

## *Your Arms Outstretched Above Your Head, Coding With The Angels*

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Your Arms Outstretched Above Your Head, Coding With the Angels, Tai Shani's new show at Gathering, encompasses watercolours, acidic geometries, glass eyes glowing with hunger as well as strained concepts of love, many candles, the sun. (The sun is a ghost here.) What brings these divergent things together in the precarious cosmology of this situation, is a trip. It would be reductive to describe this trip – seemingly induced by a mushroom known as ergot but not only – as either geographical or psychedelic, wholesome or decadent, because it feels like an actual, on-going transition: from individual need to shared heartbreak, to a depersonalized possibility of life beyond survival.

Ergot, or *Claviceps purpurea*, is a fungus flourishing on stalks of damp rye which, when processed into bread and eaten, can cause a severe disease, ergotism, sometimes fatal and inducing delirium. In 1582, in his *Kräuterbuch*, Adam Lonitzer first describes the “long, black, hard, narrow pegs on the ears, internally white, often protruding like long nails from between the grains in the ear.” The ergot infestation that persists in Your Arms..., too, becomes obvious at first sight. It's recognizable in the characteristic black “tubes” encroaching on some of the paintings, in the hallucinogenic logics adorning the sculptures, and in the overall heavy, feverish mood linking these divergent works like mould. Invoked by this deadly substance and extrapolated through a variety of careful aesthetic procedures, an unspeakable loss becomes palpable: an affective history not just of the undead and their unfinished business – but also of those whose trouble stays with us precisely because they seem irreparably distant, more-than-dead, or as they are named in one of the work's titles: the “un-undead.” The un-undead offer neither jump-scare nor solace.

Modern speculation about ergotism intersects a set of historical phenomena of social unrest, in a literal sense of the word, symptomatic seizures that sometimes turned into social convulsions, as in the dancing plagues along the Rhine and Moselle from the medieval to early modern periods. Even if this has been “debunked” in peer-reviewed journals or appropriated into “fun fact” in Vice, ergot is still summoning a psychedelic poetics of social history: it points us to how the so-called fabric of reality is partly made of simple carbs – a trivial fact unfolding in unpredictable ways, through crises of social reproduction. A connection between the appearance of the *Claviceps* grain and the symptoms of ergotism is assumed to have been relatively widely known by the 18th century (others say, since antiquity). Under conditions of extreme economic pressure, poverty or isolation, however, many millers did not take on the labour-intensive procedure of separating the healthy ears from the infested ones. People had to eat.

On Alicudi, a volcanic island off the coast of Sicily, ergot-infested rye is believed to have been consumed up until the 1950s. Alicudi is where the “flying women”, the so-called *maiara* one encounters in many of the works in Your Arms..., mythologically take off to steal goods from Palermo on the mainland. As summoned here, severed and over-the-top, the *maiara* cannot be reduced to a retrojected figure of liberal self-empowerment. Agents of actually existing hunger, they transpose scarcity into a collective emergency myth of having one's needs met through redistribution. In this sense, manifesting the materialism of need, they cannot not be real. Any history who treats them as products of stoner folklore is counterfactual. Precisely because it's ongoing, in the timelines traversing Your Arms..., the past has to be won, like any resource and through contemporary means. It has to be decoded and – with angels both fallen and high – recoded.

30 years after some of the incidents on Alicudi were scandalized, Albert Hofmann, first synthesized lysergic acid diethylamide, or LSD, as a by-product of his research on ergot. In our contemporary moment, as encrypted by Your Arms..., the dancing plagues that would follow in the 1960s and 1990s almost feel as much like a flashback as the medieval ones, even though LSD has been making a micro- and mini-dosed comeback in Silicon Valley ideology and clinical trials in the treatment of depressions. This is perhaps one reason why Mark Fisher's fragmented provocation of acid communism has been resurging as an interesting proposal for some thinkers on the left. In more elaborate variations, e.g. in Diedrich Diederichsen's phrasing, acid communism invites speculation about “what would have happened if hippie counterculture and the New Left had not diverged until the former declined into esotericism and the latter into Maoism.” What was ergot communism? Highly weather-dependent and causing migraine, it would first of all be a bad idea. (It's easy to forget how the mushroom at the end of the world can also make you throw up, or kill you.) A bad idea that also provides, however, a crucial reproductive backdrop for any attempt to construct differently alienated subjectivities. Beyond merely furnishing history with a new materialist sparkle, the substances in Your Arms... gently open up the fungal conditions of acid (communism) and its social derivatives. They show how a capacity for emancipatory hallucination is flourishing parasitically within racialized, feminized, poor, queer, surplus forms of life. The violence they encounter is where the heartbreak comes in, more as premise than result.

Feminization is intrinsically linked with a less popular story of ergot, too. Closely observing how ergotism epidemics affected pregnant women and inhibited lactation, midwives in Central Europe historically have figured out how to powder and dose ergot until it became part of their healthcare arsenal: to accelerate labour, stop postpartum haemorrhage, to induce abortions. Scientific language has yet to accurately describe exactly how LSD does what it (sometimes!) does, how it varies the feeling of being-in-the-world with its intense binding to the serotonin system. On the level of the nervous system, however, LSD's mother grain (ergot is called *Mutterkorn* in German) makes sensible an undeniable relation: the convulsions convolute freeing your mind with the urgency of reproductive labour. Talking of acid communism, some imagine if not a heroic dose, perhaps a post-heroic rave – but the psycho-activity of emancipation is much more integral to ordinary life than any conspiracy of “something in the water” would make us believe. It's durational, ill, magic. Surviving reproductive labour under patriarchy is trippy: most of us know this. We are intimately familiar with the destabilization of realism that comes with caring for others: sleep deprivation, repetitive tasks, various addictions, and of course the overwhelming anxiety of love, can silhouette the world with a real glow. Whether induced through pharmaceuticals or trauma (or, as in most cases, a singular concoction of both): Tripping – in the mere Urban Dictionary sense of being extremely stressed, too – is a reality of marginalization. “Disassociated, terrible reality did not feel real at all. All the rose emojis at the end of each message was making us cry”, one hears it whisper through the film *The Neon Hieroglyph*.

The ambience in Your Arms Your Arms Outstretched Above Your Head, Coding With the Angels starts from there, committing to these psychedelic patterns buried in the “everyday.” In this vein, rather than proposing a high as an educational experience of vague otherness, it mobilizes trace elements of ergot as a poetic method. A method, perhaps, both more and less than “world-making”: less trusting in the relationality of givenness, more just trying to come through, at times detached, with pleasure. Crucially, this permeates the ways in which individual works relate to each other as well. They are recursively tripping on each other: The obscure architecture of “NH: Astrolatric Communes” takes cues from the film *Neon Hieroglyph* until it imposes its own idiosyncrasies on the shared epic. The women smiling madly, genuinely scary in their tongue-in-cheek horror, might be from the island of Alicudi but of course, they could be from anywhere. It's possible that lines from the recently published book accompanying Tai Shani's *Neon Hieroglyph* constellation hover in the space, too. Linking in this way, any coherence remains generatively open to its surroundings, to whatever happens next. The sermon staccato of difficult adjectives throughout, all the decoration in a state of infestation – stylistic tricks in piecing together a detailed, yet non-linear passage: from (hyper-) tension to release, from social convulsion to the possibility of a movement continuing elsewhere.

Tripping can be a form of unfeeling. It is also a possibility of not wanting the world, wanting it to change on good days. “In a politically dissociative consciousness,” writes Lauren Berlant about the trip that is suicidal ideation, “the distinction between openness and defense is unknowable, open to the inconvenient noise of the world's devastating realisms, resisting, shredding, but not dying from the encounter.” Not dying is not a politics but funnily enough, no radical politics can afford to ignore its necessity – and the derealization that occurs when people attempt to endure this, not dying, in a capitalism such as ours. Similarly, the political grounding of psychedelic experience is not a given, it has to be carefully crafted with others, translated like a symptom. Where we reconfigure strategies of (acid) experimentation and (communist) organizing against the backdrop of (ergot) social reproduction, maybe we can put the different sense of scale that hallucinogens can give us to better use. Could they help us to develop a poetics of knowing when to stop, and where to start? “Full of love, I felt it too,” we learn in the film *Neon Hieroglyph*, “the antidote is as viral as the disease.” Few hippies knew: There is a summer of love that has been militant precisely not since forever, but for centuries. Getting involved now, in the middle of all this, is saddening and comical, troublesome and unavoidable.