

The Law of Contiguity by Megan Steinman

“Every flame contains fire, any bone from a dead body contains death, in just the same way as a single hair is thought to contain a man’s life force.” - Marcel Mauss, A General Theory of Magic

Hello, Reader. There are three things that I sense about you in this very moment: you have recently come in contact with the work of the artist collective Finishing School, their provocative social sculpture *Psychic Barber*, or both. Lucky guess? Perhaps. Crystal ball? Sounds useful but, truth told, I have not yet figured out how such a device might be incorporated into my theoretical investigations. I am neither looking over your shoulder, nor reading your mind. It is simply the occasion of this essay that allows me to deduce those few obvious traits. Your reading of the text establishes our remote communication, and positions us both in relation to the artists and their work. Less visible is the connection, psychic or otherwise, that you and I will share by its closing. Let’s see how we do.

In 2012, members of Finishing School happened upon a neon sign in West Seattle that read “Psychic Barber.” This particular sign actually described two separate, neighboring businesses—a barber shop and a psychic advisor—connected as the result of an insufficient amount of storefront advertising space which forced them to stack their respective neon banners. Their merger could have easily read “Barber Psychic,” but someone had the good sense to place the adjective first. Finishing School was instantly drawn to the concept presented by this combination of words, albeit simultaneously unaware as to why a psychic barber resonated with such potential for them. When the collective was later invited by Side Street Projects to create an installation on the former foundation of a demolished barber shop in Pasadena, the synchronicity of that first encounter gained both clarity and meaning.

One year later, Finishing School in a collaboration with artists Jean Robison and Yucef Merhi has conceived *Psychic Barber*, a large, free-standing room with transparent walls

and ceiling, inside of which willing participants receive a haircut and psychic reading by hired practitioners who specialize in both the salon and the occult. Hypothetically, the scope of information disclosed during the reading determines the style and texture of each cut. Psychological forces will thus shape physical beauty. According to the project's current design, only two people occupy the room during each session: the psychic barber and their client. The rest of the visitors sit on bleachers arranged along one side of the structure and become an audience to the pair's activities. The wall that faces this audience is modeled after computer and television screen ratios, a scale that the artists use to deliberately signify a private conversation broadcast for public consumption. In development is a customized sensory detection system that responds to volume and temperature fluctuations occurring inside the room. This technology allows Finishing School and its collaborators to create a visual vocabulary based on the imagined emotional reactions symbolized by body heat, the sounds of raised or hushed voices, methodical scissor snipping, or the whirring of clippers. A machine translates these effects into what might be called a "digital aura," seen as fields of color that radiate across the room's exterior: red might infer anger, passion, or both; blue could indicate calm or indifference; yellow, a signal of hope. Audiences cannot hear the conversation between the psychic barber and their client, but can visualize a spectrum of emotional reactions based on their own subjective color associations. The broadcast conversation and its "digital aura" seem to suggest that the world of images is highly influential on our perspectives of the world.

Psychic Barber creates a space where the contrast between visible worlds and their intangible counterparts can be experienced simultaneously. Its proposed architecture represents a temporary apparition resurrected atop the remains of an actual barbershop from the past. The original building is gone, we can no longer see it. In its place sits an uncanny minimalist box that isolates a combination of customary barbershop features—a hair washing station, a barber chair, client capes, and the activity of communal people watching from salon waiting rooms—within ghostlike walls illuminated by the digitally perceived conscious of its visitor-participants. A new, collective knowledge about the

barbershop is thus psychometrically generated by a representation of its archetypal spirit.

In art, a medium is the material or process that artists use to transform their imagined concepts into tangible and/or discursive forms. In Conceptual Art, Relational Aesthetics, and more contemporaneously, Social Practice, an artist's medium can remain invisible, taking the form of ideas, conversations or experiences. For example, consider your hair (or lack thereof) as a medium. Hair creates an organic sculpture incorporating both internal conceptions of beauty and outward displays of self-representation. It is the visual result of both our health and our heredity. Comparatively, in the occult a medium describes a person or symbol that connects our tangible world to the invisible phenomena that surrounds it. Both definitions allude to the communicative importance of a conduit able to connect multiple dimensions and spheres of thought using language and symbols. *Psychic Barber* employs a medium (in the occult sense) as a medium (in the artistic sense) to explore the dominant validity of our visual world and its affects on our collective psyche.

The interrelationship between humans and magical thinking has always existed. The ability to form and consider nonexistent imagery operates our intuition and guides our processes of invention. In an insightful essay on the societal implications of the occult, Edward A. Tiryakian suggests that psychic practitioners hold valuable knowledge about a reality hidden to the routinized life of mass culture. This knowledge, he writes, indicates a source of power because it allows the psychic to connect with "*the forces that govern the manifest world*" and therefore alter its appearance.¹ Psychics are not supernatural beings, and neither are "the forces" that Tiryakian alludes to. The majority of texts on psychical research and magic describe psychics as *human* beings who have developed a heightened extra sensory perception. Much of the phenomena that falls under the categories of the occult or magic exists as unseen, unknown or unproven by other institutionally sanctioned fields of knowledge, e.g. science and religion, despite the

¹ Tiryakian, "Preliminary Considerations," in *On the margin of the visible: sociology, the esoteric and the occult*, edited by Edward A. Tiryakian (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1974), 4.

fact that these fields also make strong cases for forces they cannot visually document. Religious faith requires an unquestioning acceptance of cultural figures, locations and events whose only record is found in historical fables. Contemporary science has developed concepts such as string theory, M Theory, the “Theory of Everything,” and quantum mechanics to understand physical particles that cannot be seen. Their relationships with other particles provide proof of their existence.

There is a fantastic law in magic known as the law of contiguity wherein, as Marcel Mauss explains, “*the part is to the whole as the image is to the represented object.*”² The law of contiguity enables information to be drawn from a person using only the lines of their palm or a lock of their hair. The law of contiguity suggests a phenomenological perception of the world, one in which we are both subject and object of all of our experiences. We are mediums, and the medium. Such contiguity positions the visible sphere as part of a larger world encompassing ever-present intangible forces. This world reflects us and contains us, simultaneously. It is also through the law of contiguity that we can begin to imagine exceptional intimacy with one another by understanding the responsibility that comes with being the part that represents the whole. This law of contiguity forges our connection with one another. Connections, dear reader, that begin with you and I.

***Psychic Barber* will be on view at Side Street Projects in Pasadena, California from October 11 - November 9, 2013. Organized community events, artist performances, and workshops will take place during the course of the exhibit. *Psychic Barber* travels to other national institutions, including the Riverside Museum of Art in 2014.**

² Marcel Mauss, *A general theory of magic*, translated by Robert Brain (London/New York: Routledge Press, 1972), 15.

ABOUT THE ARTISTS:

Finishing School (FS) is a socially-engaged artist collective that explores an expansive range of subject and media territories. FS produces interdisciplinary actions, installations, workshops, design, studio art, performance, and new media. They have presented work throughout the United States and internationally. Recently, FS has produced projects for the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit, the Hammer Museum's Venice Beach Biennial, the 2010 California Biennial, Engagement Party: a three-month residency program at MOCA, Living as Form: a 20-year survey of social practice for Creative Time in New York, The Contemporary Museum in Baltimore, and a site-specific commission for DFLUX in Detroit, MI. FS has also presented projects internationally in The Netherlands, Switzerland, Thailand, England, Spain, Mexico, Brazil, and Italy.

Jean Robison is an interdisciplinary multimedia artist. Often infused with an unlikely mix of gravity and humor, Robison's work embodies a hybrid sensibility that utilizes video, animation, painting, photography, performance and the Internet to explore popular culture and documentary rhetoric as well as the mechanical devices of information delivery like cameras, screens and the printed surface. She is a co-founder of an artist residency located in Oaxaca, Mexico and is co-organizer of an international flat file project, currently involving artists in Dubai.

Yucef Merhi is an artist, poet and computer programmer. Considered by many to be the pioneer of Digital Art in Venezuela, Merhi creates interactive environments, computer based works and digital applications, while proposing various ways to experience natural language and code. He has exhibited across the US and internationally, including the New Museum of Contemporary Art, Bronx Museum of the Arts, El Museo del Barrio, Eyebeam Art and Technology Center, Exit Art, Orange County Museum of Art, Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), De Appel in Amsterdam, the 2007 Biennial de São Paulo, and the 10th Istanbul Biennial.