can do, shows off what patrons can afford and it gives people a sense of the spiritual or a sense of belonging. Any individual artwork can have more than one function. This function is also a question of interpretation, not only the result of what the artist intended and this is what becomes interesting when I write about my own work. As an artist, I have to ask myself what it is that I want to achieve with what I do, but also what does my audience actually understands.

Once I finish a work and exhibit it, especially if I sell it and it is displayed in a setting I don't know, I have no more control over how the work will be interpreted. It can become a status symbol, it can perhaps be decorative in the right surroundings and it

becomes a part of the story of that particular collection. While the work is still in an exhibition that I set up, I am usually aiming for other functions. However, as is deducible from the art history excursus above, I am very interested in how people perceive art in general and my work in particular. I am curious about how they interpret my work and am more that amused if the understanding turns out to be surprising.

A few years ago I made an experiment, entitled *The Message*, to see how people understand a work of art. I built a simple geometrical construction in a gallery space and started inviting different people to have a look and give me an interpretation of what they saw. After each conversation I had with my participants, I changed the installation so that it, in my opinion, looked a bit more as the last visitor described. The installation changed slowly, new things were added and it became a year-long exercise in misunderstandings. I invited people who were professionally involved with contemporary art, because they add to the discourse that becomes art history but it became apparent that most people noticed something they were professionally interested in anyway. Their interpretations were in large part influenced by what they were working on at the time. I finished the experiment as the last participants agreed that it was a work about the private and political life and that it created a performative space. As my visitors projected their interests into what they saw, the installation became a cross section of current topics in contemporary art.

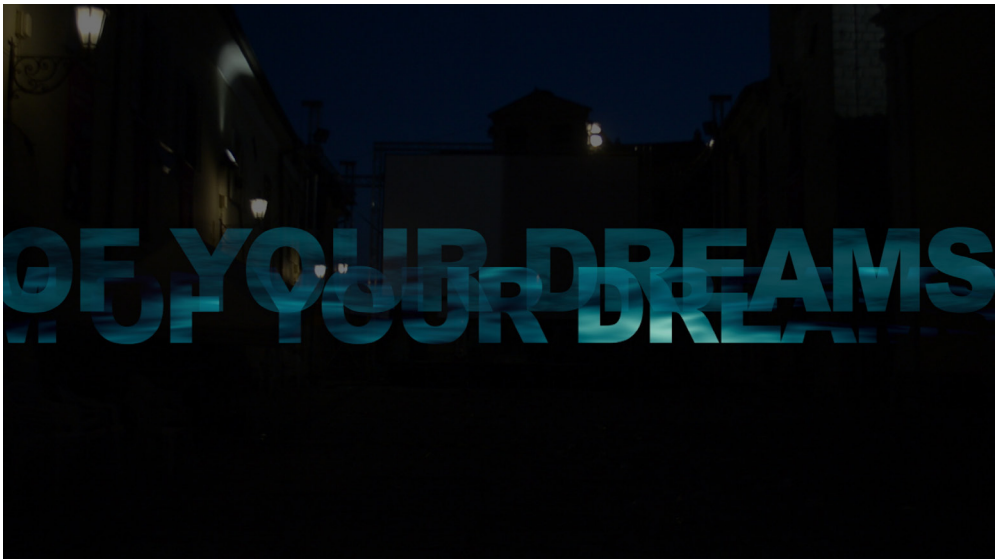
Of course it would be absurd to say that people see just what they already know. It is certainly possible to communicate new ideas and art is a means of communication that not only gives information, but actually creates new experiences. People do communicate across cultures and interests. I was recently thinking about how difficult communication situations are solved in areas outside of the arts. I thought of psychotherapists and how they have to understand their patients who are often very different from themselves, so I started looking at what was published within psychology literature. This brought me to the work of the American psychiatrist Milton Erickson who was active from the 50s until the late 70s. Erickson believed that problems appear when our subconscious gets stuck on solutions that worked well for a while but become counterproductive as circumstances around us change. He unorthodoxly gave his patients practical advice what to do, but the problem with giving advice, as we all know from daily life, is that people don't really follow it. Erickson had to find a way to communicate with his patients more efficiently. He discovered that hypnotizing them worked well. He claimed that it was a way of communicating directly to the subconscious and because of that his patients acted upon his instructions.

What made me as an artist interested in Erickson's practice was the way he described that a hypnotic session should be conducted. He listed three stages that had to be respected. The first one was to confuse or shock the person in order to make them give up their usual ways of perception. The second was to induce the hypnotic trance. This is often understood as an overly dramatic state of losing one's free will, but is actually just a focused concentration led by the hypnotist. The third stage was the communication of an actual message. Erickson suggested that this worked only if the message was either metaphorical or incomplete. This made the patients active as they were finishing

the message with their own experience, thus making it personally relevant. These three stages coincide exactly with how I think a good work of art functions as a medium. The audience has to leave their everyday perception behind. Shock is often used in the arts but a similar state can be achieved by just entering a space, a gallery or a theatre, where we know we will have to engage with a different reality. There has to be a leap of faith in order to engage with the work and it inevitably necessitates concentration. The part with the incomplete message that works by requiring the viewers to finish it with their own experience coincides with what I believe an artwork should do. This is also almost impossible to avoid anyway as I have shown in *The Message*.

Erickson's hypnotism is a new fascination for me and I am sure I will be coming back to it in many ways. The first experiments I just conducted were performances in which I hypnotized my audience into seeing an exhibition or a film that they always wanted to see. As a lot of what people understand depends on what they already know, I decided to forgo the making of a physical work altogether and to just give them the experience they wanted. The results so far were interesting, exciting and funny. I included some of the descriptions people gave me after being hypnotized in a video. I shot the sunrise over an empty open-air cinema and edited it together with the off-screen descriptions of the imaginary films. This video is the documentation of a performance, but it also becomes a hypnotic work itself as the viewers start to imagine these invisible films.

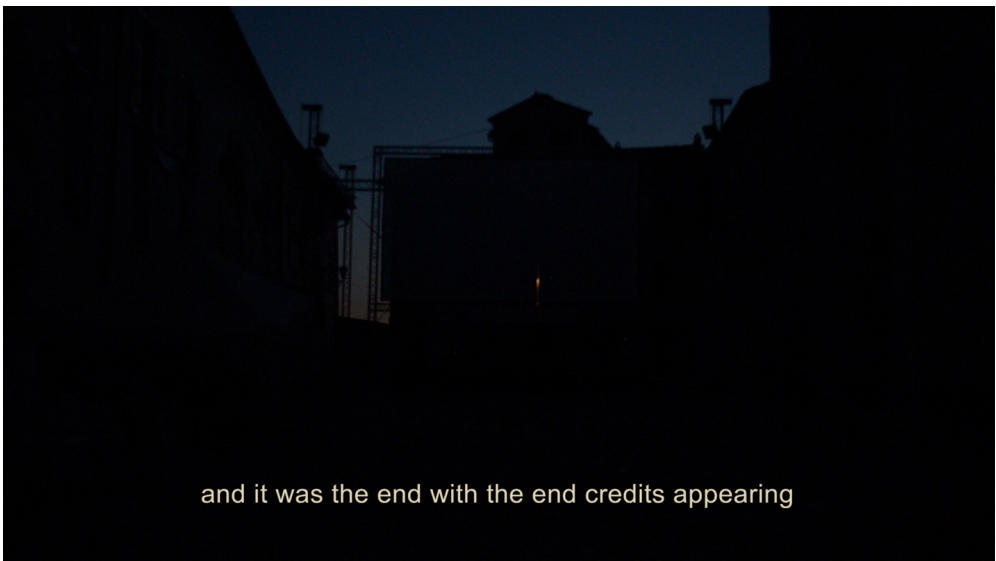
After these first experiences with hypnotism I also began to project what I know into what I see. I became aware of the hypnotic traits of any communication. If you understand that the hypnotic condition is very similar to the state one is in while reading a book and being so engrossed that one doesn't notice the space around, just consider for a moment how you feel right now, after reading this text.



Film of Your Dreams, video, 17:16, 2018



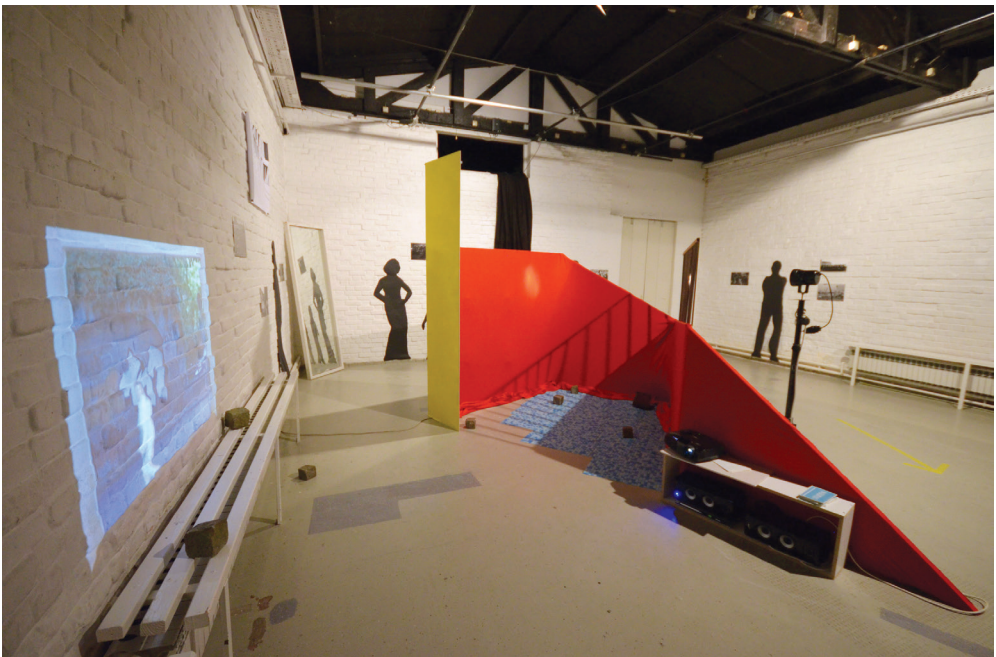
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The Message, mixed media installation, 2014–2015
(the appearance at the beginning of the process)



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