

# Matt Joils

# Chaos Magic

The events of September 11, 2001 cut off the momentum of anti capitalist and No Logo movements<sup>12</sup>: “Concerns about sweatshop exploitation and advertising in schools paled in comparison with thousands of dead, anthrax scares, the defence of the free world and the bombing of Afghanistan.” Twenty years later, off the back of the Black Lives Matter protests, in the midst of ongoing genocide of Palestinians, and in the face of the insidious racism of the Treaty Principles bill, it feels wrong to ignore politics. It can seem irrelevant or unempathetic<sup>3</sup> at best to make abstract paintings. What is the power of an image? Can a visual system such as (abstract) painting (a system that does what words cannot) be truly revolutionary, truly socially engaged?

*A picture is worth a thousand words.* Images can serve political ends, often as tools of soft power and propaganda. We might think of cinema on one hand, its narratives produced in Hollywood or Anime studios<sup>4</sup>; or a steaming plate of Pad Thai on the other<sup>5</sup>. Theodor Adorno had faith in Modernism as a beacon of pure freedom, that you could, in effect, ‘catch a vibe’ just by experiencing a work. In Adorno’s view, “great Modernist art opened up a contradiction between the aesthetic freedom of the artwork and the unfree world in which it was produced.”<sup>6</sup> This could be understood to be how painting was weaponized by the US government in the ideological melee of the cold war.<sup>7</sup> But artists are not without agency to make their own statements. The early work of Daniel Buren can be viewed as a political deployment of minimalist abstraction. A sort of ‘subvertising’ or protest where billboards, posters and signs in Paris were pasted over with his now signature stripes.

Painting is always already ideologically situated. This is usually the primary concern of the viewer rather than the maker. *Tell me about what you’ve done, what does it mean?* Abstraction works or does not work nonverbally, but the reception of it will always be mediated by discourse. There is a meme featuring Garfield with a text that reads *You are not immune to propaganda*.<sup>8</sup> Garfield himself is a fairly innocent icon of laziness and gluttony, more or less a neutral sign. The text, however, provides content. Similarly the fact that there is an instagram meme account *animarx.crossing* doesn’t mean the game couldn’t be used for other ideological messaging. As Roland Barthes highlights in *the Death of the Author*, meaning is socially constructed. One of Michel Majerus’ many painted aphorisms was “Fuck the intention of the artist”.<sup>9</sup>

The future is uncertain, but it doesn’t look so good. Can we predict what will happen? Chaos Theory is an interdisciplinary scientific and mathematical area of knowledge that aims to understand complex systems and the patterns that form.<sup>10</sup> It has been popularly understood through the metaphor of the Butterfly Effect, where a butterfly flapping its wings in Brazil can create a tornado in Texas.<sup>11</sup> Everything is connected, further illustrated by the Mahayana Buddhist concept of Indra’s Jewel Net.<sup>12</sup> Jan Verwoert argues for the viewing of painting in a wider cultural context, speaking of a “Crab walk between painting and the discotheque,<sup>13</sup> for example.

<sup>1</sup> Mark Fisher *Capitalist Realism*, Zer0 Books 2014 pg. 14

<sup>2</sup> Rick Poyner The Citizen Designer, *Designing Pornotopia: Travels in Visual Culture*, Lawrence King Publishing 2006, pg. 59

<sup>3</sup> Wilhelm Worringer, *Abstraction and Empathy*, Ivan R. Dee Inc. 1997 pg. 4-5

<sup>4</sup> Moon Channel, ‘Kawaii: Anime, Propaganda, and Soft Power Politics’, Youtube, 16 Jun, 2024

<sup>5</sup> Valeriya Safronova, ‘Kitchen Diplomacy: How Governments Use Food as Soft Power’, *Parliament EU*, 24 Jan 2024

<sup>6</sup> Jonas Ceicka, ‘Post-Punk, Mark Fisher & Popular Modernism’, Youtube, 24 Jun 2024, 6:34

<sup>7</sup> John J Curley *A Conspiracy of Images: Andy Warhol, Gerhard Richter and the Art of the Cold War*, Yale University Books 2013

<sup>8</sup> Adam, ‘You are Not Immune to Propaganda’, Know Your Meme, 05 Mar, 2019

<sup>9</sup> Louise Darblay, Michel Majerus: Notizen. Notes 1995, *ArtReview*, 17 Aug 2018

<sup>10</sup> Chaos Theory, Wikipedia

<sup>11</sup> Butterfly Effect, Wikipedia

<sup>12</sup> Barbara O’Brien, ‘Indra’s Jewel Net’, Learn Religions, Jan 24 2018

<sup>13</sup> Walker Art Center, ‘Opening Day Talk: Painting in the Present Tense’, Youtube, 7 Feb 2013 19:02

Chaos Magick is an anarchic esoteric movement characterised by its openness to new ideas, to technology and pop culture. It can also incorporate or borrow magical techniques from disparate established traditions. A chaos magician uses a syncretic bricolage of approaches, creating a system that 'does the trick'. Ray Sherwin's 1978 *Book of Results* discusses Sigil magick, drawing from Austin Osman Spare's writings<sup>14</sup>. A sigil is a constructed and usually private symbol used with magical intent. It is designed to be graphically striking so as to effectively enter the subconscious. Its efficacy is dependent on its subjective credibility, the magician has to find it convincing. There is a half-joke among practitioners about not using demons from old grimoires 'you don't know where they've been'<sup>15</sup>. New spiritual powers, new symbols are devised that fit the task at hand, as best makes sense for the magician. Maybe Jessica Rabbit is more effective for a spell of seduction than Aphrodite. It's a matter of perspective.

*Rather than work with traditional occult systems, chaos magicians either construct their own rules or throw them out altogether, spontaneously enacting rituals that break through fixed mental categories and evoke unknown - and often terrifying - entities and experiences.*

*"Using popular media is an important aspect of chaos magic," Tyagi says as he scratches the furry neck of Eris, the Doggess of Discord. "Instead of rejecting media like many Pagans, we use them as magical tools." <sup>16</sup>*

This is a DIY attitude, This is magick by any means necessary, It is characterised by to-handedness, reuse of materials, of images, of ideas measured by adequate effects, utilitarian. It's resourceful. "According to the punk aesthetic, one can express oneself and produce moving and serious works with limited means"<sup>17</sup>

What makes good art? A clear message? Simplicity and directness can be unifying and inspiring. Uncertainty is maybe more satisfying. More rewarding, engages for longer. Simon Reynolds in *Rip it up and Start Again* describes the post punk attitude:

*They saw the plainspoken demagoguery of overtly politicised musicians of the era... as far too literal and unaesthetic, and found their soapbox sermonising both condescending to the listener, and most of the time, a pointless exercise in preaching to the converted <sup>18</sup>*

Even if a painting is a successful gesture of dissent, rebellion can become just another (fetishised) style in a capitalist system. Dissent is precorporated into the mainstream — this is Cobain's Quandary.<sup>19</sup> In film, Catharsis is the playing out of revolutionary narratives on screen, which alleviates the emotional urgency of actual action.<sup>20</sup> Perhaps it's best not to make any grand claims for abstract painting. After all *The purpose of a system is what it does*. In the face of gross inequality, imperialism, impending climate disaster — a situation that can be described by the acronym VUCA (volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity) —<sup>21</sup> perhaps something less absolute and dogmatic is an appropriate response.

# Seeing

# ...is Believing

<sup>14</sup> Angela's Symposium 'Chaos Magick Interview with Peter J Carrol', Youtube, 16 Oct 2023

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Erik Davis, 'Technopagans', *Wired*, 1 Jul 1995

<sup>17</sup> 'Do it Yourself' Wikipedia

<sup>18</sup> Jonas Ceicka, 'Post-Punk, Mark Fisher & Popular Modernism', Youtube, 24 Jun 2024, 30:23

<sup>19</sup> Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism* pg.9

<sup>20</sup> Plastic Pills: The Culture Industry - Adorno, Horkheimer, Neomarxism and Ideology, Youtube, 3 Mar 2020

<sup>21</sup> David Benjamin and David Komlos, 'The Purpose Of A System Is What It Does, Not What It Claims To Do' *Forbes*, 13 Sept 2021